

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE



SSC Meeting FINAL REPORT

September 7, 2023

Via Webinar

VERSION
FINAL
9/7/23

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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 comment on SSC agenda topics is 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 12:00 p.m., September 7, 2023.

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/events/sept-2023-ssc-meeting/>

1. INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 Documents

Attachment 1a. SSC September 2023 Agenda
Attachment 1b. Minutes from the July 2023 meeting

1.2 Action

- Introductions
- Review and approve agenda. [Agenda Approved](#)
- Approve minutes from July meeting.
 - [Revise attendance list: add Genny Nesslage, Steve Turner, Judd Curtis](#)
 - [Pg27 \(Shep comment\): “I” should be “it”](#)
 - [Approved pending two sets of revisions](#)

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 comment should indicate their desire to do so to the Committee Chair.

3. SEDAR 86: RED GROUPEL OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT

3.1 Documents

Attachment 3a. Red Grouper Spatial Data Summary Report
Attachment 3b. Red Grouper Operational Assessment Terms of Reference
Attachment 3c. Red Grouper Options Paper
Attachment 3d. Red Grouper Spatial Data Presentation

3.2 Presentation

Dr. Lew Coggins, SEFSC

3.3 Overview

The Southeast Fisheries Science Center assessment staff and data providers have been considering new data informing spatial patterns in the distribution, abundance, and landings of South Atlantic red grouper. These patterns may indicate that the fishery and population dynamics of two aggregations (Northern and Southern regions) within the South Atlantic are sufficiently different that a single coastwide stock assessment model is indefensible. To evaluate this supposition, datasets for the Northern (North and South Carolina) and Southern (Georgia and Florida) regions of the South Atlantic Management unit are summarized (Attachment 3a).

There is currently an ongoing operational assessment with no topical working groups for a single stock of Red Grouper along the SA region. The Terms of Reference for the Operational Assessment are included for review (Attachment 3b), as well as an Options Paper (Attachment 3c) that provides several options for moving forward with a decision on the assessment for the SSC to consider. Note that if changes to the assessment are recommended, the Terms of Reference will need to be revised.

The SSC is asked to review the spatial considerations for the SEDAR 86: Red Grouper Operational Assessment and recommend whether the one-area or two-area model configuration is more appropriate for the operational assessment and discuss approaches to incorporate changes into the assessment if warranted.

3.4 Public Comment

3.5 Action

- Review the spatial considerations data summary for Red Grouper.
- Recommend use of one-area or two-area model for the stock assessment.
- If changes to model structure are recommended, determine an appropriate assessment type to incorporate changes.

SEFSC request to the SSC:

- Provide recommendation considering approaches in the Options Paper. Input on the need to investigate alternative model structures (i.e., besides coastwide continuity model)
 - *The SSC is open to alternative data treatments and/or modeling approaches to incorporate spatial structure in the red grouper stock assessment and that the data treatment/approach would be dependent on the available data. This would also address the CIE and SSC comments provided on the previous assessment.*
 - *The SSC recognizes the data challenges involved in using a two-area modeling approach (e.g. fishery-independent index for southern region). Red Grouper was a relatively data poor species and separating into two stocks likely increase the data challenges.*
 - *The SSC recommends a Benchmark Assessment because of multiple considerations that exceed the operational assessment framework. This would also address the need for a more open and transparent process.*
 - *Given that Red Grouper is in a rebuilding plan, there is a substantial length of time between the last assessment and next recommended benchmark results. Some interim information (e.g. FI surveys) may be available to serve as a stock health check - but how this information is used may be dependent upon the new modeling structure.*

- Would the SSC endorse a SEDAR 86 assessment that differs from the operational assessment? *Yes, the SSC recommends a Benchmark Assessment*
 - o Willingness to review such an assessment? *Yes*
 - o What additional oversight procedures (e.g., TWGs, revised TORs) are required? *For the Benchmark assessment, new TORs will be developed and participants appointed.*

4. DRAFT CLIMATE GOVERNANCE POLICY

4.1 Documents

*Attachment 4a. Climate Governance Policy Background Presentation
Attachment 4b. NMFS Draft Climate Governance Policy

4.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC

4.3 Overview

In anticipation of an increasing number of fish stocks shifting in geographic distribution, new fisheries emerging, and other demographic shifts in fisheries, the National Marine Fisheries Service (informally, NOAA Fisheries) has identified a need for guidance on determining the geographic scope of fisheries and on how to determine which Regional Fishery Management Council(s) (Council) will be responsible for preparing and amending new and/or existing fishery management plans (FMPs) for fisheries that extend or have moved beyond the geographical area of authority of any one Council, including those that move, across Council boundaries.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), each of the eight Councils has responsibilities for fisheries within specified geographic areas (MSA § 302(a)(1)) and is required to prepare and submit FMPs for fisheries that “require conservation and management” (MSA § 302(h)(1); see also 50 C.F.R. § 600.305(c)). In situations where a fishery extends beyond the geographic area of any one Council, MSA § 304(f)(1) authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to either designate a Council to prepare an FMP or require the relevant Councils to prepare an FMP jointly. To date, NOAA Fisheries and the Councils have addressed management of fisheries that span multiple Council jurisdictions on a case-by-case basis. However, given that the geographic scope of fisheries is expected to continue to shift across Council jurisdictions in the future, preparing in advance for these situations, and having an established process and guidance in place for addressing them, will give NOAA Fisheries, the Councils, and the public a more transparent, orderly, and responsive approach for fishery management.

This policy provides guidance on (1) determining whether to review the geographic scope of a fishery and/or the designation of Council authority; (2) determining the geographic scope of the fishery; (3) designation of Council authority under MSA § 304(f); and (4) guidance for transitioning management from existing Council(s), if needed.

NOAA Fisheries has requested input on the draft policy from the regional Councils. The agency is accepting comments until November 17, 2023, with a goal of completing and implementing the policy in Summer 2024.

The SSC should review the draft Climate Governance Policy document and make recommendations on the policy guidance items (1) – (4) listed above as well as the action items below as it pertains to South Atlantic managed fish stocks. These recommendations will be

passed along to the SAFMC for incorporation into a comment letter addressed to NOAA Fisheries on this policy.

4.4 Public Comment

4.5 Action

- Comment on the proposed process to review the geographic scope of a fishery and/or the determination of Council authority.
 - *Unclear where numbers (proportions of fishery landings, revenue, etc.) have been derived from. No scientific or socioeconomic justifications were provided. Thresholds for transitions in management are arbitrary, but language on the application of rules provides flexibility.*
 - *Unclear procedurally how changes are requested. No clear role for Councils and SSCs outlined in the policy document. Also unclear is who will be monitoring the data sources in Step 2(B).*
- Provide feedback on the application and potential implications of the proposed review criteria, metrics, and data sources described in Section III.
 - *Recreational data for many South Atlantic species have uncertainty (e.g., high PSEs). The South Atlantic relies heavily on recreational data sources given the magnitude of recreational fisheries in the area. Transitions in management between adjacent Councils for many stocks would be dependent on those uncertain recreational data.*
 - *How traditional ecological knowledge is gathered is extremely vague. No explanation of what TEK or LEK are, how they will be gathered in a systematic manner, or how they will be incorporated. Stakeholder provided information is valuable, but without any description of how this will be gathered, analyzed and evaluated for accuracy, this seems to not provide a concrete or viable inclusion.*
 - *Number of unassessed stocks on the South Atlantic is substantial, including high number of data-limited species (incidentally caught species, bycatch, non-targeted, etc.)*
- Comment on the potential science and stock assessment implications of this policy (including development and timing of scientific advice to inform the management process).
 - *If stock distributions have changed, this may disrupt ongoing stock assessment, delay management advice to the Council (revised assessment schedules, etc.), and potentially prevent ending overfishing and/or rebuilding of overfished stocks.*
 - *Different review bodies in the regions for stock assessments (i.e., SEDAR, SAW SAARC) create additional complexity.*
 - *Stock assessment capacity and workloads differ greatly between regional Science Centers, which is not fully recognized in the policy*

document. This policy does not take account of the current NOAA staffing structure.

- Provide any additional comments or recommendations for the Council for incorporation into the comment letter.
 - *This policy will negatively impact not only Federally managed species but also Commission and State managed species. As a result, management could be delayed or disjunct.*
 - *Recognition of the multiple management bodies is not outlined, which has the potential to alienate stakeholders. This extra layer will likely contribute to added confusion and possible resentment.*
 - *Procedure for feedback on when the geographic scope has changed is extremely unclear and the timing is insufficiently outlined.*
 - *Given stock assessment workload, it seems unreasonable to provide changes within a 6-month timeframe.*
 - *Classification of alternate stock structure will take substantial time to develop, which may alter ongoing FMP amendments. Scientific advice is paramount for the identification of alternate stock structures.*
 - *Appendix 2: for stocks spanning 2 geographic regions, multiple Councils need to be represented in the scientific and management process.*

5. OTHER BUSINESS

- Attachment 5a. Statement of Work for the Black Sea Bass SSC/SEFSC Workgroup – SAFMC Staff
 - *Workgroup members:*
 - *Kai Lorenzen*
 - *Jie Cao*
 - *Steve Turner*
 -

6. PUBLIC COMMENT

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

7. CONSENSUS STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is provided with an opportunity to review its 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 will be posted on the Council website three weeks following the end of this meeting (approximately Sept 29th).

8. NEXT MEETINGS

8.1 Scientific and Statistical Committee Meetings

- October 24-26, 2023 in Charleston, SC
- Jan/Feb webinar, dates TBD
- April 15-16, 2024 in Charleston, SC (SEP)
- April 16-18, 2024 in Charleston, SC (SSC)

8.2 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meetings

- September 11-15, 2023 in Charleston, SC
- December 4-8, 2023 in Beaufort, NC

ADJOURN