

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



March 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Jekyll Island, Georgia, on March 2-6, 2026. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

NMFS Proposed Risk/Value Matrix for Managed Stocks

The Council reviewed information on the risk and priority evaluation provided to the Fishery Management Council Executive Directors in January 2026, noting changes and progress since initially presented to the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) in May 2025. The goal of the evaluation has shifted from aligning Council and NMFS priorities to narrowing the scope of management and science. A multi-step process is being implemented to assign managed stocks to risk/value categories. Alternative, simpler management approaches will be considered for lower value and risk stocks. The process is optimistically proposed to be completed in Summer 2026 to assess resource priorities and inform FY27 planning.

The Council agrees that the agency has been unable to provide adequate science for managing South Atlantic stocks and therefore supports the intent of the scope narrowing exercise. However, the Council raised concerns with the timeline and noted it will be difficult to obtain input from its scientific and fishery advisors on the social value and degree of risk. Additional concern was expressed with the end goal of the process and how value could impact future funding allocations, particularly if the only value considered is related to fish harvest and thereby omits many other important components of the Council's management program. Focusing on fishery value may create an incentive for Council's to characterize stocks as high value and a disincentive to remove stocks from federal management.

The Council noted that the agency has not provided details on how value is estimated and raised specific concerns related to the data used. The Council intends to send a letter to SERO and SEFSC outlining these concerns by the end of March 2026.

Coastal Migratory Pelagics

The Council received an update on discussions that took place at the ASMFC's Coastal Pelagics Board meeting in Winter 2026. The Board has been waiting for the Council to begin action on Spanish mackerel since 2019, and there is some frustration that the Council has not initiated action on any management changes. The Spanish mackerel stock assessment results would come to the Council in December 2027; hence, the urgency to not wait on catch level adjustments to

act on other items. The Board expressed a desire to not get ahead of any actions taken by the Council. The Council directed staff to schedule a meeting of the Mackerel Cobia Committee in March 2027 and to bring the Advisory Panel together in Fall 2026 to discuss port meetings feedback and possible changes to management of species under the Coastal Migratory Pelagics FMP that are not tied to catch levels.

Dolphin Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) Update

The Council received an update on the dolphin MSE being conducted by the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center. When asked to provide input on management procedures to be considered in the MSE, Council members did not feel adequately prepared to provide the input requested due to the presentation being received at the start of the meeting week, leaving little time to develop adequate feedback. Some Council members expressed trouble understanding the nexus of the Council process and the MSE. Members felt that the Council needs to come up with “guardrails” and have enough time on the agenda to do so. Therefore, the Dolphin Wahoo Committee will convene in June 2026 to further discuss input needed for the MSE. Additionally, the Committee will receive feedback from the SSC on the operating model. The SSC is scheduled to receive a presentation at its April 2026 meeting.

Snapper Grouper

Commercial Management Measures (Amendment 60)

The Council received an update on progress made since the December 2025 meeting, including draft actions and alternatives, information on commercial snapper grouper permits, preliminary analyses of commercial trip limit changes, and information on a notification system to potentially allow switching to or from bottom longline gear within a snapper grouper trip. Regarding potential removal of the “2 for 1” provision for unlimited commercial permits (SG1), the Council acknowledged there has been some opposition from the public and concern over leasing of permitted vessels. The Snapper Grouper Commercial Sub-Committee will continue discussing possible changes to the commercial permit structure, including a limit on permit ownership, when they meet in April 2026.

A range of trip limit changes for several snapper grouper species (vermilion snapper, greater amberjack, red porgy, red grouper, and hogfish [GA-NC]) will be included in the amendment for consideration. Additionally, the amendment may explore providing the Regional Administrator authority to enact temporary trip limit increases and decreases based on an annual evaluation of landings relative to the annual catch limit in the previous year. Temporary trip limit adjustments would be considered for gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, hogfish [GA-NC], red grouper, red porgy, vermilion snapper, gag, and golden tilefish (hook-and-line component).

Black Sea Bass Management

In June 2025, the Council paused work on Amendment 56 to allow time for the SEDAR 76 stock assessment to be re-run with updated recreational catch estimates from MRIP. Council staff reviewed the historical timeline of Amendment 56 and where it stood when work was paused. Once updated recreational catch estimates are released later this year, the assessment will be revised, and development of Amendment 56 can resume. Amendment 56 will address long-term management actions, whereas short-term actions to address the depletion of the stock in the

South Atlantic are included in Regulatory Amendment 37, which is being prepared for submission to NOAA Fisheries. During the meeting, the Council received several comments on black sea bass management, however, prompting the decision to begin work on a separate framework amendment to consider re-opening nearshore areas that have been closed to black sea bass pot fishing to protect endangered North Atlantic right whales. On-demand pots (also known as “ropeless”) could be allowed in the closed areas because the gear does not pose an entanglement risk to the whales. Due to the expected reduction in allowable harvest of black sea bass with implementation of Regulatory Amendment 37, the Council may also consider changes to the trip limit for pot gear.

Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision (Amendment 61)

The Council is considering changes to the species composition of the Snapper Grouper FMU through Amendment 61 to streamline management of the fishery. The Council selected 17 species to evaluate whether they continue to need conservation and management under a federal plan. The evaluation could lead to species being removed from the FMU, be designated as ecosystem component (EC) species, or be managed under an alternative approach than what is currently in place.

The Council discussed revising the purpose and need of the amendment to reflect direction in recent Executive Orders and to incorporate the agency’s intent to narrowing the scope of species that are managed at the federal level. The Council removed three species from further consideration in Amendment 61: queen snapper, Cubera snapper, and banded rudderfish. An additional three species could be candidates for removal from the FMU: bar jack, misty grouper and Atlantic spadefish. The remaining species could be designated as EC species or be subject to alternative management approaches yet to be determined. The Council will continue developing the amendment to consider approving it for public hearings in June 2026.

New Amendments

The Council initiated development of a framework amendment to determine whether current restrictions on the harvest and possession of snapper grouper species within 5 Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) should remain in place or be allowed to sunset in 2027. The SSMZs are small areas (average of 1 nm²) intended to offer some protection from fishing mortality to spawning populations. Three of the areas are located over natural bottom and two encompass artificial reefs.

The Council also initiated a framework amendment to consider changing retention limits of several snapper grouper species on headboats. A retention limit “per six passengers” will be evaluated for gag, black grouper, scamp, and yellowmouth grouper.