

Meeting Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

October 15-17, 2024

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on October 15-17, 2024.

The AP approved the minutes from the March 2024 meeting and the agenda for the October 2024 meeting.

1. Committee Chair Remarks

Jessica McCawley, Chair of the Snapper Grouper Committee for the Council, provided opening remarks, along with a framework for what the Council was expecting from the AP at the meeting. The AP was also updated on the research projects being conducted to investigate red snapper recreational catches, releases, and management strategies.

2. Stakeholder Engagement Meetings

Council staff presented information on a new type of stakeholder engagement meeting designed to build relationships with fishery stakeholders by engaging them in an informal setting that allows for two-way conversations. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- The SG AP was concerned that stakeholders would not be willing to attend and participate in these meetings. Instead, they recommended an online forum where fishermen can pose questions anonymously and have them answered by staff. This is easier than showing up at a meeting.
 - There was concern that fishermen might not feel comfortable speaking up during a breakout group and noted it would be important for Council members to be prepared to encourage discussion.
 - The Council should hold virtual (webinar) opportunity to provide input for fishermen that were unable to participate in the meetings and/or to capture input from states that are not being visited in a given year.
- Trust in the Council is at an all-time low. So, it will be important that fishermen feel like they are being heard and their input is being actively considered. It will also be important for the Council to ensure transparency on the major issues (red snapper, sharks) and provide information to fishermen on what is needed to reach their goals.
 - Generally, it is felt that communication from the Council is lacking.
 - During the meeting, Council members should not sugar-coat what is going to happen in the future. They should be prepared to provide information on current issues and future plans with blunt honesty.
- It takes a significant amount of time and effort to understand and get involved in the fisheries management process, which is the largest obstacle to stakeholder participation. These meetings should focus on helping stakeholders understand the management process because it will improve both the quantity and the quality of input received by the Council.

- A social media campaign should be used to increase participation in these meetings but also generally to provide information on fisheries management to stakeholders. This is a more up-to-date way to share information and will help get a younger audience involved. Social media is lower cost and trackable to see how engagement has changed over time.
 - The younger generation prefers to receive information in smaller snippets and the meeting is too structured to be effective. All materials provided should be short, summarizing the information necessary to improve understanding.
- The Council should work with tackle shop manufacturers to help get this information out to the stakeholders. Letting fishing influencers be the voice encouraging participation should help increase attendance. However, keep in mind that the groups have a lot to advocate for and limited time and budget.
 - Consider partnering with organizations that might be able to provide something to raffle off during the meeting to increase attendance.
 - Consider combining these meetings with other fishing-focused events such as seminars.
 - Consider consulting with a public relations professional because this project is going to need a substantial communications plan.
- The venue is going to be extremely important, the more informal the better (ex. tackle shops are better than community centers).

3. Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation Presentation and Discussion

The Council is conducting a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) to explore long-term management strategies for the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery. Staff from Blue Matter Science presented preliminary results for potential management strategies to rebuild Black Sea Bass, Gag, and Red Snapper. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- An FL commercial member commented that a 1-2 month closure around the spawning seasons of each species couldn't hurt efforts to maintain or improve recruitment.
 - Consideration of this was supported by an SC recreational member.
- Some AP members noted that the model runs presented in this meeting seem to indicate the need for a reduction in recreational effort to rebuild the topic stocks.
- An NC scientist member recommended an increase in educational information on fishing and release techniques that improve the likelihood of survival for released fish, such as descending devices, venting, or circle hooks, as well as increased enforcement of regulations that require the use of such techniques.
- An NC commercial member recommended consideration of some small, inshore MPAs to enhance habitat for juvenile fish, and possibly consider stocking techniques where possible.
- An NC commercial member noted that with fish populations moving in response to climate change, the black sea bass stock, particularly, may never return to historical levels and range in the South Atlantic. The problem may be larger than fishing.
 - A similar effect was noted for a FL Keys commercial member, stating that new species could be moving into that area as other species are moving out.
- A FL headboat member commented that, while black sea bass used to be a primary targeted species for the headboat fishery off Ponce Inlet, they are rarely caught in this area today. There have been large increases in catches of sharks and goliath grouper. There could be ecosystem effects of population increases for protected predatory species.

- This member also commented that a bottom closure would be detrimental for and possibly close headboat businesses.
- An SC headboat member commented that if a bottom closure is considered, a niche needs to be carved out for the headboat component of the fishery.
- Two SC members commented that if a closure occurs and businesses are forced to sell coastal property, that property would likely be purchased and developed for other purposes, further reducing the already-limited amount of working waterfront and public fishing opportunities in the region.
- The AP discussed the need for improved data (for stocks that seem to be healthy) or improving the status of South Atlantic snapper grouper stocks so that fishing opportunities can continue without bottom closures.
- An NC scientist member commented on a study that should be published soon showing that 93% of deep, gut-hooked red snapper die after release and noted that current regulations requiring the use of circle hooks can prevent this high release mortality. Application and enforcement of this required gear is necessary.
- A FL recreational member commented that red snapper continue to be prominent in the region.
- A FL headboat member commented that near Ponce Inlet, red snapper are being caught in the river and from shore, nearer inshore than they have been caught historically.
- A FL commercial member commented on the lack of on-the-water enforcement of regulations, stating that even for boating accidents, there have not been follow-up investigations of whether a boater was under the influence of alcohol. There are also fishermen operating as industry professionals that have not attained the required permits and certifications.

4. Council Discussion Updates

Recent Amendments: Council staff updated the AP on the status of recent and developing Council actions that were not scheduled for discussion in this AP meeting, including Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendments 48 (Wreckfish Individual Transfer Quota Program Modernization), 55 (Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper), and 46 (Private Recreational Permit); the Improvements to Southeast For-Hire Integrated Reporting (SEFHIER) Program Amendment; and Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 36 (Gag and Black Grouper Recreational Vessel Limits and On-Demand Black Sea Bass Pot Stowage).

5. Red Snapper Fishery Performance Report Update

With input from the APs, [Fishery Performance Reports](#) (FPRs) have been developed for several South Atlantic species. The intent of the FPRs is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPRs will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP), and the Council to assist in their discussions. A benchmark assessment (SEDAR 90) for the South Atlantic red snapper stock is scheduled for completion in 2026.

Council staff provided an overview of the previous FPR, landings trends, and other background information. The AP focused their input based on a series of discussion questions, from which the FPR for red snapper will be updated. A copy of the full report, as well as other FPRs, will be

uploaded to: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>. The AP also recommended stock risk rating scores for red snapper to be considered in developing the stock risk rating that will be used in the acceptable biological catch control rule, following the SEDAR 90 stock assessment.

6. Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule Stock Risk Rating Recommendations for Blueline Tilefish, Golden Tilefish, and Mutton Snapper

Under the newly revised ABC Control Rule, the Council incorporates an evaluation of how much risk of overfishing it should be willing to accept. This accepted risk of overfishing is developed based on the relative biomass from a stock assessment and a Council-determined risk rating that represents the susceptibility of each stock to experiencing effects of overfishing. The risk rating is developed by scoring several biological, fishery (human interaction), and environmental attributes that affect each stock. Staff introduced the risk rating scoring system and presented evaluation information for each attribute.

The AP developed scoring recommendations for blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, and mutton snapper (along with red snapper and yellowtail snapper under the FPR agenda items). The AP's recommended scoring will be provided to the Council at their December 2024 meeting.

7. Yellowtail Snapper Fishery Performance Report Update

An operational assessment (SEDAR 96) for yellowtail snapper is scheduled for completion in 2024.

Council staff provided an overview of the previous FPR, landings trends, and other background information. The AP focused their input based on a series of discussion questions, from which the FPR for yellowtail snapper will be updated. A copy of the full report, as well as other FPRs, will be uploaded to: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>. The AP also recommended stock risk rating scores for yellowtail snapper to be considered in developing the stock risk rating that will be used in the acceptable biological catch control rule, following the SEDAR 96 stock assessment.

8. Southeast Reef Fish Survey (SERFS) Presentation

Staff from South Carolina Department of Natural Resources presented summarized trends in abundance and distribution for snapper grouper species collected in the SERFS through 2023.

9. Black Sea Bass Assessment Response (SG Amendment 56)

Amendment 56 responds to the most recent stock assessment of black sea bass, included data through 2021 and indicated that the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic is at very low levels in recent years. Council staff updated the AP on recent amendment discussions and asked them how the recreational fishery should be expected to respond to a potential retention closure on black sea bass from January-April, and the AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- A Jan-April closure would be detrimental to the charter/headboat fishery because few other species are available to keep at that time.
- A smaller bag limit for the charter/headboat component of the fishery is more livable than changing other measures that would shorten the season.

- Reducing the size limit without reducing the bag limit can have detrimental effects by hitting the ACL and causing a seasonal closure earlier.
- NC/SC border – The species composition of headboat catches seems to be fairly constant over the last 30 years
- There is a lot of inshore interaction with small/undersized black sea bass, particularly in NC.
 - Black sea bass survival after release is expected to be high, especially in shallow water.
 - Descending devices and venting techniques have greatly improved survivorship of fish after release.
 - However, limited use of descending devices and proper releasing techniques by some stakeholders can limit survivability.
 - Mortality from a lack of proper releasing in inland NC waters seems significant.
 - The number of inshore discards is significant. No circle hook requirement or prominent use of circle hooks in this area can increase hooking-related mortality.
 - Illegal fishing in nearshore waters off NC could be affecting recruitment for at least a small portion of the fishery.
- The AP discussed the effects of the commercial pot fishery on current stock status.
 - Potential benefits to the stock from the nearshore seasonal closures should be considered.
 - The small number of pot fishermen and low price per pound are unlikely to cause large amounts of mortality.
- SC – If black sea bass cannot be retained, effort is likely to still occur in areas where black sea bass are caught due to the mixture of species at those locations and typical practices from recreational anglers
- NC/SC border – Reef-associated bottom species are all mixed together; little effectiveness in targeting/avoiding black sea bass specifically
 - Fewer black sea bass are found in deeper water. When they are caught in deeper water, they are typically larger fish.
- Some members were against an April closure because few other fish are available in nearshore areas of NC at that time of year.
- A commercial member from NC proposed consideration of 12-inch size limit for both sectors, noting larger fish hold greater commercial value, so an 11-inch fish is not as beneficial for commercial fishermen.
 - An AP member from Florida noted that there are not as many of the 12-inch or larger black sea bass off Florida. Increasing the size limit may lead to more commercial discards.

10. Other Updates

Best Fishing Practices: Council staff updated the AP on the Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program (BFP MVP), 2024 outreach efforts, and the Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellowship. The AP suggested posting best fishing practices materials at boat ramps, increasing outreach on the use of circle hooks, and one AP member encourage other AP members and fishermen to attend the BFP MVP workshops.

Citizen Science: Council staff provided information on Citizen Science Program activities, including the FISHstory and SAFMC Release projects. The AP discussed some of the projects' key challenges. AP members also discussed strategies to encourage fishermen to share their citizen science project ideas via the [CitSci Project Idea Portal](#) on the Council's website. Finally, David Moss volunteered to serve (and join Richard Gomez) as Snapper Grouper AP representatives on the [Citizen Science Projects Advisory Group](#).

SEDAR: SEDAR staff updated the AP on recently finished, ongoing, and upcoming SEDAR projects. SEDAR 92 Blueline Tilefish was supposed to be completed 2024; however, due to ongoing life history topical working groups, the assessment is now projected to be completed spring 2025. SEDAR 89 Tilefish is complete and went to the South Atlantic SSC for review in October 2024. SEDAR 79 Mutton Snapper review workshop was held in September 2024 and the report has been posted to the SEDAR website. SEDAR 79 Mutton Snapper assessment is a joint assessment between the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils and will be reviewed by both SSCs in February 2025. SEDAR 90 South Atlantic Red Snapper is underway with a data scoping call November 18th, 2024 and a data workshop to be held in Charleston, SC in April 2025.

11. Other Business

The AP noted the following additional items be brought to the Council's attention:

- The AP continues to discuss fishermen's struggles with shark depredation. The AP acknowledges this is outside the Council's jurisdiction but encourages the Council to consider taking any actions in their purview (such as writing a letter to NOAA Highly Migratory Species) that would help address this issue.
- One AP member discussed the impacts that recreational data uncertainty has on commercial quotas and the ability of commercial fishermen to run sustainable, profitable businesses. This member encouraged the Council to continue work on the recreational permit to reduce the data uncertainty, as well as efforts to address issues in the commercial fishery through the Commercial Sub-Committee.
- For the for-hire limited entry amendment, there is some desire for consideration of an income requirement with continued open entry rather than limited.
- South Atlantic headboats are against any type of bottom closure in federal waters for this component of the fishery.
- Golden tilefish longline endorsement holders are considering putting forward a proposal for a catch share program.