

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



September 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in North Charleston, South Carolina, on September 14-18, 2026. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

Council Members

The Council welcomed Rob Southwick as the new Florida representative. Mr. Southwick is the former owner and president of Southwick Associates, Inc., which conducts economic and valuation studies, hunting and fishing license demand analysis, fish and wildlife economic impact analysis, and many other types of market and consumer research. Kerry Marhefka was reappointed to represent South Carolina for another term and was elected to serve as Vice Chair. Jessica McCawley, director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Division of Marine Fisheries Management was elected Chair. The Council also bid farewell to North Carolina representative and former Council Chair, Trish Murphey.

Award of Excellence

The Council presented awards to Trish Murphey, outgoing SAFMC Chair, and Dr. Jeff Buckel, North Carolina State University (in absentia), for their substantial contributions to improving the science and management of South Atlantic fisheries.

Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award

The South Atlantic Council has been honoring exemplary law enforcement officers since 2010 for their efforts to enforce fisheries regulations in the South Atlantic region. The Council presented the 2025 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award to Special Agent Kevin Mitchell of NOAA Fisheries' Office of Law Enforcement.

Resilient Fisheries

In 2024, the Council received funding for its Resilient Fisheries Initiative, which supports projects and collaborative workshops addressing management challenges driven by ecosystem change. The Council received updates on the Initiative's four projects and a detailed presentation on the first project to be completed: the Ecosystem Information Review Project, which seeks to strengthen South Atlantic fisheries management by expanding the use of ecosystem information, indicators, and collaborative research. The Council received a summary of how other Councils use ecosystem data and decision-support tools and opportunities for integrating these approaches into SAFMC management processes. The discussion emphasized that ecosystem information

should include socioeconomic data, as well as ecological indicators, and noted opportunities to summarize indicators by stock to assess changes in risk and uncertainty. The Council also discussed the potential use of risk assessments to prioritize management needs. Additionally, the project recommends implementation options, cooperative data collection, and prototype ecosystem indicators for the South Atlantic.

Council members supported developing a structured process for ecosystem-based decision-making and will use the draft implementation plan, to be presented at the December meeting, to outline the next practical steps for incorporating ecosystem information into Council decisions. The Council discussed establishing a work group and a subcommittee on ecosystem-based decision-making, recognizing the need to prioritize this work, identify volunteers, and establish clear “on-ramps” leading to practical management applications.

Golden Crab

The Council intends to convene its Golden Crab Committee in December to discuss a request from a permit holder who holds all three limited-access golden crab permits for the Southern Zone of the South Atlantic. As the sole permit holder in the Southern Zone, he has asked that the Council consider removal of the small-vessel sub-zone since it was originally intended to reduce gear conflict between large and small vessels when the fishery had several operators. The Council will make appointments to the Golden Crab AP in December and consider developing a framework amendment to respond to the request. The Council will also likely convene that AP in 2027 to discuss the current status of the fishery.

Snapper Grouper

Commercial Management Measures (Amendment 60)

This amendment seeks to increase long-term stability of the commercial snapper grouper fishery by removing the 2 for 1 requirement for transferrable commercial snapper grouper permits, increasing adaptability by allowing switching to or from bottom longline gear on a commercial trip, and facilitating economic profitability in the commercial sector by increasing trip limits for several species. The Council held three in-person hearings and one webinar hearing on this amendment and accepted comments from July 27 through September 18, 2026. NOAA Fisheries staff presented information on vessel monitoring systems and how information on gear changes could potentially be communicated to law enforcement. The Council will obtain additional feedback from its Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel and consider the amendment for final approval at its December 2026 meeting.

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 low landings. The Council is considering changes to the species composition of the FMU to streamline management of the fishery. Fourteen species are being evaluated to determine whether they continue to need management under a federal plan. These species could be removed from the FMU altogether or could be designated as ecosystem component (EC) species. For those that are considered for EC species designation, the Council wants to maintain existing permit requirements, which include limited entry commercial permits, to help with enhanced data collection, mitigate bycatch of cohabitating managed species, and to address other ecosystem issues by continuing to prohibit problematic gears that may damage

habitat. . To that end, the Council requested that NMFS provide information on policy guidelines for establishing permit requirements for EC species. Specifically, whether other Councils have implemented a limited entry permit requirement for EC species or whether the South Atlantic Council may require limited entry commercial permits as the sole commercial permit option to harvest EC species. The Council will discuss this amendment again in March 2027 and consider approving it for public hearings.

Headboat Vessel Limits (Regulatory Amendment 38)

Regulatory Amendment 38 proposes a headboat-specific, per six passenger vessel limit for gag and black grouper to increase efficiency and profitability for federally permitted headboats. This vessel limit would allow headboats that meet specified criteria to retain a higher limit of gag and black grouper based on the number of passengers on board. The Council's discussion focused on the criteria a vessel must meet to retain this vessel limit. The Council settled on two criteria (in addition to having a federal charter/for-hire permit): the vessel must participate in the Southeast Region Headboat Survey and possess a valid U.S. Coast Guard-issued Certificate of inspection. The Council also added an action to adjust catch levels for golden tilefish based on the latest stock assessment for this species and the ABC recommendation from the SSC. Public hearings will be held this fall.

Sunsetting of Spawning Special Management Zones (Regulatory Amendment 39)

The Council established five Spawning SMZs in July 2017. Fishing for, retaining, or possessing snapper grouper species is prohibited year-round within the SMZs. Three of the areas have a sunset provision that would allow the restrictions to expire in August 2027, unless the Council takes action to extend them. Regulatory Amendment 39 proposes extending the sunset provision by an additional 10 years for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown/Devil's Hole, and Warsaw Holes spawning special management zones. This extension would allow for more research to determine whether these areas are providing the intended benefit to populations of reef fish that may be utilizing them for spawning.

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. The Council approved the amendment for public hearings, which will be conducted jointly with the Gulf Council this fall.