

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

Update and Liaison Report



September 2023

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Charleston, South Carolina, September 11-15, 2023. Below is a summary of salient discussions.

Commercial Electronic Logbook Amendment

This amendment is being developed jointly with the Gulf Council to require commercial logbooks be submitted via electronic reporting forms instead of the currently used paper-based forms for the South Atlantic Snapper Grouper, Atlantic Dolphin Wahoo, Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Coastal Migratory Pelagics, and Gulf Reef Fish Fishery management plans. The Council reviewed public comment and estimated administrative costs and approved revisions to the draft codified text. The Council approved the amendment for formal review.

Snapper Grouper Amendments and Projects

Yellowtail Snapper (Amendment 44/Reef Fish Amendment 55)

This amendment would modify catch levels for South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico yellowtail snapper, update the jurisdictional allocation of the stock acceptable biological catch, total South Atlantic annual catch limit, Gulf of Mexico annual catch limit, and South Atlantic sector allocations. The Council discussed concerns in light of the MRIP-FES pilot study results and directed to have the South Atlantic SSC consider withdrawing the catch level recommendations from SEDAR 68 Interim Analysis and prioritize a new assessment for yellowtail snapper that incorporates the Florida State Reef Fish Survey data. Since this is a joint amendment, the Council asked the Gulf to consider the same action with their SSC.

Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper (Amendment 55)

The amendment proposes to establish a Scamp Yellowmouth Grouper Complex in response to SEDAR 68 and establish the following for the complex: stock determination criteria, rebuilding plan, acceptable biological catch, annual catch limits, sector allocations, and accountability measures. In addition, the amendment would reorganize and update the Other South Atlantic Shallow Water Grouper Complex. The Council reviewed a decision document that included an overview of the scoping webinars held in early August 2023 and updated actions and alternatives and gave staff guidance on the preferred approach to update the Other South Atlantic Shallow Water Grouper Complex ACL.

Private Recreational Permitting and Education Requirement (Amendment 46)

Amendment 46 proposes establishing a private recreational permit and required education component for the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery to address deficiencies in recreational data and to encourage best fishing practices that help reduce discard mortality. At their September meeting, the South Atlantic Council reviewed advisory panel comments and further refined the actions in the amendment. The Council will consider approving the amendment for public hearings at the December 2023 meeting.

Gag and Black Grouper Vessel Limit (Regulatory Amendment 36)

During FWC's federal consistency with Amendment 53 (Gag and Black Grouper), it was discovered that Amendment 53 established separate vessel limits for each species rather than a combined 2-fish vessel limit, as the Council had intended. The Council clarified its intention and directed staff to begin work on a framework amendment to revise the vessel limit for gag and black grouper.

Black Sea Bass Management

The SEDAR 76 assessment of South Atlantic Black Sea Bass indicated that the stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing. In June 2023, the Council initiated an amendment responding to the assessment results (Amendment 56). The SSC has formed a working group to further investigate assessment reference points and projections to develop catch level recommendations. These recommendations are expected to be available for the March 2024 Council meeting. Development of Amendment 56 is postponed until after catch level recommendations are available.

A small group of black sea bass commercial pot fishermen have participated in a study of the effectiveness and utility of on-demand (or 'ropeless') pots in nearshore areas currently closed to pot fishing during the winter, when North Atlantic right whales typically migrate through the area. Use of on-demand pots in the closed areas is allowed through an exempted fishing permit (EFP) that is scheduled to expire in April 2025. The Council included an action to add on-demand commercial pots as an allowable gear for black sea bass to the framework amendment that has been initiated to address the gag and black grouper recreational vessel limit (Regulatory Amendment 36 above).

Red Snapper Catch Levels (Regulatory Amendment 35)

Regulatory Amendment 35 considers revisions to South Atlantic red snapper catch levels following the most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 73) and a change in gear requirements (requiring single hook rigs while snapper grouper fishing) intended to reduce dead discards throughout the snapper grouper fishery. The Council approved Regulatory Amendment 35, but the amendment has not yet been submitted for secretarial review. In September 2023, the Council was informed of a pilot study indicating potential significant bias in recreational catch estimates through the Marine Recreational Information Program. The Council decided to have additional discussions relative to Regulatory Amendment 35 at the December 2023 meeting in light of this new information.

Best Fishing Practices Outreach

The Council received an update on the Best Fishing Practices Campaign projects and activities. The Council approved the new project, ‘What It Means to Me’, which will film fishermen and capture, in their own words, what best fishing practices means to them and their importance to the long-term sustainability of South Atlantic fisheries. The project is scheduled to begin filming participants at the fall 2023 Advisory Panel meetings. Additionally, the Council supported the continued development of the Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program (BFP MVP) which is slated to begin spring 2024. Lastly, the Council received an update on Council and Sea Grant staff outreach activities which included state partner events, ICAST, seminars, tackle shop outreach, an increase in best fishing practices social media presence, new educational materials, and a recent Sea Grant media charter trip out of Isle of Palms, SC. Staff plan to continue seminars, tackle shop outreach, Sea Grant media charter trips, developing BFP MVP, and will have a booth at the Florida Keys Seafood Festival in January 2024.

Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendments and Projects

Atlantic Spanish Mackerel

The Council reviewed actions and alternatives in CMP Framework Amendment 13 to update catch levels for Spanish Mackerel and approved the amendment for scoping. The Council discussed sector allocations confirmed that this amendment will not include modifications to sector or regional allocations. The intent is to have allocation addressed once more information has been gathered during Mackerel Port Meetings. This rationale will be added to the amendment document as it is developed. Scoping hearings will be held via webinar prior to the December 2023 Council meeting and the Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel will discuss this amendment during their meeting scheduled for November 7-8.

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. In September, staff provided the Committee an update on recent discussions with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) (virtual port meetings only) and an updated timeline for completion of Mackerel Port Meetings. Planning team representatives have been requested from south Atlantic state agencies, GMFMC, and ASMFC. The first planning team meeting will be held at the end of September/beginning of October to discuss meeting structure and possible locations in advance of the November 2023 Mackerel Cobia meeting.

Other Items

Allocation Review Guidelines

The Council is developing allocation review guidelines to better document efforts to address the GAO’s allocation-related recommendations over the past couple of years including the allocation review trigger policy, developing an allocation decision tool, allocation discussions when developing amendments, updating Fishery Management Plan (FMP) goals and objectives, and providing research recommendations. The Council reviewed draft guidelines that outline the Council’s process for allocation reviews, including the allocation decision tool process, the updated allocation review trigger policy, and the types of information that will be documented

following an allocation trigger and subsequent review. The Council is scheduled to consider approval at the December 2023 meeting.

Habitat Blueprint

The Habitat Program Evaluation and Blueprint (Habitat Blueprint) was initiated to evaluate the goals and objectives of the Council’s habitat program, ensure Magnuson-Stevens Act requirements are addressed, and to provide guidance and direction for habitat program activities. The purpose statement for the Blueprint is “To support the identification, monitoring, and protection of the habitats required by the species managed by the South Atlantic Council to preserve their ecosystem function and ensure their long-term sustainable use.” Part of this process was evaluating the Habitat & Ecosystem Advisory Panel’s charge and composition. The Council approved the Habitat Blueprint, a job description for the advisory panel, and requested that the Habitat Blueprint workplan be reviewed at the December 2023 Council Meeting. The Workplan will outline the next steps for the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel.