



PC: GRNMS

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

AP Discussion Document, April 2025

Background

SEDAR 76 (2023) included data through 2021 and indicated that the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic has declined substantially. The assessment estimated recruitment to be lower than average since 2011 and declining thereafter. 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](#).

An explanation of current management challenges resulting from the declining biomass/recruitment of black sea bass and status of South Atlantic snapper grouper fisheries was presented in March 2024. A video of this explanation is linked [HERE](#).

In a [letter](#) received from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on May 30, 2024, NMFS stated that black sea bass will continue to be listed as not overfished and not subject to overfishing (the status from the previous assessment), until an update to the status determination criteria (SDC), as recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), is put in place. NMFS requested that the SDC be updated to MSY proxies based on 40% of the spawning potential ratio (SPR).

Online scoping was conducted from January 22 through 5pm on February 6, 2025. Emailed comments are included in the March 2025 Council Meeting Briefing Book. Comments submitted via the online form are viewable [HERE](#).

In March 2025, the Council reviewed scoping comments and directed staff on the actions and ranges of alternatives that should be developed in the draft amendment. The Council determined that changes to sector allocations would not be considered at this time, consistent

with the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel’s (AP) discussion in March 2024, in which no AP members expressed support for considering changes to sector allocations.

Acceptable Biological Catch

In March 2024, the Council initially received recommended overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels from the SSC. The Council, SSC, and Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) communicated from March 2024 – December 2024 concerning the assumptions that should be included in projections of future catch based on SEDAR 76 used to develop OFL and ABC recommendations. Due to the lengthening time between projected management implementation (late 2026) and the assessment terminal year (2021), as well as disagreement between recent average abundance trends projected for interim years versus continued declines observed through the Southeast Reef Fish Survey, the Council requested that the assessment information be updated and projections re-run using more recent information, as available.

The SEFSC is developing the updated assessment and projections and is expected to present results for SSC review at their April 2025 meeting. The update and SSC’s recommendations for OFL and ABC will be presented to the Council in June 2025.

Objectives for this Meeting (April 2025)

- Review the draft actions and provide any additional recommendations on alternatives.

Actions

The AP has provided recommendations for several of these actions during the [March 2024](#) and [October 2024](#) meetings.

- 1. Reduce catch levels (ABC, annual catch limit [ACL], and optimum yield [OY])**
 - The Council will receive SSC recommendations for catch levels at the June 2025 meeting.
- 2. Consider revising status determination criteria (SDC)**
 - The assessment panel recommended the 40% SPR-based reference points instead of the current 30% SPR-based reference points used during the last stock assessment (SEDAR 76 2023), and the SSC endorsed this recommendation. Additionally, NMFS requested these reference points be incorporated into the FMP through this amendment.
 - The Council has directed a wider range of alternatives than only the current (30% SPR) and recommended (40% SPR) proxies, including an alternative that sets the proxy based on the best scientific information available (i.e. the proxy could change as scientific recommendations change).
- 3. Change fishing year start date**
 - Current recreational start date: April 1
 - Current commercial start date: January 1
 - The Council directed consideration of a January 1 start date for both sectors.

- The Council also requested analysis of interactive effects of the fishing year start date with size or bag limit changes on the recreational season length.
- 4. Re-open nearshore areas to on-demand black sea bass pots.**
 - Current seasonal pot closures: November 1-April 30 (closure area changes during December 1-March 31)
 - The Council directed inclusion of this action in the amendment due to the development of new technology that does not require this closure.
 - The Council directed staff to develop alternatives that either keep the seasonal closure as it is (No Action) or completely remove the seasonal closure, without intermediate alternatives.
 - 5. Prohibit multi-hook rigs**
 - Likely to be similar to the action developed for Regulatory Amendment 35 prior to its rescission.
 - 6. Revise the recreational bag limit**
 - Current bag limit: 7 fish
 - The Council directed an alternative exploring a larger bag limit be included for analysis.
 - 7. Recreational size limit reduction**
 - Likely to increase retention, but unlikely to affect overall catch without a decrease in the bag limit, as well.
 - The Council directed consideration of a range of size limits from 11 inches (would match commercial) to 13 inches (current size limit). The Council stated they only intend to consider changes to the recreational size limit in this amendment, not the commercial.
 - 8. Recreational seasonal retention closure**
 - Potentially matching shallow water grouper closure (January-April). The Council also directed inclusion of alternatives that do not include this entire timeframe (e.g. only March-April).
 - Snapper Grouper FMU species closed to recreational harvest during January-April: black grouper, blueline tilefish, gag, East Florida/Florida Keys hogfish, red grouper, red porgy, scamp, snowy grouper, wreckfish, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney.
 - Greater amberjack closed in April.
 - Include in the evaluation looking at historical time periods of closures and whether discards were reduced.
 - 9. Golden tilefish recreational season start date (maybe)**
 - The Council directed consideration of changing the recreational season start date for golden tilefish in an amendment other than Abbreviated Framework 4 (golden tilefish catch levels).
 - This action may be considered under Amendment 56 or the expected blueline tilefish assessment response planned for later in 2025.

- Intent is to consider aligning the season start date for golden tilefish with other deep water species (e.g. blueline tilefish, snowy grouper; season start on May 1).

Additional Notes:

- Note in the background discussion the strong impact of discards in state waters.
 - Research whether other agencies/assessments have used different inshore/offshore discard mortalities. Nearshore mortality may be significantly different.
 - The Council stated a concern about why high numbers of nearshore discards (typically smaller fish) are not being reflected in offshore biomass.

AP Action

Recommend ranges of alternatives that should be considered under each action in this amendment.

Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2024	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping
September 2024	Discussed changes to amendment timeline and reviewed assumptions for ABC projections.
December 2024	SSC comments/recommendations for additional catch level projections
January 22-February 6, 2025	Scoping
March 2025	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives
June 2025	Review SSC catch recommendations, initial actions and alternatives, and preliminary analyses
September 2025	Review modifications to the amendment, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
Fall 2025	Conduct public hearings
December 2025	Review public comment and approve all actions
March 2026	Approve for formal review
Late 2026	Regulations effective

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%
Recreational 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)	NMFS will project the length of the recreational fishing season based on when NMFS projects the recreational ACL 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.
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 2024 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	Trip limit 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww); 11" TL. (Am18A) H&L trip limit 300 lbs gw Jan -Apr (Reg 14 effective 12/8/14) Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)

Recreational Management Measures	13" TL (Am 18A); 7-fish bag limit (Reg Am 25) Sale of recreationally caught fish prohibited.
Seasonal closures	Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)
Spawning season	Peak spawning March-May offshore with minor spawning Sept-Nov
Size at first spawning	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.

Appendix B. State Regulations

Based on current information, the effects of changes to recreational management should all be considered with the expectation that state regulations (summarized below) remain unchanged. A large portion of the recreational catch occurs in state waters (Table 2).

Federal: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

North Carolina (S of Cape Hatteras): 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

South Carolina: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

Georgia: 15 fish per person per day bag limit; 12-inch minimum size limit

Florida: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

Table 2. South Atlantic recreational catches (shore, charter, and private trips) of black sea bass from 2019-2023 for inland, state ocean (≤ 3 miles), and federal ocean (> 3 miles) waters.

Year	Inland	Ocean ≤ 3 miles	Ocean > 3 miles
	Landings (number)		
2019	4,778	17,423	388,759
2020	23,296	16,028	187,633
2021	65,012	10,306	195,872
2022	30,954	8,006	269,466
2023	97,263	19,855	232,122
	Releases (number)		
2019	2,361,811	1,167,075	4,208,745
2020	2,343,704	811,823	2,818,590
2021	2,205,874	1,110,027	2,238,182
2022	3,713,356	1,503,126	3,329,941
2023	3,563,520	1,035,373	1,522,056
	Catch (number)		
2019	2,366,589	1,184,498	4,597,504
2020	2,367,000	827,851	3,006,223
2021	2,270,886	1,120,333	2,434,054
2022	3,744,310	1,511,132	3,599,407
2023	3,660,783	1,055,228	1,754,178

Source: MRIP Public Data