

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting

April 21-23, 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on April 21-23, 2026.

The AP approved the minutes from the October 2025 meeting and the agenda for the April 2026 meeting.

1. Committee Chair Remarks and Council Discussion Update

The Snapper Grouper Committee Chair presented a summary of discussions from the December 2025 and March 2026 Council Meetings.

2. Updates

Jessica McCawley (Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission [FWC]; Snapper Grouper Committee Chair) presented results from Florida's red snapper exempted fishing permit (EFP) studies for 2025 and noted the pending applications from all South Atlantic states for 2026 recreational red snapper EFPs.

Council staff updated the AP on developing and recently submitted amendments, the Council workplan, and the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Research (SEDAR) program.

Council staff provided an update on recent Citizen Science Program activities, including an introduction to new Citizen Science team members; FISHstory Validation Team and analysis updates; and highlights from the SAFMC Release 2025 Data Summary, the 2026 Participant Recognition Program, and the 2026 Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo.

3. Fishery-Independent Surveys Presentation

Staff from South Carolina Department of Natural Resources presented results through 2025 for the SERFS (chevron trap and video), as well as the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey (SADLS).

4. Black Sea Bass Management

Staff reviewed the past timeline, upcoming management changes, and potential considered actions for Amendment 56 and Regulatory Amendment 40. Related to Regulatory Amendment 40, the AP provided input on whether changes to commercial trip limits for black sea bass pots should be considered along with the potential re-opening of the seasonally-closed nearshore areas in Regulatory Amendment 40.

The AP discussed whether changes to black sea bass pot commercial trip limits should be considered in Regulatory Amendment 40 along with the potential re-opening on the seasonal nearshore closed areas to on-demand pot gear. The AP had the following input:

- Off North Carolina, the South Atlantic black sea bass fishery is affected by the mid-Atlantic trawl fishery. The latter is affecting the catch levels and the market. AP members stated that black sea bass are now difficult to sell in the South Atlantic market.
- There needs to be restriction on the Mid-Atlantic trawl fishery to improve the South Atlantic black sea bass pot fishery. The trawl fishery floods the market, and black sea bass catch levels in the Mid-Atlantic were recently increased.
- In Florida, where there was a black sea bass pot fishery, there are no commercial landings from pots anymore; therefore, regulations on the commercial trip limit for pots will be moot in that area.
- The black sea bass pot fishery is a very clear fishery in terms of discards. Any increase in pot fishing as a result of re-opening closed areas would not lead to an increase in commercial discards.
- AP members agreed the potential of the pot fishery becoming a derby fishery was low due to the low number of active endorsements and the significant expense of on-demand retrieval systems for black sea bass pots. Fishermen will have to balance out investment in this innovative gear and maintaining profit. Therefore, not all endorsement holders will be willing to incur the cost of equipping their pots with on-demand gear.
- **AP members agreed the trip limit for black sea bass pots should not be any lower. If it decreases, it will no longer be profitable.**
- **AP members were in support of the opening of nearshore seasonal closures to on-demand gear.**
- Some AP members expressed concern over the for-hire industry retaining access to black sea bass if nearshore closed areas are re-opened to commercial harvest. Adjusting the fishing year for both sectors would balance access.

The AP was asked to share observations on the 2025 black sea bass season to further inform discussions on black sea bass management. The AP provided the following:

- During the 2025/2026 season, for-hire captains in NC caught more and larger bass than in recent years. Anglers were catching the bag limit in an hour this past season. The size of fish went up and “keeper fish” were closer to shore than in the past.
- Off Wilmington, NC, the sea bass fishery this winter was the best fishermen have seen.
- AP members noted an increased number of private recreational vessels on the water off Morehead City, NC, even in the middle of winter. An increase in private boat recreational efficiency is really affecting catchability. It is important for the Council to consider this factor when changing management. Areas that used to be remote are now much more accessible.
- Catch and release of black sea bass is about the same and has been consistent in northern SC.
- In southern SC, private anglers saw a big decline in sea bass even after the pots left. There is continued concern with how the increase in red snapper abundance is affecting black sea bass.
- Fishermen are seeing black sea bass come back to Ponce Inlet. This past year was the best they have seen in over a decade.

- Of northeast FL, the cold-water intrusion this past year affected many fisheries (e.g., king fish). It also brought black sea bass to the area. Young fishermen were catching large “greenheads” two miles from shore.

5. Recreational Golden Tilefish Fishing Year

In several recent years, the recreational sector for golden tilefish has experienced early closures, resulting in potentially different access to the fishery throughout the region. The AP discussed how these closures are affecting the fishery and potential management changes for improvement.

The AP recommends that the Council consider changing the start date of the recreational fishing year to May 1. Potential benefits from this change would include:

- Discard reduction due to alignment with the opening of other deepwater species, such as blueline tilefish and snowy grouper.
- Avoiding harvest of golden tilefish earlier in the year (January-February) could protect spawning fish, as some fishermen have observed spawning activity at this time of year.
- Greater trip efficiency by having alignment with other deep water species (e.g. blueline tilefish, snowy grouper, swordfish). Even if the species are not caught together, the fishing grounds can be close enough that multiple spots targeting multiple species can be included in a single trip.

The AP described differences in this fishery throughout the region. South of Cape Hatteras, NC, golden tilefish have more overlap in their range with blueline tilefish and snowy grouper, while north of Cape Hatteras, there is more separation among the three species. Notably, off South Florida, the continental shelf is very close to shore, resulting in close proximity of the characteristic habitats for golden tilefish (mud bottom) and blueline tilefish and snowy grouper (harder bottom).

The AP also discussed prioritization of changing the fishing year:

- Low priority on a regional scale due to the small percentage of recreational allocation and the small resultant annual catch limit (ACL).
- Members specifically noted that this issue is a lower priority for anglers in:
 - Myrtle Beach, SC (charter/headboat) due to the long distance to tilefish fishing grounds.
 - Ponce Inlet, FL (headboat) due to this headboat not typically running trips in deep enough water to catch golden tilefish.
- While this situation, specifically, is not a high priority issue for much of the region, it does highlight a more overarching high priority issue of the need for more localized, sub-regional management.

6. Black Grouper Fishery Performance Report and Stock Risk Rating

Council staff provided an overview of landings trends and other background information. Then, Council staff presented a list of questions to prompt discussion that will be used to develop the Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for black grouper. The FPR will inform Council decisions in response to the black grouper management strategy evaluation (MSE) currently being developed

by Florida FWC. Finally, the AP recommended risk scores for consideration during the Council's development of the stock risk rating for black grouper.

7. Florida Hogfish Stock Risk Rating (*Attachments 7a and 7b*)

In 2024, the AP developed an [FPR](#) for the East Florida and Florida Keys stock of hogfish (Florida hogfish), in preparation for the now ongoing SEDAR 94 stock assessment. Council staff summarized main takeaways from the FPR. The AP recommended risk scores for consideration during the Council's development of the stock risk rating for Florida hogfish.

8. Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation

As part of the ongoing South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE), research has recently been conducted assessing angler preferences to better understand attitudes and fishing behavior in the recreational fishery. Kai Lorenzen from the University of Florida presented results of this research to the AP.

The presentation concluded that recreational Snapper Grouper anglers are diverse in both their fishing behavior and their views on management measures, making it difficult to identify a single management approach that satisfies all user groups. The survey results showed a divide between anglers who prioritize greater harvest access and those more supportive of conservation-oriented measures such as closures, stricter regulations, or permitting systems. Researchers emphasized that anglers are often willing to accept restrictions when they believe those measures will improve fishing quality, increase fish abundance, or produce longer-term benefits. The findings also suggested that management preferences are shaped not only by economic impacts and fishing opportunity, but also by broader beliefs about stewardship and conservation.

AP members raised concerns about the survey design and whether the respondents accurately represented active Snapper Grouper anglers. Questions focused on how participants were screened, whether they had recent fishing experience, and whether fishing licenses or other qualifications were verified. Members were uneasy that individuals who may fish only occasionally could influence findings that may later inform management decisions.

Members also questioned whether the survey gave equal weight to casual anglers and highly active participants. Concerns were expressed that anglers with limited knowledge of regulations, seasons, and fishery conditions may not fully understand the trade-offs presented in the discrete choice experiments. Some members argued that avid anglers and those more directly affected by management changes should have greater influence in the analysis.

The AP also discussed the reliability and interpretation of the survey results. Members noted that the study relied on self-reported fishing activity and hypothetical management scenarios, which could introduce bias. There was concern that the survey findings differed substantially from public comment and permit-holder feedback because the incentivized panel captured a broader and less engaged audience than traditional stakeholder outreach.

Additional issues involved how the survey results may ultimately be used in the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE). Kai and Chip emphasized that the project was intended to inform understanding of angler behavior rather than prescribe management actions, but AP members remained cautious about how much weight should be given to the results. Members also recommended future work include separate surveys for charter and for-hire

operators and requested access to the full survey instrument to better evaluate the methodology and survey logic.

9. Commercial SG 1 Permit and Trip Efficiency (Amendment 60)

Amendment 60 considers revisions to the commercial snapper grouper unlimited (SG 1) permit and changes to management measures intended to increase commercial trip efficiency. Actions include consideration of removal of the snapper grouper commercial unlimited permit 2-for-1 policy, revision of bottom longline gear requirements to allow switching to or from this gear within a trip, and trip limit changes for 7 species.

Council staff introduced the considered actions and described past and future development steps. The AP provided the following comments:

Action 1. Remove the 2-for-1 policy for the snapper grouper commercial unlimited permit

- The AP expressed mixed opinions on whether to remove the 2-for-1 policy.
 - No consensus recommendation is available at this time. The AP will further discuss any recommendations later in the development process.
- One member, who was generally opposed to removal of the policy, suggested that if the 2-for-1 policy is removed, to only allow active permits to be exchanged on a 1-for-1 basis, but still require a 2-for-1 exchange for transfer of latent permits.
 - ‘Active’ vs. ‘latent’ could potentially be defined similar to the original SG 1 vs. SG 2 designations (1000 lbs of snapper grouper in any of the last 4 years).
 - This received some support from other members as a potential ‘middle ground’.
- Leasing – Vessels are leased to permit holders
 - Several leased vessels have or need multiple permits.
 - There are some problematic leasing practices, but difficult to come to a solution.
 - Some ability to lease is necessary as an avenue for newer entrants to participate in the fishery.

Action 2. Revise bottom longline gear stowage requirements and species that may be harvested while gear is on board and stowed

- The AP discussed the consideration of vessel monitoring systems (VMS) to validate gear usage and changing information.
 - Commercial representatives do not necessarily want a VMS requirement, but there may be some willingness for it if it allows additional access/higher trip limits.
 - One representative suggested that vessels equipped with VMS should be allowed to retain multiple trip limits on multi-day trips.
 - Members noted that VMS provides a benefit through more reliable communication.
 - Members noted that while VMS is becoming more affordable, there is still a significant expense to acquire, maintain, or transfer these systems.
- The AP discussed the proposed stowage requirements for longline gear while it is on board but not being used.
 - Requirements may need to be revised to be more flexible.
 - Smaller vessels may not have the space to stow longline gear off the deck.

- Having hooks unbaited could be problematic for longer longlines (e.g. those used for golden tilefish). Baiting this type of gear can take several hours and is often done at the end of one trip to hold in the freezer for a following trip.
 - The AP noted that distinction between bottom longline versus buoy gear (as defined by federal regulations) may be needed to clarify the regulations for each.
- The AP noted the depth restriction for snapper grouper fishing using bottom longline, no bottom longline fishing for snapper grouper species South of St. Lucie, FL, or in less than 50 fathoms depth.
 - One member suggested removing the species possession restriction but keeping this spatial restriction for longline gear.

Action 3. Revise commercial trip limits for greater amberjack

- Morehead City, NC – Effective greater amberjack fishing in this area, with trip limits frequently hit.
 - Stock may not be as healthy as the last assessment indicated. Some concerns for localized depletion.
- Members noted that greater amberjack does not have a market throughout the South Atlantic. In some areas, this may be due to low availability.
- Generally, some AP members supported an increase to the greater amberjack trip limit, while some preferred to maintain the current trip limit.
 - Members that supported an increase stated that 2,000 lbs was too high, preferring lower levels of increase, such as 1,500 lbs or 1,750 lbs.
 - Members that stated support for an increased trip limit were from Myrtle Beach, SC; Southport, NC; and Ponce Inlet, FL.
 - Members that stated support for keeping the current trip limit were from Morehead City, NC, and Cape Canaveral, FL.

Action 4. Revise commercial trip limits for vermilion snapper

- Generally, the AP supported increasing the trip limit for vermilion snapper.
 - One member (Southport, NC) stated support for the 1,500 lb trip limit.
 - Members noted that longer trips would benefit from the increase and increasing this limit may help rebuild trust from commercial stakeholders.

Action 5. Revise commercial trip limits for red porgy

- Generally, the AP supported increasing the trip limit for red porgy.
 - Members from Myrtle Beach, SC; Hilton Head, SC; and Southport, NC, stated support for an increase to 30 fish.
 - One member from GA stated support for an increase to 45 fish, noting the small size of red porgy.
 - Members commented that red porgy are generally a bycatch species and not a targeted fishery.
 - Recreational members noted some frequent encounters with red porgy and that an increase to the bag limit for that sector may be appropriate as well.

Action 6. Revise commercial trip limits for hogfish (Georgia-North Carolina)

- Generally, the AP supported increasing the trip limit for Georgia-North Carolina hogfish.
 - Members from Myrtle Beach, SC, and GA stated support for an increase to 750 lbs.

Action 7. Revise commercial trip limits for red grouper

- Generally, the AP supported increasing the trip limit for red grouper.
 - Members from Myrtle Beach, SC, and GA stated support for an increase to 300 lbs.
- One member commented that the low harvest relative to the ACL may not be due to the trip limits, and that the Council may want to consider revisiting some of the snapper grouper ACLs.

Action 8. Revise commercial trip limits for gray triggerfish

- The AP expressed some concern about increasing the trip limit for gray triggerfish.
- One member (Southport, NC) stated potential support for some amount of increase.
- Two members (GA and Morehead City, NC) stated support for keeping the current trip limit, noting that last year was not as good for that species as previous years.
- One member (Hilton Head, SC) noted that gray triggerfish are sometimes a go-to recreational target with red snapper being closed, so they have been getting fished pretty hard.

Action 9. Revise commercial trip limits for golden tilefish (hook and line only)

- Generally, the AP supported increasing the trip limit for golden tilefish (hook and line only).
 - Members from Cape Canaveral, FL, and Ft. Lauderdale, FL, stated support for an increase.
 - The member from Ft. Lauderdale, FL, stated support for a 750 lb or 1,000 lb limit, noting that longline endorsement holders have a 4,000 lb limit. Increasing trip costs have reduced the profitability of trips, especially for deepwater species like golden tilefish.
- A member from Southport, NC, noted that with this species being so far offshore in that area, weather is a huge factor in whether harvest occurs. The past few years, poor weather has significantly affected harvest of golden tilefish in that area.

10. Snapper Grouper Commercial SG 2 (225-Pound) Permit (*Attachment 10*)

With potential changes to the 2-for-1 policy being considered through Amendment 60, the AP discussed what role the SG 2 (225-pound) snapper grouper commercial permit should have in the long-term future of the fishery. Staff presented summary information related to the number of SG 2 permits over time. The AP provided the following comments:

- Members expressed concern for how SG 2 permits will be used moving forward, as the dynamics of the commercial fishery have changed.
 - The fishery includes fewer large boats with enough capacity to capitalize on the full suite of snapper grouper trip limits in a given trip.
 - The fishery has also become a boutique fishery, rather than one that is expected to produce large quantities of fish to feed large numbers of people.
 - Loss of waterfront property continues to be a problem, resulting in a shifting of the fleet toward smaller “dayboats”, which can collectively be big contributors for fish houses. Many of the dayboats are SG 2 permit holders.
- Members noted that the high amount of latency in SG 2 permits is due to these permits being non-transferrable
- Several members stated support for changing SG 2 regulations to make these permits transferrable, at least to family members.

- Some members expressed concern about greater access to these permits resulting in wealthy people acquiring them to be allowed greater access to red snapper off FL. This could result in further shortening of the commercial season.
- Another member discussed that the issue for red snapper is with the low trip limit and ACL, not necessarily the number of commercial participants.
- Members who had concerns about effects on the season supported waiting to change the transferability of the SG 2 permit until seeing how some of the changes considered in Amendment 60 will affect the commercial sector.
- Several members supported a permit pool or some way to maintain the current number of SG 2 permits.
 - These permits can provide a way for newer fishermen to enter the fishery at a more reasonable price or activity point (possibly smaller/part-time businesses).
 - SG 2 permits allow more people to participate without a huge increase in fishing pressure.

11. Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision (Amendment 61)

The Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit (FMU) currently consists of 55 species, many of which are unassessed or have very low landings. The Council is considering changes to the species composition of the Snapper Grouper FMU through Amendment 61 to streamline ongoing management of the FMU. In doing so, the Council has selected 14 species to further evaluate if there is a continued need for conservation and management. The Council has indicated that these species may be up for removal from the FMU altogether or designated as ecosystem component (EC) species.

Amendment 61 was last reviewed by the AP at the [October 2025 meeting](#). Since then, the amendment has continued to be developed and further refined. The AP was provided an update on what has changed in the amendment and asked if there are any updates to previous AP recommendations or additional feedback for the Council to consider. The AP provided the following feedback captured in Table 1 and in the comments below:

Table 1. SG AP revised consensus recommendations for species considered in Amendment 61.

Species	1) Status quo (maintain federal management)	2) Remove from FMP all together	3a) EC w/ no other measures	3b) EC + permit and reporting	No AP consensus at this time
Jolthead Porgy	X				
Knobbed Porgy	X				
Saucereye Porgy	X				
Scup	X				
Whitebone Porgy	X				
Misty Grouper	X				
Blackfin Snapper	X				
Bar Jack		X		X	
Atlantic Spadefish				X	
Sand Tilefish				X	

White Grunt				X	
Tomtate				X	
Sailor's Choice				X	
Margate				X	

Consensus Statements:

- The AP noted that there were some Council considerations that are contrary to the AP’s previous or updated recommendations. In particular, the AP felt that misty grouper should remain status quo and be maintained under federal management.
 - The AP consensus for misty grouper is to remain status quo under federal management. The species are long lived and may benefit from federal management.
 - Additionally, Amendment 14, which established eight deepwater Type II marine protected areas to protect a portion of the population and habitat of long-lived deepwater snapper grouper species, specifically lists misty grouper as species targeted by that amendment.
- Regarding potential trip and bag limits for EC species, it was noted that the starting point for potential limits appears to be fairly high, but the AP will further discuss these limits in the fall after additional information is available.

Individual AP member comments:

- An AP member noted that the grunts and spadefish are not important species for Northeast Florida and could be removed from federal management.
- An AP member initially stated that bar jack are important species for the headboat fishery off Florida. Upon further investigation into data for headboat catches, it was later noted that bar jack landings are not as high as initially thought and that the species could be removed from the FMU or designated as an EC species.
- It was also noted that the grunts are an important non-commercial food source. A bait fishery for these species may also develop if management is removed.
- The spadefish fishery off South Carolina occurs primarily in federal waters and removal of federal measures would affect that fishery.

12. South Atlantic Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZ) Research

The Council established five Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017, where fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper-grouper species is prohibited. Three of these SSMZs are natural sites with a sunset on regulations after 10 years, while two artificial-reef SSMZs did not have the sunset provision. The Council intended to use the 10-year period to gather additional information to determine whether the natural sites are functioning as effective spawning areas for the focal species listed in the System Management Plan for the SSMZs.

The panel discussion generally trended toward keeping the SSMZs in place. Supporters cited:

- Evidence of spawning fish in the zones
- The importance of protecting spawning habitat
- The value of long-term, stable management areas for research and monitoring
- The possibility that even small protected areas can matter biologically

Those more skeptical emphasized:

- Limited enforcement capacity
- Very small area size relative to the broader spawning range
- Uncertainty about how effective area closures are compared with time-based closures
- Confusion over how much fishing actually occurs inside the zones

Despite those concerns, the informal show of hands suggested the AP was generally comfortable with the zones remaining effective rather than letting the sunset clauses expire. The AP recommended additional outreach efforts be made to inform stakeholders about the areas and clarify the difference between the Deepwater Marine Protected Areas and the SSMZs. They encouraged staff to work with chart manufacturers to get these areas added to GPS units and chart plotters.