

**FINAL**  
**SUMMARY REPORT**  
**SNAPPER GROUPER COMMITTEE**  
**SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**  
**June 10-12, 2025**

The Committee approved the minutes from the March 2025 meeting and the agenda for the June 2025 meeting.

The Committee received a presentation and information on exempted fishing permit (EFP) applications from Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission to continue research investigating management impacts of aggregate bag limits and limited allowance of red snapper retention. The Committee expressed support for continuing this research.

The Committee also received updates about amendments that have been approved by the Council and were recently submitted for secretarial review and implementation. Amendment 55 (Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper) is under a statutory deadline. NMFS is working on proposed rules for this amendment as well as the Regulatory Amendment 36 (Gag and Black Grouper Recreational Vessel Limits and On-Demand Black Sea Bass Pot Stowage), Amendment 48 (Wreckfish), and the Joint Commercial Electronic Logbook Amendment (which covers species under the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan as well as Coastal Migratory Pelagics and Dolphin Wahoo).

NMFS updated the Council on the Final Rule for Amendment 59 (Secretarial Amendment for Red Snapper), which has been submitted to the Federal Register. The Final Rule implements 3 actions from the proposed rule. The 2025 red snapper commercial season will begin on July 14, 2025, and will close at 12:01 a.m., local time, on January 1, 2026, unless the commercial catch limit is met or is projected to be met before this date. The recreational sector will open for two days on July 11 and 12, 2025.

**Innovation Plan (Other Business)**

Council staff and Council members introduced an [Innovation Plan](#) to the Committee that provides a potential framework for future discussions. The goal of this approach is to adapt to changes in NMFS and maximize commercial and recreational goals through innovative and comprehensive management in the Snapper Grouper fishery. The Council intends to engage in further discussion on this topic at upcoming meetings.

**Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) Proxies**

Dr. Luiz Barbieri (Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission) presented information on MSY proxies, their estimation, and how they are used in management. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) updated the Council about ongoing efforts to provide guidance for developing Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR)-based MSY proxies specific to stocks in the South Atlantic. Council staff presented a summary of MSY and SPR-based benchmarks from stock assessments used for Council-managed species, the relationship between steepness and associated SPR proxy values, guidance from the NS1 tech memo, and recommendations following the SCS8 meeting and SSC review. The Committee had some discussion throughout these presentations about the applicability of MSY proxies specifically for South Atlantic

snapper grouper species. The Committee continues to support species-specific evaluations of MSY proxies for snapper grouper species over application of general scientific principles primarily based on other species from other areas.

**MOTION 1:** FORM A WORKING GROUP COMPRISED OF MEMBERS OF THE GULF AND SOUTH ATLANTIC SSC'S, COUNCIL STAFF, AND A COUNCIL MEMBER FROM EACH COUNCIL TO COLLECTIVELY ADDRESS THE BEST PRACTICES FOR ESTIMATING STEEPNESS (AND THUS ESTIMATE MSY) FOR MANAGEMENT ADVICE, AS WELL AS A DISCUSSION OF SPR PROXY VALUES GIVEN A RANGE OF LIFE HISTORY VALUES AMONG FISH SPECIES.

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

**DIRECTION TO STAFF:**

- Have Staff and Council SSC Liaison develop a process between science (SSC) and management (Council) for development of appropriate SPR proxies on either a stock-by-stock basis or among stocks with similar life history characteristics. Potential topics would include:
  - o Thresholds for re-examining benchmark values and associated SPRs.
  - o How to consider transitioning fixed steepness stocks to associated SPRs.
- Consider a similar joint workgroup approach for stocks shared between the South and Mid Atlantic Council jurisdictions after completion of joint Gulf/South Atlantic workgroup report and Council review.

**Terms of Reference for Gag Assessment**

Staff presented the changes to the terms of reference for the gag stock assessment requested by the Council during Full Council I following the discussion of MSY proxies. The Council approved the terms of reference after minor additions and clarifications.

**Black Sea Bass (Amendment 56)**

Council staff presented the stock risk rating matrix from the ABC Control Rule for Black Sea Bass and the preliminary scores and comments made by the Advisory Panel and SSC. The Council determined the stock risk rating of black sea bass to be “high.”

The SEFSC presented results of the SEDAR 76 Update stock assessment of black sea bass. This assessment indicated that the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic is overfished and is experiencing overfishing. The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed SEDAR 76U at their April and May 2025 meetings. The SSC Chair presented the SSC's comments on the assessment and recommendations for the overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC). The SSC's comments noted several uncertainties in the stock assessment information used to develop catch level recommendations. The Committee agreed with these uncertainties but also recognized the decline in abundance of black sea bass, necessitating more immediate management action. Therefore, the Committee passed the following motion:

**MOTION 2:** Through Snapper Grouper Amendment 56, establish commercial and recreational annual catch targets (ACTs) that are equal to 50% of average landings from 2019-2023 for each sector. The recreational ACT would be calculated using landings in CHTS units. The Council will reconsider ACTs and associated management measures two years after implementation.

Direct the IPT to draft actions that would be expected to lead to landings that are below the respective sector ACTs. The actions could include:

- Making recreational and commercial size limits the same length.
- Reducing the recreational bag limit.
- Reducing commercial trip limits.
- Implementing a spawning season closure where harvest of black sea bass would be prohibited for both sectors including January through April each year. At a minimum the closure would cover the months of March and April.
  - o Consider spawning season alternatives in 2-month waves.

Request that the SSC:

- Re-evaluate the MSY estimate and reconsider the F40%SPR proxy recommended previously in light of the uncertainties identified with the MSY estimates and the SSC recommendation to investigate “the use of an SPR-based MSY proxy in a future assessment because of the uncertainties in the stock recruitment relationship and the potential for non-stationarity.”
- Reconsider use of the high terminal F estimate (2023) in the estimation of the assumed fishing mortality rate for the interim years in the projection analysis.
- Reconsider ABC advice for 2027 and beyond.

Direct Council Staff to work with SSC leadership and the SEFSC to conduct additional peer review of the SEDAR 76 assessment update.

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**  
**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

THE COUNCIL CLARIFIED THE FOLLOWING:

- SSC MEETING NEEDS TO OCCUR IN PERSON AND ENSURE THE SSC HAS AMPLE TIME TO DISCUSS

The Committee later clarified that the proposed actions from the above motion could be considered through a framework amendment, and directed staff to develop this amendment as a framework rather than a plan amendment. The framework amendment will include actions to address:

- Annual catch targets for both sectors.
- Recreational size limit – Consider alternatives ranging from 11-13 inches by 1-inch increments
- Recreational bag limit – Consider alternatives (other than No Action) ranging from 1 fish to 4 fish.
- The Council directed to **not** consider an action to modify commercial trip limits. It was clarified that pot fishermen fully expect to have a closure under the reduced catch level and support management modifications under consideration. A trip limit under 1,000 pounds will not work for pot fishermen.
- Spawning closure **for both sectors** – Consider alternatives from January-April in 2-month increments.

- Include an alternative that closes the ***both sectors*** from February-March.
- Include separate alternatives considering each sector. Staff may develop 8 total alternatives, one for each sector and month combination. Then, the Council can select multiple alternatives to develop the spawning closure for each sector.

### **Commercial Sub-Committee Report and Amendment 60**

The Snapper Grouper Commercial Sub-Committee (Sub-Committee) met on June 9, 2025. A [summary report](#) for this meeting is included in the June 2025 Council meeting briefing book. Based on the Sub-Committee's recommendations, the Committee passed the following motion:

**MOTION 3: APPROVE AMENDMENT 60 FOR SCOPING.**

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

In addition to direction provided in the Sub-Committee Summary Report, the Committee directed staff to include consideration of replacing gear onboard restrictions with stowage requirements. The Committee also directed staff to include consideration of multi-day trip limits, potentially for a subset of snapper grouper species. Finally, the Committee directed staff to ask the public, through scoping, when fishermen begin to reduce directed effort on a trip to avoid exceeding trip limits.

### **DIRECTION TO STAFF:**

- Request information from NOAA regarding status of 1-stop reporting for the commercial sector at a future Sub-Committee meeting
- Ask in scoping: for annual catch limits that are not being harvested, is it because the trip limits are too low?
- Update "reaching trip limit" analysis to include a threshold lower than 90% of the limit. Analyze through a frequency distribution to estimate the threshold level.

### **Golden Tilefish Assessment Update**

During preparation of Abbreviated Framework 4 (golden tilefish catch levels) for analysis and further discussion, Council staff identified some discrepancies between the stock assessment and the commercial landings as monitored in-season relative to the ACL. Council staff will continue to work with the SEFSC, SERO, and data cooperators to identify the source of discrepancies and report back to the Committee in September 2025.

### **Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision**

In March 2025, the Council directed staff to compile information on 17 species in the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit (FMU) to evaluate whether they continue to require conservation and federal management. The Committee completed an online survey that included federal guidelines to facilitate a discussion of whether these species are in need of conservation and management. Council staff reviewed the results of the survey. The Committee concluded that all 17 species should be considered for either designation as ecosystem component species or removal from the FMU through an amendment. Several Committee members noted that they do not want most of this group of species to be completely unregulated but also recognized that the need for conservation and management of these species may not rise to the same level as others in the FMU. Committee members also noted that some state-level regulations for these

species, particularly in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, are currently dependent on federal regulations. The Committee also directed staff to investigate whether a federal permit could be required to commercially harvest ecosystem component or unmanaged species from federal waters. The Committee passed the following motion:

**MOTION 4:** INITIATE AN AMENDMENT TO CONSIDER REMOVAL FROM THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT UNIT OR DESIGNATION AS ECOSYSTEM COMPONENT SPECIES/THIRD CATEGORY FOR MISTY GROUPER, MARGATE, SAILOR’S CHOICE, TOMTATE, WHITE GRUNT, BAR JACK, JOLTHEAD PORGY, KNOBBED PORGY, SAUCEREYE PORGY, SCUP, WHITEBONE PORGY, BANDED RUDDERFISH, BLACKFIN SNAPPER, CUBERA SNAPPER, QUEEN SNAPPER, ATLANTIC SPADEFISH, AND SAND TILEFISH.

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

#### **Yellowtail Snapper & Mutton Snapper (Amendment 44)**

The Council reviewed the results of the SEDAR 79 for mutton snapper and SEDAR 96 for yellowtail snapper. The SSC chair then provided feedback from the joint Gulf and South Atlantic SSC meeting. Staff reviewed the proposed amendment process for both species which would start with a joint Gulf and South Atlantic amendment, where the Gulf is the administrative lead, that would establish ABCs and the jurisdictional allocation for both species. Following this amendment, the South Atlantic would initiate an amendment to update the ACL and sector allocations for both species.

**MOTION 5:** DIRECT STAFF TO RESUME WORK ON JOINT SNAPPER GROUPER AMENDMENT 44, REEF FISH AMENDMENT 55 FOR YELLOWTAIL SNAPPER WITH THE ADDITION OF ABCS AND JURISDICTIONAL ALLOCATION FOR MUTTON SNAPPER.

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

#### **Private Recreational Permit & Education Requirement (Amendment 46)**

The Council paused work on this amendment in favor of focusing on actions that are de-regulatory in accordance with recent Executive Orders. The amendment remains on the Council’s workplan but its timeline of development is uncertain.

#### **Atlantic Blueline Tilefish**

In April and May 2025, the SSC reviewed the blueline tilefish stock assessment and did not recommend the surplus production model for use in management. Instead, the SSC supported a data-limited approach based on average catch to establish the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for areas north and south of Cape Hatteras. For the region north of Cape Hatteras, the SSC also recommended incorporating updated data from the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey to inform the allocation of the ABC. This resulted in 70% of the northern ABC being allocated to the Mid-Atlantic and 30% to the South Atlantic.

For the South Atlantic, this allocation equated to 193,800 pounds, which was added to the ABC recommendation of 133,000 pounds for the area south of Cape Hatteras. The total combined

ABC recommended for the South Atlantic was 326,800 pounds (whole weight). Council staff also presented a Fishery Overview, which included blueline tilefish landings and related data. Notably, landings in some years significantly exceeded the recommended ABC, with recreational catches surpassing 800,000 pounds in certain instances. The Committee expressed concern about how the average catch models were resulting in potential reductions in catch for the South Atlantic region. The Committee decided that since a management response was not immediately required by the stock status or ABC recommendation, timing and the substance of the management response would be considered later, after the Council has considered prioritization and timing of other, more immediate actions.

**DIRECTION TO STAFF:** COMMUNICATE WITH THE MAFMC THROUGH A LETTER REQUESTING A MEETING TO JOINTLY ADDRESS REGIONAL APPORTIONMENTS OF BLUELINE TILEFISH. DEVELOP AND SUBMIT THE LETTER BY THE END OF JUNE.

- This is an opportunity to set up a process for addressing other species as they move northward into the Mid-Atlantic.
- Consider whether commercial trip limits are adequate in the context of the updated annual catch levels.

#### **AP Report for topics not covered on the agenda**

The Snapper Grouper AP met on April 2-3, 2025, and the topics for this meeting were largely addressed in this meeting or planned to be addressed in the next Council meeting. The Committee had an opportunity to ask any clarifying questions of the Acting AP Chair, but no further discussion was had.

#### **Management Strategy Evaluation Update**

Blue Matter Science was selected to continue its work on the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE). As part of this effort, they will develop scenarios to evaluate aggregate bag limits, Amendment 59, and additional management scenarios informed by the ongoing Angler Attitudes and Perceptions research led by the University of Florida. The final MSE products are expected to be presented to the Council in September 2026, coinciding with the conclusion of Blue Matter's contract.

#### **Other Business**

##### Aggregate Bag Limit

The Committee also discussed an aggregate recreational bag limit for the snapper grouper fishery.

**MOTION 6:** DECOUPLE THE ACTION TO IMPLEMENT A RECREATIONAL AGGREGATE BAG LIMIT FROM THE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY EVALUATION AMENDMENT. DIRECT STAFF TO REPORT TO THE COUNCIL IN SEPTEMBER 2025 ON WAYS TO DEVELOP THIS AMENDMENT.

**APPROVED BY COMMITTEE**

**APPROVED BY COUNCIL**

Note: At the March 2025 meeting, the Council approved a motion to include consideration of recreational aggregate bag limits in the amendment that would result from the Snapper Grouper MSE, which has a longer timeline.

### State Management

The Committee discussed recent proposals to implement state agency management of snapper grouper species, specifically red snapper, in federal waters. In September 2025, NMFS will present information about potential paths towards this type of management format, working with ASMFC to use some of the principles used in their management as a basis. A staff from the Gulf Council will also be asked to present as part of this discussion.

#### DIRECTION TO STAFF:

- NMFS, GULF COUNCIL, FWC, AND OTHERS TO COORDINATE ON PRESENTATIONS RELATIVE TO STATE MANAGEMENT.
- ENSURE THAT THOSE THAT HAVE GONE THROUGH THE PROCESS (E.G., CONGRESSIONAL STAFFERS, GULF COUNCIL STAFF, OTHER AGENCIES) OF SWITCHING TO STATE MANAGEMENT CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE DISCUSSION.
- ADD THIS TO THE SEPTEMBER 2025 MEETING AGENDA (**THIS IS A PRIORITY ITEM**). REQUEST THAT STATES BEGIN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THIS TOPIC AMONG THEMSELVES AND WITH NMFS.

#### Timing and Tasks:

##### **MOTION 7: DIRECT STAFF TO DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- Form the MSY Estimation Best Practices Work Group.
- Use work for Amendment 56 to develop a framework amendment for Council consideration for public hearing approval at the September 2025 meeting.
- Conduct scoping for Amendment 60. Convene the Commercial SG Sub-committee at the beginning of the September Council meeting if time allows.
- Continue working with SEFSC, SERO, and data cooperators to investigate differences between commercial landings included in SEDAR 89 and ACL monitoring for golden tilefish.
- Request that state agency Council members compile information about how removal of federal snapper grouper regulations for the 17 species evaluated for ecosystem component designation would affect the states' abilities to manage these species. Provide to staff ahead of the September 2025 meeting for inclusion on the meeting agenda.
- Begin development of the FMU Revision Amendment.
- Resume work on Joint Snapper Grouper Amendment 44, Reef Fish Amendment 55 and add mutton snapper to this amendment.
- Work with Blue Matter Science to begin the second phase of the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation.
- Report to the Council in September 2025 on ways to consider an action implementing an aggregate bag limit for the snapper grouper fishery.
- Prepare material for continued discussion of an innovative approach to manage the Snapper Grouper fishery and bring to the September 2025 Council meeting.

##### **APPROVED BY COUNCIL**