

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



December 2024

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, on December 2-6, 2024. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

Advisory Panel Policy

Edits were approved to the Council's Advisory Panel (AP) Policy to better define the role of liaisons appointed to advisory panels. The Council also discussed options for conducting law enforcement background checks for AP applicants. The current process is conducted through NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement and only evaluates federal fishery violations. The Council did not make any changes to the application or background check process but intends to engage in further discussion on this topic during the March 2025 meeting, including a review of eligibility criteria used by the states for state advisory panel members.

Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Update on Electronic Reporting

Staff from the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Division of NOAA Fisheries briefed the Council on the proposed rule, published on September 6, 2024, on Atlantic HMS electronic reporting requirements. The proposed changes aim to streamline and modernize reporting through electronic reporting and consolidation of reporting deadlines, expand electronic logbook reporting to additional commercial and charter/headboat vessel owners, and collect additional information from dealers through existing electronic reporting mechanisms. The Council will send a comment letter to HMS emphasizing the four main concerns cited by the Gulf Council (validation, consistency in reporting, including non-HMS species, and reporting of economic data), ensuring the letter emphasizes the need for data validation and avoiding duplicative reporting.

Secretarial Amendment to End Overfishing of Red Snapper

The Southeast Regional Office updated the Council on potential actions and timing for the Secretarial amendment being developed to end overfishing of red snapper in the South Atlantic. Potential actions and other details are outlined in the [Fishery Bulletin](#) released on December 5, 2024. An updated stock assessment of red snapper with data through 2023 is being developed by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center to provide scientific advice for the Secretarial amendment. This stock assessment report will be available within the time of amendment development. A more detailed update will be presented at the March 2025 Council meeting, and

in-person public hearings are being scheduled by NOAA Fisheries in February 2025. Specific times and locations of the public hearings will be announced later.

Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER)

Feedback and recommendations from the Social and Economic Panel (SEP) on ways to improve the SEFHIER program were presented to the Council, followed by a presentation on utilization of for-hire electronic Vessel Trip Reports (eVTR) data in the Mid-Atlantic region. Subsequently, Dr. Jessica Stephen, NMFS SERO provided a detailed presentation addressing items the Council requested in September and clarifying aspects of the existing program in the South Atlantic and how it was conducted in the Gulf of Mexico while it was operational. Council staff then presented an overview of draft actions and alternatives, and the Council provided feedback on the range of alternatives for each action. The Council finished making appointments to the For-Hire Reporting (FHR) AP during this meeting and intends to convene the FHR AP and the Law Enforcement AP before the March 2025 meeting. The Council will review feedback from both APs and consider approving the amendment for public scoping at the March 2025 meeting. Additionally, the Council requested a list of analyses from SERO to better understand the utility of the data collected thus far through SEFHIER.

Stakeholder Engagement Meetings

Council staff has worked to develop a plan for holding stakeholder engagement meetings along the South Atlantic coast, meeting fishermen in their communities. The goal of these meetings is to build relationships with fishery stakeholders by engaging them in an informal setting that allows for two-way conversations. Building and maintaining relationships and momentum for participation in the management process requires consistent interaction with stakeholders over time, so the Council intends for these types of meetings to become a regular part of their engagement efforts. Staff presented an updated planning document for the meetings, including options for timing of the meetings, and the Council provided feedback on the proposed meeting structure and topics for 2025/2026. The Council intends to conduct the first round of stakeholder engagement meetings late in the fall quarter 2025 (October/November) for two states and the beginning of the winter quarter 2026 (January/February) for the other two states.

Citizen Science Program Evaluation

Staff provided background information on the initial CitSci Program evaluation efforts. These efforts included working with researchers to collect baseline levels of knowledge about, confidence in, and trust in the citizen science process of collecting data to inform fisheries management. Two researchers, Dr. Rick Bonney and Dr. Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, presented findings from an online survey of scientists and managers, and findings from interviews with fishermen, respectively. Staff then shared efforts the CitSci Program is currently doing to help address the researchers' key findings and shared recommendations from the CitSci Operations Advisory Panel (AP) on future efforts to address these findings. The Council thanked the researchers for their work and noted that their findings will be very useful both to the CitSci Program and to the Council more broadly. However, Council members acknowledged that working to address the trust issues identified through this research cannot be done by the Citizen Science Program alone. These are larger issues that will require work on a much broader scale from the Council and the wider fisheries community.

Snapper Grouper Amendments and Projects

Black Sea Bass (Amendment 56)

Amendment 56 responds to the results of the most recent South Atlantic black sea bass stock assessment (SEDAR 76), which indicate that the population is depleted. The SSC has proposed an update to the projections that have been used, thus far, to develop ABC recommendations. The Council directed staff and the SSC to request these updated projections from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center ahead of the SSC's April 2025 meeting. Staff was also directed to conduct scoping for the amendment prior to the March 2025 meeting.

Private Recreational Permit and Education Requirements (Amendment 46)

Amendment 46 considers establishing a private recreational permit and education requirement for the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery. The Committee directed staff to adapt the purpose and need statements of the draft amendment to include planning for potential reporting and expansion to other FMPs in the future and emphasize the intent to survey permit holders to enhance data collection. Regarding the number of species to be covered by this permit, the Committee discussed a general desire to reduce the number of snapper grouper complex species under federal management. Hence, staff will begin gathering information on this topic for continued discussion. The Council reaffirmed the intent to exempt states from the federal requirement for a future permit and education requirement when a state program fulfills an equivalent requirement. The Council also requested additional information on whether an existing angler-based program, such as Florida's State Reef Fish Program, could be granted an exemption if the federal permit were to be vessel-based.

Management Strategy Evaluation for the Snapper Grouper Fishery

The Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) explores long-term management strategies for the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery. The Snapper Grouper AP and Scientific and Statistical Committee Chairs presented comments and recommendations for management strategies that should be considered in future simulations. Staff from Blue Matter Science presented several potential management strategies for black sea bass, gag, and red snapper and requested input from the Council to refine the current suite of broad management strategies into implementable actions that should be further explored. The Council provided guidance for development of future model iterations including effort reduction and sector caps, dynamic reference points, aggregate bag limits, and seasonal closures for the recreational sector (weekend only fishing).

Golden Tilefish Stock Assessment and Amendment

The Southeast Fisheries Science Center presented the results of the SEDAR 89 stock assessment of South Atlantic golden tilefish, which indicate that the stock is not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The Council initiated an amendment to revise catch levels to be consistent with the SSC's recommendations based on SEDAR 89.

Commercial Sub-Committee

In November 2024, the Snapper Grouper Commercial Sub-Committee met via webinar. The Sub-Committee reviewed commercial information from the 2015 Snapper Grouper Vision

Blueprint and concluded that additional and updated information is necessary to prioritize commercial management issues that need to be addressed. The Sub-Committee directed staff to compile this information, as available, for the Sub-Committee's next meeting, which is to be held in-person prior to or during the March 2025 Council meeting. The intent is that sub-committee recommendations will ultimately form the basis of an amendment to the Snapper Grouper FMP to address management of the commercial component of the fishery.

Return 'Em Right Expansion

The Council discussed a project under consideration that would expand the "Return 'Em Right" Program, which works to advance the use of best fishing practices, into the south Atlantic and Caribbean regions as well as to other species including highly migratory species, coastal migratory pelagic species, and other species such as flounders, drums, and sea trout. The Council directed staff to draft a comment letter that will: 1) expressing support for the expansion of the program to the South Atlantic region, and 2) strongly emphasize the importance of collaborating with and supporting already established programs in the region, specifically the Council's Best Fishing Practices Initiative and Citizen Science Program, and relevant state and regional agencies.