



# Amendment 56

## to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

**Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel  
Discussion Document**

March 2024

## Background

SEDAR 76 (2023) included data through 2021 and indicated that the Black Sea Bass stock in the South Atlantic is overfished. The assessment estimated recruitment to be lower than average since 2011 and declining since then. Despite declines in landings over the same period, spawning biomass has also declined, while fishing mortality has increased. Assessment, landings, and biological information is summarized in the [Fishery Overview](#).

In March 2024, the Council received recommended overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Due to strong declines in recent recruitment, the projection used to estimate OFL and depict expected long-term rebuilding of the stock assumes the **long-term average recruitment** (higher), while the projection used to estimate ABC for short-term management decisions assumes a lower **recent (2014-2019) average recruitment** (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Black sea bass overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee, based on projections from SEDAR 76 (2023).

<b>OFL RECOMMENDATIONS</b>				
Year	Landed (1000 lbs ww)	Discard (1000 lbs ww)	Landed (number, 1000s)	Discard (number, 1000s)
2025	39	1299	39	3174
2026	68	1430	66	3331
2027	109	1454	100	3354
2028	165	1456	140	3356
2029	211	1457	170	3356
<b>ABC RECOMMENDATIONS</b>				
Year	Landed (1000 lbs ww)	Discard (1000 lbs ww)	Landed (number, 1000s)	Discard (number, 1000s)
2025	35	503	32	1164
2026	54	506	46	1167
2027	-	-	-	-
2028	-	-	-	-
2029	-	-	-	-

Projections become increasingly uncertain for years further away from the terminal year. The SSC’s standard policy is to recommend ABC for no more than 5 years beyond the terminal year of data (2021 for SEDAR 76). Due to the timing of assessment completion and the time necessary to develop projections with appropriate assumptions about the future population and fishery, this results in ABC recommendations for 2 years: 2025 and 2026. Under the current ABC recommendations, the 2026 level would remain in place until a future assessment or interim analyses supporting recommended catch levels based on more recent data can be completed.

An explanation of the condition of population and past, present, and future management challenges for South Atlantic black sea bass was presented in March 2024. A video of this presentation is linked [HERE](#).

## Objectives for this Meeting

- Review assessment summary information
- Recommend management changes that should initially be considered in Amendment 56

## Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2024	Review decision document and consider approval for scoping
Summer 2024	Scoping hearings

September 2024	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives
December 2024	Analyses and initial actions and alternatives
March 2025	Review modifications to the amendment, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
Spring 2025	Conduct public hearings
June 2025	Review public comment and approve all actions
September 2025	Approve for formal review
Early 2026	Regulations effective

## Actions

### Required

The following actions are required components of Amendment 56 in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) or Council policy:

1. The Council is required to **reduce catch levels (ABC, annual catch limit [ACL], and optimum yield [OY])** because the SSC has recommended lower ABCs than the current ABC of 643,000 lbs ww. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that the Council set its ABC at or below the level recommended by the SSC. The ACL also must be reduced because ACL may not exceed ABC. Finally, OY is based on maximum sustainable yield, which has been re-estimated through SEDAR 76 with the incorporation of more recent data, including the transition of recreational catch estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) to the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey (FES).
2. The Council is also required to **develop a rebuilding plan for black sea bass, due to the overfished status** determined through SEDAR 76 (2023). Projected rebuilding of this stock is highly dependent on future recruitment. If recruitment returns to a level close to the higher long-term average, the stock is projected to rebuild within 10 years. If recruitment remains near the lower recent average, the stock is not projected to rebuild to the biomass at maximum sustainable yield (BMSY) as currently estimated. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that if a stock can be rebuilt within 10 years, the rebuilding timeframe must be 10 years or less.
3. Per the Council's [Allocation Review Trigger Policy](#), with the completion of a new stock assessment and revised catch level recommendations, the Council will **review sector allocation percentages** for black sea bass as part of this amendment process. Sector

allocation percentages will be applied to the total ACL to develop ACLs for the commercial and recreational sectors.

### **Other Actions**

The following actions are not required for Amendment 56, but may be considered based on previous Council and AP discussions:

1. Discard reducing measures.
  - Black sea bass is a highly released species. While it has relatively high survival rates compared to other snapper grouper species, the large number of releases results in significant numbers of fish that are estimated to die due to being caught and released.
  - Recent catch estimates indicate approximately 1.5 times more fish die from being caught and released than from being caught and retained (SEDAR 76).
2. Recreational size limit reduction.
  - The recreational minimum size limit is 13 inches total length. The commercial minimum size limit is 11 inches total length.
  - Comments from the 2022 fishery performance report (FPR) noted catches of many black sea bass that were just under the legal recreational size limit.
  - There was some support for reducing the minimum size limit, but the FPR notes this should not be done at the expense of the season length. Keeping the recreational season open as long as possible was noted as a higher priority than any form of management to increase retention.
3. Re-opening nearshore areas to on-demand black sea bass pots.
  - Nearshore areas were seasonally closed to roped black sea bass pots to reduce the probability of whale entanglements.
  - With the development and successful experimental use of on-demand pots that reduce the probability of such encounters, some comments have supported re-opening these areas to on-demand pots.
  - Re-opening and associated regulations would need to be considered with the greater context of the current status of the black sea bass stock.
4. Consider allocating the commercial ACL by gear (pots and hook-and-line).
  - Consideration of this change was noted in the 2022 FPR.

### **AP Action:**

Provide input and recommendations on actions that should initially be considered in Amendment 56.

## Appendix A. Summary of Regulations

Species	Black Sea Bass
OFL	703,000 lbs ww (2021+)
ABC	643,000 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Total ACL	643,000 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Commercial ACL	276,490 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Recreational ACL	366,510 lbs ww (2021-2022+) (AF 2)
Commercial Allocation	43.00%
Rec Allocation	57.00%
Commercial AM (Amendment Language)	If commercial landings, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the quota specified in §622.190(a)(5), the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the commercial sector for the remainder of the fishing year.
Recreational AM (Amendment Language)	<p>The recreational ACL for black sea bass is 848,455 lb (384,853 kg), gutted weight, 1,001,177 lb (454,126 kg), round weight for the 2018-2019 fishing year; 367,119 lb (166,522 kg), gutted weight, 433,200 lb (196,496 kg), round weight for the 2019-2020 fishing year; 323,161 lb (146,583 kg), gutted weight, 381,330 lb (172,968 kg), round weight, for the 2020-2021 fishing year; and 310,602 lb (140,887 kg), gutted weight, 366,510 lb (166,246 kg), round weight, for the 2021-2022 and subsequent fishing years.</p> <p>NMFS will project the length of the recreational fishing season based on when NMFS projects the recreational ACL specified in this paragraph is expected to be met and announce the recreational fishing season end date in the Federal Register prior to the start of the recreational fishing year on April 1. On and after the effective date of the recreational closure notification, the bag and possession limit for black sea bass in or from the South Atlantic EEZ is zero. This bag and possession limit applies in the South Atlantic on board a vessel for which a valid Federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper has been issued, without regard to where such species were harvested, i.e. in state or Federal waters.</p>
Commercial In-season Closure?	Yes
Commercial Payback?	Yes
Rec In-season Closure?	No- NMFS will announce rec season each year (Reg 14). Rec season for 2015 is Apr 1- Mar 31 (all year)
Rec Payback?	No (removed in Reg 14)
Fishing year	Jan 1-Dec 31 comm Apr 1- Mar 31 rec (Reg 14)
Commercial Management Measures	<p>Trip limit 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww); 11" TL. (Am18A) H&amp;L trip limit 300 lbs gw Jan -Apr (Reg 14 effective 12/8/14) Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)</p>
Recreational Management Measures	<p>13" TL (Am 18A); 7-fish bag limit (Reg Am 25) Sale of recreationally caught fish prohibited.</p>

<b>Seasonal closures</b>	Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)
<b>Spawning season</b>	Peak spawning March-May offshore with minor spawning Sept-Nov
<b>Size at first spawning</b>	Black sea bass change sex from female to male. The minimum size of maturity for females 3.6 in SL. All females are mature by 7.1 in SL.