

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



June 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in St. Augustine, Florida, on June 8-12, 2026. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

Dolphin Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) Update and Dolphin Wahoo Regulatory Amendment 3

Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff updated the Council on progress of the Dolphin MSE and the results of recent modeling efforts. The MSE indicated that the Dolphin stock is at high abundance with stock biomass 2-3 times the SSB_{msy} level, and that fishing mortality is well below F_{msy}. The MSE further indicated that the management actions proposed in Regulatory Amendment 3 would not have a measurable impact on the stock. Council members expressed varying opinions on whether to continue to develop Regulatory Amendment 3, primarily due to concerns over localized stock conditions and regional variability in abundance and fishery conditions. However, based on the favorable stock indications from the MSE the Council voted to discontinue work on the amendment. The SEFSC will continue to develop and fine-tune the MSE for the Council to use in future management of the dolphin fishery.

New Comprehensive Amendment

The Council initiated a comprehensive amendment to clarify commercial trip limit and possession requirements for the three finish FMPs: Snapper Grouper, Coastal Migratory Pelagics, and Dolphin Wahoo. The amendment would also consider revising the framework procedure under each of the FMPs to allow timelier modifications to trip limits and bag limits.

Outreach and Communication

The Council received feedback on various topics from its Outreach and Communication AP, reviewed and approved draft goals and objectives, and received a presentation on the expansion of the Return 'Em Right program to the South Atlantic.

Snapper Grouper

Commercial Management Measures (Amendment 60)

Amendment 60 considers revisions to the commercial snapper grouper unlimited (SG 1) permit and changes to management measures intended to increase commercial trip efficiency, such as eliminating the "2 for 1" requirement for SG 1 permits and increasing trip limits for a several snapper grouper species. The Council reviewed additional analysis conducted by the

Southeast Regional Office, modified the purpose and need statements in the draft amendment, selected preferred alternatives for some of the actions, and approved the amendment for public hearings. The Council also added an action to the developing amendment to consider requiring that all harvest of snapper grouper species on vessels with snapper grouper commercial permits be sold. Public hearings will be conducted in August 2026 at various locations along the South Atlantic coast and during the September 2026 Council meeting in North Charleston, SC.

Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision (Amendment 61)

The Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit (FMU) currently consists of 55 species, many of which are unassessed or have very low landings. The Council is considering reducing the number of species in FMU to streamline management, previously identifying 14 species to evaluate whether they continue to need federal management. The Council reviewed feedback from the Snapper Grouper AP and an updated decision document covering the revised purpose and need statements and draft actions. The Council clarified the intent to maintain permitting requirements for species designated as Ecosystem Component (EC) species because of the multi-species nature of the fishery and to improve data collection, mitigate bycatch, and continue to prohibit the use of fishing gear that has the potential to damage habitat. The Council removed consideration of an aggregate commercial trip limit for EC species but retained consideration of a recreational aggregate bag limit, which would be separate from limits for managed species. The Council will review this amendment again in September and consider approving it for public hearings in December.

Headboat Vessel Limits (Regulatory Amendment 38)

The Council continued to discuss measures to address the needs of the South Atlantic headboat fleet by relaxing possession limits for vessels that carry many passengers and collect a fee per passenger. Under regulations that will soon go into effect (under Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 36) a vessel carrying 6 passengers, for example, would only be allowed to retain a total of two fish (gag or black grouper combined), and so would a vessel carrying 40 passengers. Hence, the Council is considering a “per six passengers” limit for gag and black grouper to allow retention of more fish on large passenger vessels. The Council had initially intended to consider a vessel limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper but removed this from consideration after learning that a vessel limit for these species would be more restrictive to headboats than the current per person limit. The Council will discuss this amendment again at its September 2026 meeting with the intent to approve it for public hearings in December.

Sunsetting of Spawning Special Management Zones (Regulatory Amendment 39)

The Council established five Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017, where fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper grouper species is prohibited. Three of these SSMZs are natural sites with a sunset on regulations after 10 years (in August 2027), while two artificial-reef SSMZs did not have the sunset provision. Under this amendment, the Council will consider extending the sunset provision from 7 to 20 years or removing it (resulting in regulations becoming permanent) for the South Cape Lookout (NC), Georgetown Hole/Devils Hole (SC), and Warsaw Hole (FL) SSMZs. Public hearings will be held in the fall.

Re-Opening of Seasonal Closure for On-Demand Black Sea Bass Pots (Regulatory Amendment 40)

The Council will continue developing Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 40 to consider allowing deployment of black sea bass pots inside the seasonal closed areas currently in place. The closures protect North Atlantic Right whales and other marine mammals that can easily become entangled in roped fishing gear. Fishing in these areas with black sea bass pots would be conditional on the pots being equipped with on-demand retrieval systems, which significantly lower the chance of whales and other marine animals becoming entangled. The Council also discussed potentially reducing the trip limit for black sea bass pot gear (in anticipation of the catch limit being reduced upon implementation of Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 37). However, the Council's advisors as well as the public opposed the reduction citing reduced trip profitability. Therefore, the Council removed consideration of a trip limit reduction for pots. Other modifications to black sea bass management will be addressed in Snapper Grouper Amendment 56, once the stock assessment for black sea bass is completed later this year.

Mutton and Yellowtail Snapper Assessment Response (Snapper Grouper Amendment 44, Reef Fish Amendment 55)

This joint amendment is in response to the most recent stock assessments for mutton (SEDAR 79) and yellowtail snapper (SEDAR 96). The amendment will modify the stock ABC and OFL, the jurisdictional apportionment between the Gulf and South Atlantic and the South Atlantic sector allocations for both species. In June, the Council reviewed actions and alternatives and Gulf feedback from their June 2026 meeting and selected preferred alternatives. The Council plans to approve the amendment for public hearings in September 2026.