



PC: GRNMS

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

Discussion Document for Snapper Grouper AP

October 2024

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 in each of those years. 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, SEDAR 56), with an expected update to the status determination criteria (SDC), as recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). NMFS requested that the SDC be updated to reference point proxies based on 40% of the spawning potential ratio (SPR) (the current proxies are based on 30% SPR), which aligns with the assessment panel's recommendation and was also supported by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

Because the stock status from SEDAR 56 is maintained until the SDC are updated through an amendment, the Council is not required to implement a rebuilding plan for black sea bass. After the SDC are updated, if stock conditions do not change, then the stock would be

considered overfished, and the Council would be required to implement a rebuilding plan within 2 years of the status determination. In September 2024, the Council decided that Amendment 56 would not include a rebuilding plan but would include management actions to prevent overfishing.

Since the AP’s last discussion on black sea bass, the Council, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC), and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) have worked collaboratively to develop catch projections that incorporate potential regulatory changes being considered by the Council. Catch projections were originally developed with the assumptions that a rebuilding plan would be necessary, and the stock would need to be rebuilt within ten years. With the Council’s decision to not include a rebuilding plan in Amendment 56, catch projections must be re-run with a different set of assumptions (prevent overfishing rather than rebuild within 10 years). The SSC is next expected to review and develop recommendations on catch projections at their October 2024.

During the September 2024 meeting, the Council also discussed potential fishery responses to management regulations that could be considered through Amendment 56. The Council recommended posing some of their discussion questions to the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel for further information.

Objectives for this Meeting (October 2024)

- Review current list of potential actions and discuss how fishery behavior is expected to respond to management changes being considered.

Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2024	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping
September 2024	Discuss potential changes to amendment timeline and review assumptions for ABC projections
December 2024	SSC comments/recommendations for additional catch level projections and AP comments
Winter 2025	Scoping hearings
March 2025	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives
June 2025	Review analyses and initial actions and alternatives
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

Potential Actions

The following lists include actions that the Council is required to take through Amendment 56, as well as other actions that are not required, but have been discussed by the Council. The full lists are included for informative purposes, but the Council has only requested AP discussion at the October 2024 meeting on the item listed under “AP Discussion”.

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. **Reduce catch levels (ABC, annual catch limit [ACL], and optimum yield [OY])**
2. **Revise status determination criteria (SDC)**
 - The assessment panel recommended the 40% SPR-based reference points instead of the current 30% SPR-based reference points 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.
3. **Review sector allocation percentages**
 - Required discussion per the Council’s [Allocation Review Trigger Policy](#), with the completion of a new stock assessment and revised catch level recommendations.

Other Actions

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

4. **Modify accountability measures**
 - Change the current recreational measure in which NMFS sets the season each year.
5. **Change fishing year start dates**
 - Recreational: April 1
 - Commercial: January 1
6. **Consider opening 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)
7. **Consider allocating the commercial ACL by gear (pots and hook-and-line).**
 - Consideration of this change was noted in the 2022 Fishery Performance Report
8. **Modify recreational management measures**
 - Discard reducing measures (e.g. single hook rigs)
 - Recreational bag limit reduction.
 - Recreational size limit reduction.
 - **Seasonal retention closure for the recreational sector.**
 - Potentially matching shallow water grouper closure (January-April).

- Snapper Grouper FMU species closed during January-April to recreational harvest: 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.
- **A January-April black sea bass recreational retention closure is included in the requested additional projection runs to be reviewed by the SSC in October 2024.**
- In August 2024, the SEFSC and SSC discussed uncertainty associated with assumptions about fishing behavior and effort in response to a January-April retention closure. The SSC noted the need to reduce fishing effort to prevent overfishing (due primarily to discard mortality) under the context of the $F_{40\%}$ reference point.
- The working assumption is that the recent landings-based fishing mortality associated with waves 1 and 2 would be converted to discard-based fishing mortality (100% mortality rate to ~15% mortality rate for fish that would have been landed), but there would be no change in fishing effort during those waves.
- **Quantitative data to inform assumptions about fishery behavior under a wave 1 and 2 retention closure are limited. However, assumptions may be informed through expert judgment from the Council and its stakeholder advisors.**
- Recreational releases of black sea bass by wave and mode are shown in the [Fishery Overview](#) (under Graphs>Recreational Sector Data).

AP Discussion

If a January-April recreational retention closure on black sea bass were implemented, should fishing effort in areas where black bass occur be expected to significantly change? If so, by how much (number caught per angler/trip or by percentage)?

- How effective are recreational fishermen at targeting and avoiding black sea bass?
- Consider other species that are already closed during waves 1 and 2, notably shallow water groupers. Are black sea bass typically caught in the same areas as these species?
- If black sea bass could not be retained, would recreational fishermen continue to fish in areas where they have typically caught black sea bass?

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)	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.