

# **Summary Report**

## **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting**

### **October 27-29, 2025**

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on October 27-29, 2025.

The AP approved the minutes from the April 2025 meeting and the agenda for the October 2025 meeting.

#### **1. Committee Chair Remarks**

Jessica McCawley, Chair of the Snapper Grouper Committee for the Council, provided opening remarks, along with a framework for what the Council was expecting from the AP at the meeting.

#### **2. Updates on Developing Council Actions**

Council staff updated the AP on the status of recent and developing Council amendments and projects that were not scheduled for discussion in this AP meeting, including the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 89 stock assessment of golden tilefish, development of an action to address recreational vessel limits for headboats, development of an action to establish a recreational aggregate bag limit, Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendment 60 (Commercial Permits and Trip Efficiency), and Amendment 62 (Joint State-Federal Management of Recreational Red Snapper).

#### **3. Florida Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permit Discard Research Projects Update**

Jessica McCawley (Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission) updated the AP on the research projects being conducted in Florida to investigate red snapper recreational catches, releases, and management strategies, using exempted fishing permits (EFP).

#### **4. Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation**

Council staff presented an update on the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE). The AP provided input on species that are commonly caught with red snapper to include in MSE analyses for areas north and south of Cape Canaveral.

- Florida AP members commented that the major change in the fishery really happens closer to Melbourne or Ft. Pierce, FL, rather than Cape Canaveral; so re-examining the areas may be helpful.
- One AP member from south Florida commented that an aggregate bag limit may not be as useful of a management tool south of Cape Canaveral or Ft. Pierce because there are fewer interactions with red snapper and other species of fish to catch in that area.
- Species to include:
  - North of Cape Canaveral: Gag, Vermilion Snapper, Gray Triggerfish, Black Sea Bass, Red Snapper, Goliath Grouper, Greater Amberjack (or complex of all Jacks), Red Porgy

- South of Cape Canaveral: Red Snapper, Mutton Snapper, Black Grouper, Red Grouper, Amberjack, Silk Snapper [don't include Yellowtail or Gray Snapper]

## **5. Black Sea Bass (Regulatory Amendment 37)**

Council staff gave a presentation that summarized Council discussions about Amendment 56 (Black Sea Bass Assessment Response) that led to the initiation and development of Regulatory Amendment 37, which addresses more immediate actions to reduce fishing mortality and increase recruitment of black sea bass, while the SEDAR 76 Update stock assessment is further reviewed and modified to inform long-term management actions. The AP discussed the actions and alternatives included in Regulatory Amendment 37, providing the following comments and recommendations:

- AP members commented that sub-regional effects and management should be considered in the long-term changes for black sea bass to account for differences in the northern and southern portions of the South Atlantic region.

### *Action 1. Establish annual catch targets and revise accountability measures for South Atlantic black sea bass*

- The AP discussed the scientific information being used to develop actions in this amendment.
  - Members, particularly from the Carolinas, commented that black sea bass are plentiful in their areas, emphasizing the need to consider sub-regional management.
  - Members discussed that the decline in black sea bass, notably at the southern end of the range, coincides with the increase in red snapper, which are more prevalent at the southern end of the black sea bass range.
- Commercial members from North Carolina discussed that the commercial price has declined due to the increased in black sea bass harvest north of Cape Hatteras, NC, noting that commercial trawling is allowed in the Mid-Atlantic region.
- A commercial member from North Carolina recommended considering a reduction to trip limits or a stepdown that would keep the commercial season open year-round.
- Some members disagreed with the extent of the decline in annual harvest that is being considered by this action (50% less than recent harvest levels).
- One member commented on the evaluation of social impacts from this action, stating that strong short-term effects can lead to long-term effects like business closures, boat ownership declines, and other broad effects on the recreational sector.

**MOTION 1: RECOMMEND ALTERNATIVE 2 (ANNUAL CATCH TARGETS) UNDER ACTION 1 SUB-ACTIONS AS PREFERRED.**

**APPROVED BY AP (15-1-1ABS)**

### *Action 2. Establish a spawning season closure for South Atlantic black sea bass*

- Commercial members commented that there is a low commercial price for black sea bass during February and March, so there was some support for the current preferred closure during these two months because the commercial fishery is projected to stay open the rest of the year.
- February and March is a critical time for the recreational for-hire component.

- During that time of year, black sea bass is a shallower water fishery with colder water, which can have lower discard mortality.
- Can use artificial bait to improve the chances of catching keeper-sized fish at this time of year.
- Trips early in the year are needed to sustain businesses coming out of winter, when trips cannot go out as frequently.
  - The small number of trips or harvest does not reflect the great importance for some amount of revenue for for-hire businesses during this time of year.
- During February-March, there are few other accessible snapper grouper species that can be targeted due to the existing closures at that time and difficulties getting far offshore due to weather.
  - A for-hire member commented about the need for consistent access to be able to maximize fishing opportunities when the weather is good.
- One charter member commented that the seasonal closure in February-March can have strong charter/headboat effects if Easter falls in March. Easter is a big weekend for that component.
  - It was also noted that it will be difficult to allow the ACT to last until then because March is at the end of the fishing year.

*Action 3. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass*

- AP members recommend consideration of a 3-fish bag limit, noting a small difference in season length and the amount of expected harvest between a 3-fish bag limit and a 2-fish bag limit

*Action 4. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass*

- Some AP members expressed support for the current 13-inch recreational minimum size limit.

**MOTION 2: RECOMMEND ALTERNATIVES FOR THE FOLLOWING MEASURES: FEBRUARY THROUGH MARCH CLOSURE, 3-FISH BAG LIMIT, AND 13-INCH RECREATIONAL MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT.**

**APPROVED BY AP (16-1-1ABS)**

**6. Yellowtail Snapper and Mutton Snapper (SG Amendment 44/RF Amendment 55)**

Council staff presented an overview of the proposed actions in this joint amendment that will update the stock OFL and ABC, regional apportionment of the stocks, regional catch levels, and South Atlantic sector allocations for both mutton and yellowtail snapper based on the most recent stock assessments (SEDAR 79 and SEDAR 96 respectively). The assessments for both species noted that the stocks are not overfished or experiencing overfishing. AP members discussed the need to avoid ACL closures in the South Atlantic, noting that keeping management the same and simply updating catch levels may be the best option.

**7. Blueline Tilefish (Abbreviated Framework 5)**

Council staff presented a discussion document summarizing results from the SEDAR 92 stock assessment for blueline tilefish and recent Council discussions surrounding adoption of the SSC

recommended catch levels. The AP agreed that moving forward with Abbreviated Framework 5 was appropriate because the benefit to the fishery of quickly implementing the increased ABC is greater than the potential benefits of waiting for a more prolonged process that would include reevaluating sector or jurisdictional allocation percentages. Staff noted that the Council intends to have future discussions with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council in regard to the jurisdictional allocation and could consider sector allocations at that time. When asked if they would be in support of an increase in the commercial trip limit for blueline tilefish from 300 lbs gw to 400 lbs gw during May 1 – December 31, the AP said that an increase may be appropriate, but also recommended considering an increase to the January 1 – April 30 trip limit from 100 lbs gw to 300 lbs gw so that the trip limit was the same throughout the year.

## **8. Citizen Science Update**

Council staff shared information on Citizen Science Program activities, providing updates on the Citizen Science Project Idea Portal, SMILE, FISHstory, and SAFMC Release projects. Highlights included an overview of the [SAFMC Release 2024 data summary](#) and a new collaboration between Sea Grant and SAFMC Release – the [Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo](#). AP members noted the continued importance of citizen science and in-person outreach initiatives, and in trying to demonstrate the value of participating in these efforts when communicating with fishermen.

## **9. Discussion About Commercial Trip Limits on Sale of Fish**

Council staff presented an issue about the application of commercial trip limits to the sale of fish that came up during scoping of Snapper Grouper Amendment 60. Commercial AP members viewed resolution of this issue as a high priority. Members discussed this issue and provided the following comments:

- A potential solution could be to have different “possession” vs “operating trip” limits; used in waterfowl contexts.
- With loss of waterfront/landing areas and trip limitations on the amount of fish that can be harvested/sold, fishermen need flexibility to be able operate and sell their catch efficiently.
  - Some fishermen need to travel long distances to sell catch and get the best price possible.
  - One member brought up the possibility of grants or funds to maintain/refurbish working waterfront in the South Atlantic. Similar programs have been used in other regions.
- Clarify the definition of “sale”. In some contexts, money doesn’t transfer hands until after the catch is inspected by the dealer. For large harvests, fish are taken on consignment until they are inspected and priced.
- Day boats need to be able to drop fish off after hours and be able to turn back around quickly.
- As long as proper labeling/recording is applied, after-hours transactions should be fine.
  - Commercial fish are counted against a quota that prevents overfishing.
- One member commented that “purchased, or sold” may need to be removed from the codified text; should be applied as “landed”.
- For long-range fisheries (e.g. golden tile) there can also be difficulty accommodating the time necessary to transit back to shore and get fish onshore on the last day of a season. It

should be clarified that as long as the boat is tied to the dock by 11:59 PM on the last open day of the season, fish should be able to be offloaded and sold after.

**10. Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision (Amendment 61)**

The Council is considering changes to the species composition of the Snapper Grouper fishery management unit (FMU) through Amendment 61 to streamline management. In doing so, the Council has selected 17 species to further evaluate if there is a continued need for federal conservation and management. At the meeting, Council staff briefed the AP on the Council’s considered changes to the Snapper Grouper FMU. The AP provided the following feedback captured in Table 1 and in the comments below:

**Table 1.** SG AP initial consensus recommendation for species considered in Amendment 61.

Species	1) Status quo (maintain federal management)	2) Remove from FMP all together	3) EC w/ no other measures	3a) EC + permit	3b) EC + reporting	No AP consensus at this time
Queen Snapper	X					
Cubera Snapper	X					
Jolthead Porgy	X					
Knobbed Porgy	X					
Saucereye Porgy	X					
Scup	X					
Whitebone Porgy	X					
Misty Grouper	X					
Blackfin Snapper	X					
Atlantic Spadefish				X	X	
Bar Jack				X	X	
Banded Rudderfish				X	X	
Sand Tilefish				X	X	
White Grunt				X	X	
Tomtate				X	X	
Sailor’s Choice				X	X	
Margate				X	X	

Supporting comments for the consensus recommendation:

- Queen snapper is a target species in S. Florida and so is, cubera snapper, but to a lesser extent. Concern over removal from federal management.
  - o Also concern over species identification issues with cubera snapper and mangrove snapper of a similar size.
  - o Similarly, the AP felt the Council should decide on either retaining or removing all the porgies as a single unit because of identification issues across porgy species.
- For queen snapper, cubera snapper, and the porgies complex, there was concern over new directed commercial targeting of the species if they are removed from federal management and the potential for increased discarding of other co-occurring federally managed species.

- o Also noted that scup are an important species to the headboat fishery in Raleigh Bay, NC.
- Misty grouper are a long-lived species that likely benefit from management.
- Overall support for removing some species from federal management to streamline the FMP and allow for additional directed resources and initiatives geared towards key species in the FMU.
  - o Recommend maintaining existing data collection and permit requirements if listed as EC species.

Other AP non-consensus recommendations:

- Consider removing all 17 species from the FMP to allow for state management.
- Consider maintaining all of the deepwater complex (blackfin snapper, sand tilefish, misty grouper, queen snapper) as status quo. Concern over bycatch of other co-occurring federally managed species if removed from the FMU due to new targeted effort towards the unmanaged deepwater complex species.
- Spadefish could be removed from federal management and the FMU all together if states are willing to take on management. Do not want the species to be totally unmanaged due to a potential shift in effort towards them.
  - o Spadefish are not commonly caught with other snapper grouper species. Typically need to use specialized techniques to target spadefish.

Other AP comments:

- White grunt is critical in North Carolina. The number 2 most common species in the headboat survey.
  - o Don't want to see them overfished but also supportive of streamlining management of the Snapper Grouper FMP.
- Headboats in the FL Keys would benefit from having the grunts removed from the federal aggregate.
- Would like to keep the limited entry commercial permit requirement to avoid increase in effort and bycatch of other federal managed species that commonly co-occur with the proposed EC species.
- The AP did not have a recommendation on an aggregate limit for EC species and would like additional information at a future meeting before providing recommendations.
- After the AP's main discussion on the topic, an AP member mentioned that dealers sometimes lump blackfin snapper with yelloweye and vermilion snapper for sale because of their similar appearance, which could cause issues if blackfin snapper are removed from the FMU.

## **11. Additional Updates**

### **a. Best Fishing Practices**

Council staff provided an overview of the components of the Best Fishing Practices Campaign and highlighted accomplishments from the 2024–2025 Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program. One AP member suggested incorporating additional information on venting into seminars offered to fishing clubs and recreational anglers. Another member recommended sharing best fishing practices materials in schools, particularly those with fishing clubs. Finally,

an AP member noted that there is some “self-policing” within the New Smyrna, Florida fishing community regarding carrying a descending device on board.

**b. SEDAR**

SEDAR staff provided an update on SEDAR process changes along with an update on recently finished, ongoing, and upcoming SEDAR projects. Staff also shared that the council will be appointing a standing technical team. The AP did not have any SEDAR process or project questions.

**12. Elect Chair and Vice Chair**

The AP approved the following motions:

**MOTION 3: ELECT CHRIS KIMREY AS CHAIR OF ADVISORY PANEL.  
APPROVED BY AP**

**MOTION 4: ELECT HALEY STEPHENS AS VICE CHAIR.  
APPROVED BY AP**

**13. Other Business**

AP members made the following comments under Other Business:

- Recommend greater consistency among federal closure timing announcements, noting particularly the delay in announcing the closure of commercial red snapper in 2025.
- AP members requested that the Southeast Reef Fish Survey report that is typically provided in April be included in the materials for the following October meeting as well.