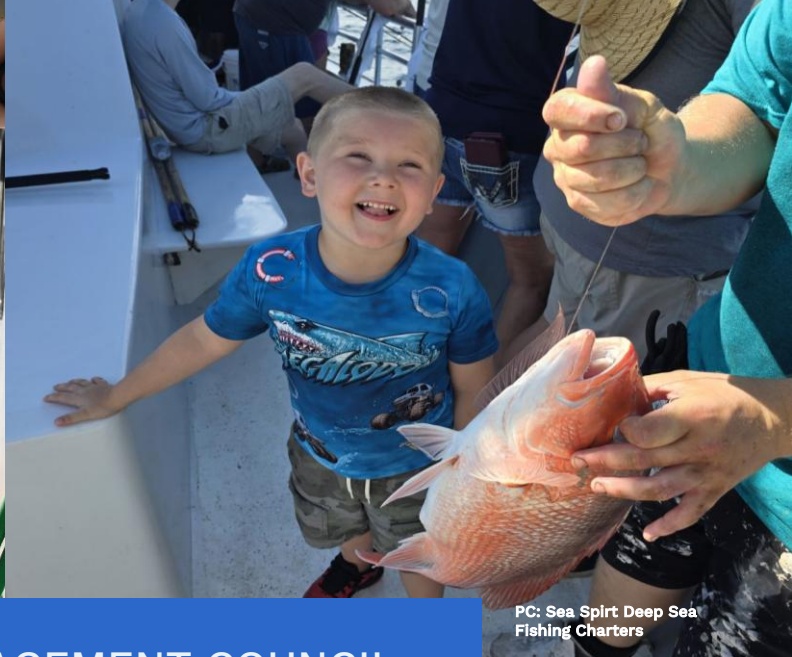




PC: Sea Spirit Deep Sea Fishing Charters

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 38

Revising headboat vessel limits for gag and black grouper and the assessment response for golden tilefish

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Review , October 2026

AP Objectives for this Meeting (October 2026)

- Review previous Council discussion
- Review action and alternative language
- Provide input as needed

Tentative Amendment Timing

✓June 2026	Review draft actions and alternatives
✓September 2026	Review decision document and preliminary analysis and make any modifications to the Purpose and Needs and Actions and Alternatives
December 2026	Review public hearing document, select preferred alternatives and approve for public hearings
Early 2027	Conduct public hearings
March 2027	Review public hearing comments
June 2027	Review final draft and consider for final approval

Vessel Limit Background

In **December 2024** staff presented a [description of the headboat fishery](#), trends in effort, commonly caught species, and catch per unit effort (CPUE) for select species. After that report the Council requested additional, more detailed information including vessel capacity, discards, etc. be provided for review in June 2025. In June 2025, staff presented [highlights from a report](#) prepared by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) and the SG Committee expressed the intent to continue the discussion, focusing solely on snapper grouper species.

The full SEFSC document can be found [HERE](#).

In **September 2025**, the Council directed staff to investigate vessel limits and catch rates for **gag, black grouper, scamp/yellowmouth grouper, and snowy grouper**, provide the regulatory definition of a headboat, and gather feedback from the Law Enforcement AP (LE AP) on the enforceability of vessel limits per 6 passengers.

In December 2025, the Council requested an exploratory analysis of the impact of changing from a **per vessel limit** for **gag, black grouper, scamp, and snowy grouper** to a **one fish limit per every 6 passengers**. Vessel limits were established for gag and black grouper in 2023 (Amendment 53) and revised in Regulatory Amendment 36 (under review) and snowy grouper in 2015 (Regulatory Amendment 20).

In **March 2026**, snowy grouper was removed from consideration for this amendment and in **June 2026** scamp/yellowmouth grouper was removed from consideration because it does not have a vessel limit in place and therefore applying a vessel limit to only the headboat component would be more limiting. The **LE AP provided the following in January 2026**:

- Enforceability depends on clear, simple rules and ability to verify passenger counts and fish onboard.
- Avoid percentage-based limits.
- Require headboats to maintain passenger records that can be reviewed at boarding to facilitate verification of allowable catch.
- Multiple vessel sizes and capacities may complicate management, any specific enforcement (based on certificate of inspection [COI] or permit) would require accessible information for LE to be effective.
- Vessel-based limits could effectively increase total catch.

The **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (SG AP)** recommended that the Council consider vessel limits in proportion to the number of anglers for federally permitted headboats. The AP noted that this would benefit vessels larger than 6-pack charters (~7-20 anglers) and larger headboats (20+ anglers). The AP suggested exploring the following:

- 4 fish per 10-30 passengers.
- 6 fish for 30 passengers, 30% of the passenger count, maximum of 10 fish per vessel.

Criteria to Retain the Headboat Vessel Limit

- **Required permit**
 - [South Atlantic Charter/Headboat for Snapper-Grouper For-Hire Fishing Permit \(Open Access\)](#)
- **Certificate of Inspection**
 - The Council discussed that a COI should be required to retain the vessel limit because it is the legal requirement to take more than 6 passengers on a vessel.
 - Council members noted that the process
- **Southeast Region Headboat Survey**
 - The SRHS considers a headboat to be a vessel that **typically carries more than 6 passengers** and where **passengers pay a per-head fee (not a flat fee for the whole boat)**.
 - Selection for the SRHS is based on the permit.
 - The Council discussed including a requirement to participate in the SRHS to be able to retain this vessel limit. But had the following concerns and **ultimately removed this criteria**:
 - There are headboats that are not participating in the SRHS that would not be able to retain the vessel limit
 - Any future changes to the SRHS could affect eligibility to retain the vessel limit.

Action 1. Revise the for-hire vessel limits for gag and black grouper.

Alternative 1 (No Action). Within the 3-fish combined grouper and tilefish aggregate bag limit, the daily bag limit is one gag or black grouper, combined. The for-hire vessel limit for gag and black grouper is 2 fish per trip in any combination; the more restrictive limit applies. Captain and crew may not retain gag or black grouper.

NOTE: *The No Action alternative assumes the implementation of Regulatory Amendment 36, which is currently (as of August 2026) in the final rule phase of rulemaking.*

Alternative 2. Modify the for-hire vessel limit to be **2 gag or black grouper, in any combination per 6 passengers** for vessels with the South Atlantic Charter/Headboat for Snapper-Grouper For-Hire Fishing Permit (Open Access) and have a valid United States Coast Guard (USCG) issued certificate of inspection (COI). Any vessel that has a valid South Atlantic Charter/Headboat for Snapper-Grouper For-Hire Fishing Permit (Open Access) or a valid United States Coast Guard (USCG) issued certificate of inspection (COI) would have a vessel limit of 2 gag or black grouper combined per vessel per day. Captain and crew may not retain gag or black grouper.

Sub-Alternative 2a. The maximum number of gag or black grouper, combined, is 8 fish per vessel.

Sub-Alternative 2b. The maximum number of gag or black grouper, combined, is 10 fish per vessel.

Sub-Alternative 2c. The maximum number of gag or black grouper, combined, is 12 fish per vessel.

Discussion

- The gag fishery is currently under a rebuilding plan and after the implementation of Amendment 53 has been meeting its ACL each year.
 - 2023: Recreational closed 10/23/23
 - 2024: Recreational closed 6/15/24
 - 2025: Recreational closed 6/26/25
 - 2026: Recreational closed 8/2/26
- Vessels that meet the criteria for the headboat vessel limit would be allowed to retain 2 fish per 6 passengers, but would only be allowed to retain more than 2 fish if they had the appropriate number of passengers on board:
 - A vessel would need to have at least 12 passengers on board to retain 4 fish (Table 1).
 - A vessel would need to have at least 18 passengers on board to retain 6 and so on. If the vessel had 11 people, it would be limited to 2 fish. If the vessel had 17 people, it would be limited to 4 fish.
- This amendment will not modify the recreational vessel limit for private recreational, charter vessels, and any vessel that does not meet the criteria to retain the headboat vessel limit (Table 2).

Table 1. The number of gag and black grouper that can be retained per six passengers on a headboat that meets the criteria for the headboat vessel limit under **Action 1, Alternative 2**. The max number of fish per vessel under **Alternative 2, Sub Alternatives 2a, 2b,** and **2c** are shown as **purple, orange,** and **green** lines, respectively.

Number of passengers (in groups of 6)	Headboat Limit of 2 fish per 6 passengers (Alternative 2)
2 to 11 people	2 fish per vessel
12 to 17 people	4 fish per vessel
18 to 23 people	6 fish per vessel
24 to 29 people	8 fish per vessel
30 to 35 people	10 fish per vessel
36 to 41 people	12 fish per vessel
42 to 47 people	14 fish per vessel
48 to 53 people	16 fish per vessel
54 to 59 people	18 fish per vessel
60 to 65 people	20 fish per vessel
66 to 71 people	22 fish per vessel
72 to 77 people	24 fish per vessel

Table 2. The number of gag and black grouper that can be retained for charter and private recreational vessels under the current vessel limit, which will **not be modified** through this action.

Number of passengers	Most Restrictive Private/Charter Limit
1 person	1 fish per person (bag limit)
2 people	1 fish bag/2 fish per vessel
3+ people	2 fish per vessel

Advisory Panel Action

- REVIEW THE RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES AND SELECT PREFERRED.
- PROVIDE INPUT AS NEEDED.

Golden Tilefish Assessment Response Background

SEDAR 89 was initially released in July 2024. After acceptance by the SSC, Council staff **noticed that commercial landings were much higher than quota monitoring estimates for 2018-2022**. Revised landings estimates were provided by ACCSP and the models were reanalyzed. **A revision to SEDAR 89 was released in September 2025**. The assessment was conducted by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center in cooperation with regional data providers for the period 1972-2022. Current stock status was estimated in the base run to be $SSB_{2022}/MSST = 1.312$ (Table 3), indicating that **the stock is not overfished**. The base model, median and majority of the MCBE suggests that **the stock is not overfished**, but the base model and median of the MCBE is slightly below SSB_{MSY} . The estimated time series of F/F_{MSY} from the assessment model suggests that although F has exceeded F_{MSY} sporadically for individual years during the assessment period, it has not been consistently above the limit since the period of overfishing during 1990-2000. However, fishing mortality has been increasing considerably since 2010 and there is considerable uncertainty in F/F_{MSY} as demonstrated by the MCBE, especially toward the end of the assessment period.

Current fishery status in the terminal year, with current F represented by the geometric mean from 2020 – 2022 ($F_{current} = F_{2020-2022} = 0.1473$), was estimated by the base run to be $F_{2020-2022}/F_{MSY} = 0.72$ (Table 3). Thus, **at the end of the assessment, golden tilefish was not undergoing overfishing. The majority of MCBE runs (80.8%) agreed with the fishing status result from the base model**, and the median value of $F_{2020-2022}/F_{MSY}$ from the MCBE runs (0.71) (Table 3). Compared to SEDAR 66, stock status has remained consistent with fishing mortality slightly below fully exploited and SSB near SSB_{MSY} . The estimated trends from this operational assessment are similar to those from SEDAR 4, SEDAR 25, and SEDAR 66.

Table 3. Estimated status indicators, benchmarks, and related quantities from the base run of the BAM, conditional on estimated current selectivities averaged across fleets.

Quantity	Units	Estimate	Median	Standard Error
F_{MSY}	yr ⁻¹	0.2	0.21	0.06
$75\%F_{MSY}$	yr ⁻¹	0.15	0.16	0.05
B_{MSY}	1000 lb whole	6158.52	5856.66	997.99
SSB_{MSY}	Trillions of Eggs	515.42	485.07	1165.03
MSST	Trillions of Eggs	386.57	363.80	873.77
MSY	1000 lb gutted	523.31	521.82	66.82
$L_{75\%MSY}$	1000 lb gutted	502.45	501.52	67.16
$L_{current}$	1000 lb gutted	373.42	371.24	16.91
R_{MSY}	millions fish	0.05	0.04	0.01
$F_{2020-2022}/F_{MSY}$	-	0.72	0.71	0.31
$SSB_{2020}/MSST$	-	1.31	1.33	0.48
SSB_{2022}/SSB_{MSY}	-	0.98	1.00	0.36

Source: [October 2025 SSC Report](#)

Current Catch Levels and Management Measures

Table 4. Current catch levels and sector allocations for golden tilefish.

OFL lbs gw	ABC lbs gw	Total ACL lbs gw	Commercial %	Commercial ACL lbs gw	Recreational %	Recreational ACL numbers of fish
535,000	466,000	466,000	96.70% (25% H&L, 75% Longline)	450,622	3.30%	2,741

Table 5. Current commercial and recreational management measures for golden tilefish.

Commercial Hook & Line			Commercial Longline			Recreational		
Min Size	Season (open)	Trip Limit	Minimum Size	Season (open)	Trip Limit	Minimum Size	Season (open)	Bag Limit
none	Jan 1 - Dec 31	500 lbs gw	none	Jan 1 - Dec 31	4,000 lbs gw	none	Jan 1 - Dec 31	1/person/day within the 3 snapper/grouper aggregate bag limit

Landings

Table 4. South Atlantic golden tilefish **commercial hook and line landings** from 2015-2025*.

Year	Commercial Hook & Line Landings	Commercial Hook & Line ACL	Commercial Hook & Line % ACL	Closure Date
2015	143,872	135,324	106.3%	12/8/2015
2016	121,962	135,324	90.1%	NA
2017	131,941	135,324	97.5%	11/29/2017
2018	74,445	79,328	93.8%	8/14/2018
2019	85,141	82,935	102.7%	7/23/2019
2020	87,616	82,935	105.6%	7/23/2020
2021	82,279	82,935	99.2%	6/1/2021
2022	89,339	82,935	107.7%	7/2/2022
2023	88,898	105,161	84.5%	10/31/2023, reopened 12/7/2023
2024*	102,003	108,304	94.2%	NA
2025*	69,808	110,722	63.0%	NA

*2024 and 2025 landings are preliminary

Sources: SEFSC Commercial ACL Database [September 21, 2026]

Table 5. South Atlantic golden tilefish **commercial longline** landings from 2015-2025*.

Year	Commercial Longline Landings	Commercial Longline ACL	Commercial Longline % ACL	Closure Date
2015	389,244	405,971	95.9%	2/19/2015
2016	411,367	405,971	101.3%	3/15/2016
2017	405,691	405,971	99.9%	5/9/2017
2018	227,554	234,982	96.8%	3/25/2018
2019	282,676	248,805	113.6%	3/14/2019
2020	256,639	248,805	103.1%	2/18/2020, reopened 3/14-3/23/2020
2021	242,051	248,805	97.3%	2/10/2021, reopened 3/20-3/30/2021
2022	254,197	248,805	102.2%	3/16/2022, reopened 4/11-4/15/2022
2023	270,158	315,484	85.6%	2/26/2023, reopened 4/4-4/6 and then 12/7/2023
2024*	327,116	324,912	100.7%	2/8/2024, reopened 7/24-7/31/2024
2025*	324,206	332,165	97.6%	10/17/2025

*2024 and 2025 landings are preliminary

Sources: SEFSC Commercial ACL Database [September 21, 2026]

Table 6. South Atlantic golden tilefish **recreational** landings from 2015-2025*.

Year	Recreational Landings (numbers of fish)	Recreational ACL (numbers of fish)	Recreational % ACL	Closure Date
2015	3,595	3,019	119.1%	8/11/2015
2016	13,010	3,019	430.9%	8/27/2016
2017	1,746	3,019	57.8%	NA
2018	3,112	2,187	142%	8/28/2018
2019	15,638	2,316	675.0%	6/17/2019
2020	2,894	2,316	125.0%	NA
2021	3,073	2,316	133.0%	9/20/2021
2022	2,357	2,316	102.0%	NA
2023	38,687	2,559	1512.0%	7/17/2023
2024*	2,957	2,635	112.0%	2/29/2024
2025*	16,256	2,694	603.0%	3/21/2025

*2024 and 2025 landings are preliminary

Sources: SEFSC Recreational ACL Database [September 21, 2026]

Action 2. Revise the golden tilefish overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, total annual catch limit, and optimum yield

Alternative 1 (No Action). The overfishing limit is 535,000 pounds gutted weight, the acceptable biological catch is 466,000 pounds gutted weight and the total annual catch limit and optimum yield is set equal to the acceptable biological catch.

Alternative 2. Revise the acceptable biological catch and set it equal to the most recent recommendation from the Scientific and Statistical Committee. Revise the total annual catch limit and annual optimum yield for gag and set them **equal to the recommended** acceptable biological catch.

Alternative 3. Revise the acceptable biological catch and set it equal to the most recent recommendation from the Scientific and Statistical Committee. Revise the total annual catch limit and annual optimum yield for gag and set them **equal to 95% of the recommended** acceptable biological catch.

Alternative 4. Revise the acceptable biological catch and set it equal to the most recent recommendation from the Scientific and Statistical Committee. Revise the total annual catch limit and annual optimum yield for gag and set them **equal to 90% of the recommended** acceptable biological catch.

Alternative	Year	OFL (lbs gw)	OFL (numbers of fish)	ABC (lbs gw)	ABC (numbers of fish)	Total ACL (lbs gw)	Total ACL (numbers of fish)	OY (lbs gw)	OY (numbers of fish)
Alternative 1 (No Action)	2027+	535,000	-	466,000	-	466,000	-	466,000	-
Alternative 2	2027+	540,000	80,000	465,000	69,000	465,000	69,000	465,000	69,000
Alternative 3	2027+	540,000	80,000	465,000	69,000	441,750	65,550	441,750	65,550
Alternative 4	2027+	540,000	80,000	465,000	69,000	418,500	62,100	418,500	62,100

Advisory Panel Action

- REVIEW THE RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES.
- PROVIDE INPUT AS NEEDED.