

# South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



March 2024

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Jekyll Island, Georgia, March 4-8, 2024. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

## **Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER)**

In December 2023 the Council stated their intent explore ways to modify the SEFHIER program to improve compliance, strengthen reporting requirements, and explore validation. At their March meeting, the Council received presentations on the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources for-hire reporting program and the Southeast Region Headboat Survey. To begin to identify needed changes to the SEFHIER program, and to obtain feedback from those who are required to report, the Council will assemble an advisory panel (AP) whose charge will be to explore improvements to the existing program. The Council approved the structure of the AP and will solicit applicants this spring with the intent of appointing members in June 2024. While the new AP is only tasked with discussing improvements to the existing SEFHIER program, the Council may revisit the AP's membership and its charge in the future to address limited access or other mechanisms to improve compliance and data collection.

## **For-Hire Limited Entry Amendment**

Council staff presented available information on the number of federal for-hire permits in the Snapper Grouper, Dolphin Wahoo, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics (Atlantic only) fisheries from 2008 through 2020. Subsequent years of data were not available due to issues affecting the electronic permits system at the Southeast Regional Office. Staff also summarized information from Snapper Grouper Amendment 47, which considered implementing a moratorium on for-hire permits in the Snapper Grouper fishery, but was not completed. The Council directed staff to prepare a discussion document for June 2024, including a list of details the Council will have to work out as they move forward, e.g., Equity and Environmental Justice, impacts from climate change, governance shift considerations, etc. Additionally, the Council intends to wait to hold scoping hearings on this amendment until permit data from 2021 onwards are available later this year (possibly by May 2024).

## **Snapper Grouper Amendments and Projects**

### *Private Recreational Permitting (Amendment 46)*

The Council continued to make progress on an amendment to require a permit for the private component of the recreational sector. The Council requested additional feedback from their Outreach and Communications AP, Technical AP, and Private Angler AP ahead of the Council's next meeting. The intent is to consider approval for public hearings in September 2024.

### *Red Snapper*

The Council received an overview of three projects proposed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC) that require Exempted Fishing Permits to allow harvest of red snapper. A total of five projects are recommended for funding. The Council provided comments on the FWC proposals.

NOAA Fisheries stated it is unknown whether there will be a recreational or a commercial season in 2024. Additionally, during the meeting week, NOAA Fisheries notified the Council that the agency is considering interim measures to reduce overfishing of red snapper during the 2024 fishing year.

The Council developed Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 35 to address overfishing for red snapper but rescinded approval of the amendment in December 2023. At their March meeting, the Council requested the SSC provide feedback on the Shertzer et al. management strategy paper and to what extent strategies discussed therein could meet goals for reducing discards and rebuilding the red snapper stock. Additionally, the MSE Planning Team will compile an initial prioritized list of strategies for the Council to review in June based on potential for discard reduction while preventing overfishing and optimizing access. The Council will then use the MSE to evaluate these strategies.

### *Black Sea Bass Management (Amendment 56)*

The Council received a presentation from the SEFSC on revised projections of future catch used for setting ABC and a rebuilding timeframe. Staff delivered a [presentation](#) focused on population conditions and past, present, and future management challenges. The Council requested additional information be compiled to inform discussions and consideration of the amendment for scoping in June 2024.

### *Gag and Black Grouper Recreational Vessel Limits and On-Demand Gear for Black Sea Bass Pots (Regulatory Amendment 36)*

The Council reviewed scoping comments and Law Enforcement Advisory Panel comments about potentially expanded use of on-demand pots. The Council reviewed actions and alternatives and directed continued development of the draft amendment with consideration of approval for public comment scheduled for June 2024.

### *Snapper Grouper Commercial Fishery*

The Council also continued discussion of the snapper grouper commercial fishery, including the current permit structure and trends in the fishery. The Council requested additional information for their next meeting, including the number of vessels by revenue bins, regulatory and legal

mechanisms for leasing and overall statistics on leasing, and trends in imports. The Council intends to take a focused look at both short-term and long-term changes needed for the fishery by continuing to engage the AP, looking back at suggested strategies in the Vision Blueprint, and consider other approaches to obtain feedback from stakeholders.

## **Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendments and Projects**

### *Port Meetings*

Based on recommendations from the Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel, the Council directed staff to begin work on a plan to conduct port meetings for king and Spanish mackerel to gain a comprehensive understanding of the fisheries to improve management efforts. Staff presented the Committee with a draft structure for port meetings and tentative meeting locations. The Council approved the final plan for conducting port meetings. Port meetings will begin in North Carolina on April 1-4, 2024. A Council webpage has been completed for port meetings, including outreach materials: <https://safmc.net/king-and-spanish-mackerel-port-meetings>



# *South Atlantic Fishery Management Council*

## *News Release*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
March 11, 2024

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### **Federal Fishery Managers Review Assessment for Black Sea Bass, Red Snapper Projects, and Address Other Issues During March Meeting**

Black Sea Bass are managed along the Atlantic coast in federal waters from Cape Hatteras, NC southward along the east coast of Florida by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Based on the recent stock assessment conducted through SEDAR 76, the stock is overfished and declining in abundance. With a current recreational bag limit of 7 fish per person and a 13-inch minimum size limit, the number of undersized fish released by the recreational fishery has increased in recent years while total landings have declined. Black Sea Bass inhabit offshore reef areas as well as nearshore structure and around half of the estimated regulatory discards occur in state waters. The overall discard mortality rate is approximately 14%. In addition, the stock assessment shows continued trends in low recruitment, or the number of new fish entering the population each year.

During its March meeting last week in Jekyll Island, Georgia, the Council reviewed stock projections for Black Sea Bass from NOAA Fisheries, considered recommendations from its Scientific and Statistical Committee, and a management response options presentation from Council staff addressing [Population Conditions and Management Challenges for Black Sea Bass](#). The presentation shows strong evidence the stock is in significant decline. Climate change may be contributing to low recruitment and loss of the stock at the southern end of its range, and there is an urgent need to reduce both discards and landings.

The Council will continue to discuss Black Sea Bass during its June 10-14, 2024 meeting, including options for management to take out to public scoping. Public scoping meetings for Snapper Grouper Amendment 56 addressing measures for Black Sea Bass are tentatively planned for this summer.

#### **Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Projects**

Council members received an overview of three projects proposed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC) that require Exempted Fishing Permits. The projects are expected to be funded by NOAA Fisheries to explore new and innovative approaches to better understand and reduce Red Snapper discards and increase fishing opportunities in the snapper grouper fishery. A [total of five projects](#) are recommended for funding.

The [three FWC proposals](#) involve the use of Exempted Fishing Permits to allow harvest of Red Snapper. The individual projects would collaborate with fishermen to obtain catch and discard data, test innovative strategies to reduce discards, and allow additional harvest opportunities. In addition, the projects include a reporting app, an education course, and an angler satisfaction evaluation.

The proposals include both private recreational anglers and for-hire vessels in northeast Florida and private recreational vessels in southeast Florida. Fishermen will be selected to participate and test aggregate bag limits of snapper grouper species, including retention of Red Snapper. The projects could potentially begin in July 2024 and continue for one year, with possible funding available for an additional year. The Council provided comments on the proposals. NOAA Fisheries will also solicit public comment on the Exempted Fishing Permits needed for the three project proposals.

*(Continued)*

## Red Snapper Management

During the meeting, the Council received a letter from NOAA Fisheries stating the agency is considering interim measures to reduce overfishing of Red Snapper during the 2024 fishing year. In the letter, Regional Administrator Andy Strelcheck noted the need to take “expeditious action to meet legal obligations, now and in the long term: including thorough consideration of the benefits and tradeoffs of different management opportunities to increase Red Snapper access, reduce discards, and rebuild other snapper grouper stocks.” The Council received notification on July 23, 2021 that the Red Snapper stock was experiencing overfishing, primarily due to release mortality in the recreational fishery.

The Council developed Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 35 to address overfishing for Red Snapper, reduce the number of fish caught and released, and reduce mortality of released fish. However, during its December 2023 meeting, the Council rescinded approval of the amendment, acknowledging that taking additional time to work on the regulatory amendment poses little risk as the Red Snapper stock is rebuilding faster than expected, exhibiting strong recruitment, increasing abundance, and expanding age structure.

The Council is addressing long-term management measures for Red Snapper and other snapper grouper species through development of a Management Strategy Evaluation for the Fishery. To help reduce release mortality, the Council has implemented requirements for descending devices to be onboard and readily available when fishing for snapper grouper species and hook specifications to help ensure released fish survive. The Council has also continued expansion of outreach efforts including the Council’s Best Fishing Practices and Citizen Science Programs.

When asked about the 2024 Red Snapper season, Regional Administrator Andy Strelcheck stated they have no season projections to date, and a final decision will be made later this spring. The length of any season is determined by NOAA Fisheries.

## For-Hire Reporting

The Council also continued discussing the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting Program and the need to improve compliance with reporting requirements. To begin identifying needed changes and get feedback from those who are required to report, the Council approved assembling an advisory panel whose charge would be to explore approaches to improve the existing program. The Council established the structure of this advisory body and will solicit applicants this spring with the intent of appointing members at their June 2024 meeting.

## Management of the Commercial Snapper Grouper Fishery

The Council continued discussion of the snapper grouper commercial fishery, including the current permit structure and trends in the fishery. The Council will take a focused look at both short-term and long-term changes needed for the fishery. Council members requested additional information on vessels active in the fishery, leasing of permitted vessels, trends in imports, and permit trends. The Council will continue to solicit input from its Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel, scheduled to meet March 26-28, 2024 in Charleston, SC.

## Additional Information

Additional information about the March 2024 Council meeting in Jekyll Island, Georgia, including meeting materials and committee reports, is available from the Council’s website at: <https://safmc.net/events/march-2024-council-meeting/>. The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council will be held June 10-14, 2024 in Daytona Beach Shores, Florida.

**The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.**