

# **SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**

## **SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE**



**SSC Meeting**

**Final Report**

**August 15, 2024**

**Via Webinar**

VERSION  
FINAL  
8/30/2024

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*\*Indicates materials not available for briefing book at time of posting. These materials will be added to the recent materials section when available.*

## **SAFMC PUBLIC COMMENT PROCESS**

### Written comment:

Written comments on SSC agenda topics are provided to the Committee through an online form, similar to all other Council briefing materials. Written comment can be submitted at [this link](#). For this meeting, the deadline for submission of written comment is 5:00 p.m., August 14, 2024.

### Verbal comment:

Two opportunities for comment on agenda items will be provided at set times during SSC meetings. The first will be at the beginning of the meeting, and the second near the conclusion. Those wishing to comment should indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who will then recognize individuals to provide comment.

An opportunity for comment on specific agenda items will also be provided as each item comes up for discussion. Comments will be taken after all the initial presentations are given and questions from the SSC are answered, but before the SSC starts making recommendations to address the action items. As before, those wishing to comment should indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who will then recognize individuals to provide comment. All comments are part of the record of the meeting.

### Meeting Format:

This meeting will be held via webinar. Online registration for the meeting can be found at the Council's website: <https://safmc.net/meeting-type/scientific-and-statistical-committee/>

## 1. INTRODUCTIONS

### 1.1 Documents

Attachment 1a. SSC August 2024 Agenda

Attachment 1b. Minutes from the April 2024 meeting

### 1.2 Action

- Introductions
- Review and approve agenda.
  - *Agenda approved*
- Approve minutes from April 2024 meeting.
  - *Minutes approved*

## 2. PUBLIC COMMENT

The public is provided this comment period for any general comments pertaining to any items on the agenda. There will also be time provided for public comment during each specific agenda item as they are discussed. Those wishing to make comments should indicate their desire to do so to the Committee Chair.

*No public comment relevant to the agenda items was provided.*

## 3. SEDAR 76: BLACK SEA BASS OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROJECTIONS

### 3.1 Documents

Attachment 3a. Black Sea Bass Projections Presentation

\*Attachment 3b. Black Sea Bass Report

Attachment 3c. Red Snapper Forecasts: New Methodology and Additional Scenarios

### 3.2 Presentation

Dr. Matthew Vincent, SEFSC

### 3.3 Overview

The SAFMC reviewed the catch level recommendations from the SSC at their March and June Council meetings and began working on an amendment to address the status of the stock. Based on the results of SEDAR 76 (2023), the stock is overfished and subject to a rebuilding plan. Several management options were discussed to address the rebuilding of the stock including changing the minimum size limit for the recreational and commercial sectors. This management action would change selectivity inputs into assessment projections, necessitating alternate projections runs inclusive of the proposed size limit changes. Additionally, the SAFMC

requested the SEFSC develop scenarios where the discard F is reallocated to landings F. This is similar to the approach used in SEDAR73: Red Snapper (see Attachment 3c) that was reviewed by the SSC during their July 2021 meeting ([July 2021 meeting report](#)). These two requests are presented by the SEFSC. The SSC should review these alternate projection runs and make recommendations to the analyst. Additional requests to the SEFSC are currently being worked on and will be presented at the October SSC meeting.

### 3.4 Public Comment

### 3.5 Action

#### ➤ General Comments

- *The SSC requests a background document leading into the discussion for the October meeting (Council staff).*
- *Uncertainties and concerns that were discussed by the SSC:*
  - *What are the impacts of the potential differences between federal and state waters of a possible closed season on total discards of BSB given that it is mostly a shallow water fishery? E.g., would States also implement this season closure.*
  - *Information on the proportion of landings/discards between state/federal waters would be helpful.*
    - *Relevant materials have been developed by Council staff based on MRIP queries for shore-based (<3 miles) and offshore (>3 miles) effort, and will be included in the October SSC BB.*
  - *Would changing the size limit affect reproductive parameters. This information should be available from fishery independent survey data, but it was noted that SERFS does not routinely sample during the Black Sea Bass reproductive season.*
  - *There is uncertainty in how the change in a projected age structure would affect landings and discards.*
  - *We have very limited information on differential discard mortality by depth, and the effect of the use of descending devices on discard mortality rates is not (fully) known.*
  - *Fishing behavior may change if size limits are implemented and/or BSB is added to the shallow water grouper closure. This may affect targeting and discarding, and potentially change sources of discards (due to bag or size limits, and closed season).*
- *A comparison of assuming SPR30% and SPR40% in the projections will be included in the October, 2024 briefing book materials to the SSC.*

- Review alternate projections runs and characterize uncertainties.
  - *The SSC expresses reservations that changing size limits will have the effect needed to rebuild the overfished stock. The Black Sea Bass stock is in very poor condition considering the low R levels, low index values, and high fishing effort, so Council should take the most conservative measures to manage the stock and to encourage rebuilding the biomass. Lowering the size limit is not the most conservative measure that can be taken to rebuild this stock.*
  - *Reiterate SSC recommendations to Council during March report (specifically, need for F reductions):*
    - *The magnitude of BSB discards relative to landings is a huge problem. The high levels of bycatch for BSB are severely hindering rebuilding and substantial reductions in effort are needed to reduce overall F for the BSB stock.*
    - *Strategies to control effort more broadly will be essential to the recovery and sustainable harvest of SAFMC fishery resources.*
  - *Lower size limits will likely increase overall F (more landings F will offset any gains in reducing discard F) if no other measures are taken.*
  - *The SSC recommends including the following projection scenarios for discussion at the October SSC meeting:*
    - *Minimum size limits of 11, 12 and 13 inches*
    - *Closed season (waves 1 and 2 to match shallow water grouper closure) scenario (including how effort/landings are potentially shifted to later waves once re-opened)*
    - *Phase-in approach of ABC*
    - *Presentation of allocations to commercial and recreational sections under current ABC scenarios*
    - *All scenarios should include both long-term R and recent R.*
  - *The SSC recommends reducing the number of projection scenarios, after review of the updated projections, before making recommendations to the Council.*
  - *Temporal closures will result in reduced landings and discards only if overall annual effort is reduced. It may be ineffective for reef fish because (1) the effort can shift to later waves and/or (2) the site fidelity of the fish leads to any legal fish being caught in later waves. Thus, a seasonal closure may not reduce landings to the ABC values that the SSC provided during the March 24 meeting. A reduction in  $F_{discard}$  would be dependent on the type of seasonal closure (see below) and the amount of effort shifting to later waves.*
  
- Discuss questions and make recommendations to the analyst:

- Is using the discard to landings selectivity weighting from 2019-2021 for all minimum size limit scenarios the best assumption?
  - *The SSC recommends using the more recent time period (2019-2021) weighting for all size limit scenarios as the recent data are most reflective of current stock dynamics (e.g., age structure,  $F$ ); thus, should be more representative of future fishery dynamics.*
- Is using the discard  $F$  from 2019-2021 for all minimum size limit scenarios the appropriate assumption?
  - *Assume recent  $F$  (2019-2021) for discard mortality, as this is a more representative estimate and is most reflective of recent stock dynamics.*
- Are fish caught during closed season more likely to be additional discards or will all fishing cease?
  - *The Council's proposed action is that only federal waters would be closed during waves 1 and 2 and would align BSB closure with timing of shallow water grouper season closure. Some related uncertainty comments are listed above.*
  - *Critical is that the impact of a decision for a closure for just BSB or all bottom fishing (e.g. Snapper/Grouper) will have significant implications for  $F_{discard}$ .*
- How to perform the subtract out discards from quota scenario:
  - Is it sufficient to show that recreational discards exceeds proportion in ABC?
    - *Do not perform projections for scenario of subtracting discard mortality post allocation by sector because the recreational discards alone exceed the recreational ACL (note that this statement is to be confirmed by the SEFSC analyst after the SSC meeting).*

## 4. FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENTS UPDATE

### 4.1 Documents

Attachment 4a. Active Amendments June 2024 for SSC

Attachment 4b. Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 36 Presentation

### 4.2 Presentation

SAFMC Staff

### 4.3 Overview

The SSC will receive updates on several ongoing fishery management plan amendments, including Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 36 (Gag and Black Grouper; On-Demand

Gear), Coral Amendment 10 (Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern), the Comprehensive Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) Improvement Amendment, and the South Atlantic Ecopath with Ecosim Model Application. The entire list of ongoing amendments is provided in attachment 4a, but the focus for this update will be on the four mentioned above and located at the top of the attachment document. The goal for this agenda topic is to update the SSC on the current status of these amendments and potential future involvement in the development of these fishery management plan amendments with scientific input and recommendations.

#### 4.4 Public Comment

#### 4.5 Action

- Receive updates on fishery management plan amendments.
- Comment on amendment development, potential scientific inputs, and make recommendations.
  - *SG Reg Amendment 36*
    - *The SSC supports that the Council is discussing different management actions for the for-hire vs headboat fisheries.*

## 5. **BLACK GROUPER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY EVALUATION (MSE)**

### 5.1 Documents

Attachment 5a. Black Grouper MSE Presentation to SSC  
 Attachment 5b. Design of Alternative MPs for Black Grouper – Final Report  
 Attachment 5c. Infographic Booklet for Black Grouper MSE  
 Attachment 5d. SEDAR 48 Data Workshop Report

### 5.2 Presentation

Vania Henriquez, Peyton Moore, and Bill Harford; Nature Analytics

### 5.3 Overview

Nature Analytics will present a proposed foundation for designing management procedure options for Black Grouper fisheries in the U.S. Southeast Region. The need for a stock assessment alternative occurred as a result of the termination of the last stock assessment for Black Grouper (SEDAR 48, 2017), due to a variety of issues that were raised in the data workshop, particularly with regard to the misidentification of Black Grouper and Gag leading to uncertain landings time series data (see executive summary in SEDAR 48 data workshop report, attachment 5d). With this unresolvable issue, the SEDAR steering committee supported the decision to halt the SEDAR 48 assessment and seek alternative solutions that would be investigated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission. The presentation and supporting materials provided by Nature Analytics aims to provide such a solution by illuminating a



pathway to designing and testing management procedures to ultimately provide management advice for Southeastern Black Grouper.

#### 5.4 Public Comment

#### 5.5 Action

- Review Black Grouper MSE data inputs and modeling approach.
- Make recommendations to the analytical team.
  - Any suggestions or recommendations on how to proceed?
    - *The SSC supports the use of a multi-indicator approach to the development of Management Procedures.*
    - *Begin with one stock model (combined GOM and SA) as initial approach. Differences in quality of data streams for indicators between GOM and SA could complicate selection of appropriate indicators and may lead to alternative approaches.*
    - *Prior to development of Management Procedures using specific indicators, thoroughly investigate the quality of data streams those indicators are based upon (presentation slide 11). This includes exploration into how potential misidentification issues may impact other data streams in addition to landings time series. The SSC noted that*
      - *Dockside sampling identification should be reliable.*
      - *After 1990 there was an increase in focus on species identification within MRIP.*
    - *Update the data streams past 2015, the terminal year of SEDAR 48 assessment (presentation slide 12).*
    - *For review of future iterations of model development, convene joint SA/GOM SSC panel.*
    - *The SSC supports a joint review with the GOM SSC before making management recommendations to the respective Councils.*
  - Any concern with any of the options presented?
    - *The SSC noted that there is a high uncertainty in sex ratios and age at transition information due to the lack of data.*

## 6. **SSC WORKGROUP AND SEDAR PANELS**

### 6.1 Documents

Attachment 6a. SSC Workgroup Approach

Attachment 6b. SSC Member SEDAR and WG Appointments

### 6.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

### 6.3 Overview

The SSC has utilized workgroups comprised of a smaller panel of SSC members, staff, SEFSC representatives, and others for providing efficient and effective input and evaluation on specific tasks requiring technical analyses before reporting to the entire SSC body and finalizing recommendations. The SAFMC approved the SSC workgroup approach (Attachment 6a) in December 2016 and since then the document and general approach has remained unchanged. The SSC should review 'Attachment 6a' and suggest any revisions to improve the overall workgroup approach, if necessary.

Staff will then present the current rosters of SSC members appointed to SEDAR panels and extant workgroups and give an update on the status of each of the workgroups (Attachment 6b). The SSC should consider whether several workgroups that have never convened should be disbanded and/or if new ones should be formed based on planned fishery management plan amendment needs.

### 6.4 Public Comment

### 6.5 Action

- Review and revise SSC workgroup approach, if necessary.
  - *The SSC recommends revisions and edits (see below) to the Workgroup Approach Document and procedures. Staff will provide SSC recommended edits to the Workgroup Approach Document to the Council for consideration.*
    - *Draft ½ page scope of work with brief justification to be approved by Council before workgroup is formed, a full Scope of Work is developed, and before any work is started.*
    - *Formalize the process to require a Scope Of Work with specifically outlined tasks and timeline be developed prior to commencement of workgroup activities.*
    - *Include language to include either the SEP chair or other SEP member in SSC workgroup leadership committee at all times.*
    - *Workgroup chair will provide bi-annual update on workgroup progress and activities during in-person SSC meetings.*
    - *Staff will make suggested revisions to the Workgroup Approach and circulate to the SSC along with the final report for review before sending to Council for approval.*
- Receive summary of workgroups and SEDAR membership.
  - *Leave Ecopath/Ecosim/Ecospace Working Group as is.*
  - *For now, leave 'Regime Shifts' and 'MSY Proxies' WGs in place, but consider potentially combining workgroups into larger Ecosystem and Habitat WG based upon guidance from upcoming workshops (SCS8, ECCC, CEFI).*

- *Remove SSC members from Review Panel of Yellowtail Snapper, as review is done by full SSC.*
- *Add Black Grouper to the SEDAR list to be populated with members at a later time.*
- *Add SEP member for one of the Ecosystem WG seats*
- Restructure workgroups, if necessary.
  - *No restructuring is needed at this time.*

## 7. OTHER BUSINESS

- Upcoming SCS8 Meeting Update
  - *Share webinar link for keynote and case study presentations (if available) with SSC members.*
- SciFish Update
  - *This has the potential to provide information for management in the future. There were no additional comments to this update.*
  
- SSC presentation to Council in Sept.

## 8. PUBLIC COMMENT

The public is provided one final opportunity to comment on SSC recommendations and agenda items. Electronically submitted comments can be viewed [here](#).

*No public comments were provided.*

## 9. CONSENSUS STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee reviewed and make edits to its draft report, final consensus statements, and final recommendations.

The draft SSC report will be provided to the Council at their September Council meeting. The final SSC report is scheduled to be posted on the Council website two weeks following the end of this meeting (approximately August 30th).

## 10. NEXT MEETINGS

### 10.1 Scientific and Statistical Committee Meetings

- SEP: October 7, 2024 9am-12pm, Webinar
- SSC: October 22-24, 2024 in Charleston, SC (8:30 am start Tue)
- SSC: January/February 2025 Webinar (TBD)

- SEP: April 14-15, 2025 in Charleston, SC
- SSC: April 15-17, 2025 in Charleston, SC

## 10.2 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meetings

- September 16-20, 2024 in Charleston, SC
- December 2-6, 2024 in Wrightsville Beach, NC
- March 3-7, 2025 in TBD

**ADJOURNED AT 4:22 pm**