

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE  
SNAPPER GROUPER COMPLEX  
AUGUST 2024**

**STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**Fishery Management Plan History**

FMP Documentation:	August 1983 (SAFMC 1983a, b; 48 FR 39463)
Regulatory Amendment 1	March 1987
Regulatory Amendment 2	March 1989
Amendment 1	January 1989
Regulatory Amendment 3	November 1990
Amendment 2	December 1990
Amendment 3	January 1991
Amendment 4	January 1992
Amendment 5	April 1992
Regulatory Amendment 4	July 1993
Regulatory Amendment 5	July 1993
Amendment 6	July 1994
Amendment 7	January 1995
Regulatory Amendment 6	May 1995
Amendment 8	December 1998
Regulatory Amendment 7	January 1999
Amendment 9	February 1999/October 2000
Amendment 10	July 2000
Amendment 11	December 1999
Regulatory Amendment 8	November 2000
Amendment 12	September 2000
Amendment 13a	April 2004
Amendment 13c	October 2006
Amendment 14	February 2009
Amendment 15a	March 2008
Amendment 15b	February 2010
Amendment 16	July 2009
Amendment 19	July 2010
Amendment 17a	March 2011
Amendment 17b	January 2011
Regulatory Amendment 10	May 2011
Regulatory Amendment 9	July 2011
Regulatory Amendment 11	May 2012
Amendment 25	April 2012
Amendment 24	July 2012
Amendment 23	January 2012
Amendment 18a	July 2012/January 2013
Amendment 20a	October 2012
Regulatory Amendment 12	October 2012
Amendment 18b	May 2013

Regulatory Amendment 13	July 2013
Regulatory Amendment 14	December 2014
Regulatory Amendment 15	September 2013
Amendment 27	January 2014
Amendment 31	January 2014
Amendment 28	August 2013
Regulatory Amendment 18	September 2013
Regulatory Amendment 19	October 2013
Regulatory Amendment 21	November 2014
Amendment 32	March 2015
Amendment 29	July 2015
Regulatory Amendment 22	August/September 2015
Regulatory Amendment 20	August 2015
Amendment 33	January 2016
Amendment 34	February 2016
Amendment 35	June 2016
Regulatory Amendment 25	August 2016
Regulatory Amendment 16	December 2016/March 2017
Amendment 36	July 2017
Amendment 37	August 2017
Amendment 43	July 2018
Amendment 41	February 2018
Regulatory Amendment 28	January 2019
Abbreviated Framework Amendment 1	August 2018
Abbreviated Framework Amendment 2	May 2019
Amendment 42	January 2020
Regulatory Amendment 27	February 2020
Regulatory Amendment 30	March 2020
Regulatory Amendment 26	March 2020
Regulatory Amendment 29	July 2020
Abbreviated Framework Amendment 3	August 2020
Regulatory Amendment 33	November 2020
Amendment 39	January 2021
Regulatory Amendment 34	May 2021
Amendment 50	January 2023
Amendment 49	September 2023
Amendment 53	September 2023
Amendment 52	November 2023
Amendment 51	November 2023
Amendment 45	February 2024

Comprehensive Review: None

Of the 75-species managed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC), 55 of these are included in the Snapper Grouper management complex. Because of its mixed species nature, this fishery offers the greatest challenge for SAFMC to manage. Initially, Fishery Management Plan (FMP) regulations consisted of minimum sizes, gear restrictions, and a provision for the designation of Special Management Zones (SMZs). Early attempts to develop more

effective management measures were thwarted by lack of data on both the resource and the fishery. The condition of many of the species within the snapper grouper complex is unknown. Improved data collection (in terms of quantity and quality) during the 1980s and 1990s has provided more management information on some of the more commercially and recreationally valuable species, but lack of basic management data on many of the species remains the major obstacle to successful management.

Management of the snapper grouper fishery is also difficult because many of these species are slow growing, late maturing, hermaphroditic, and long lived; thus, rebuilding efforts for some species will take years to full recovery. Strict management measures, including prohibition of harvest in some cases, have been implemented to rebuild overfished species in the snapper grouper complex. Such harvest restrictions are beneficial, not only in rebuilding species, but also in helping to prevent species from undergoing overfishing in the future.

Regulatory Amendment 1 (48 FR 9864) prohibited fishing in SMZs, except with hand-held hook and line and spearfishing gear; prohibited harvest of goliath grouper in SMZs; and implemented SMZs off South Carolina and Georgia.

Regulatory Amendment 2 (54 FR 8342) established two artificial reefs off Fort Pierce, Florida as SMZs.

Amendment 1 (SAFMC 1988; 54 FR 1720) prohibited use of trawl gear to harvest fish in the snapper grouper fishery south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina and north of Cape Canaveral, Florida; defined directed snapper grouper fishery as a vessel with trawl gear and greater than or equal to 200-pounds of snapper grouper species onboard; and established the rebuttable assumption that vessels with snapper grouper species onboard harvested these fish in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Regulatory Amendment 3 (55 FR 40394) established an artificial reef at Key Biscayne, Florida as an SMZ in Dade County, Florida; prohibited fish trapping, bottom longlining, spearfishing, and harvesting of goliath grouper in SMZs.

Amendment 2 (SAFMC 1990a; 55 FR 46213) prohibited harvest or possession of goliath grouper in or from the EEZ in the South Atlantic and defined overfishing for snapper grouper species according to NMFS 602 guidelines.

Amendment 3 (SAFMC 1990b; 56 FR 2443) established a management program for the wreckfish fishery which: added wreckfish to the snapper grouper management unit; defined Optimum Yield (OY) and overfishing; required an annual permit to fish for, land or sell wreckfish; established a control date of March 28, 1990 for the area bounded by 33 degrees and 30 degrees N latitude; established a fishing year beginning April 16; established a process whereby annual quotas would be specified; implemented a 10,000 pound trip limit and a January 15 – April 15 spawning season closure.

Amendment 4 (SAFMC 1991a; 56 FR 56016) prohibited the use of various gear, including fish traps, the use of bottom longlines for wreckfish, and powerheads in SMZ off South Carolina; established bag limits and minimum size limits for several species; established income requirements to qualify for permits; and required that all snapper grouper species possessed in South Atlantic federal waters must have heads and fins intact through landing.

Amendment 5 (SAFMC 1991b; 57 FR 7886) established an Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) management program for the wreckfish fishery.

Regulatory Amendment 4 (SAFMC 1992a; 58 FR 36155) modified the definition of black sea bass pots; allowed for multi-gear trips and the retention of incidentally caught fish.

Regulatory Amendment 5 (SAFMC 1992b; 58 FR 35895) established eight additional SMZs off the coast of South Carolina.

Amendment 6 (SAFMC 1993; 59 FR 27242) established commercial quotas for snowy grouper, golden tilefish; established commercial trip limits for snowy grouper, golden tilefish, speckled hind, and Warsaw grouper; included golden tilefish in grouper recreational aggregate bag limits; prohibited sale of Warsaw grouper and speckled hind; created the Oculina Experimental Closed Area; and specified data collection needs for evaluation of possible future Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) system.

Amendment 7 (SAFMC 1994a; 59 FR 66270) established size limits and bag limits for hogfish and mutton snapper; specified allowable gear; prohibited the use of explosive charges, including powerheads, off South Carolina; and required dealer, charter, and headboat federal permits.

Regulatory Amendment 6 (SAFMC 1994b; 60 FR 19683) includes provisions to rebuild and protect hogfish by implementing a recreational bag limit of five fish per person off Florida; protect cubera snapper by implementing a recreational bag limit of two per person for fish 30-inches total length (TL) or larger off Florida; and protect gray triggerfish by implementing a minimum size limit of 12-inches TL off Florida.

Amendment 8 (SAFMC 1997; 63 FR 38298) established a limited entry system for the snapper grouper fishery.

Regulatory Amendment 7 (63 FR 71793) established ten SMZs at artificial reefs off South Carolina.

Amendment 9 (SAFMC 1998a; 64 FR 3624; 65 FR 55203) increased the minimum size limits on red porgy, black sea bass, vermillion snapper (recreational only), gag, and black grouper; changed bag limits for red porgy, black sea bass, greater amberjack, gag, and black grouper; established an aggregate recreational bag limit of 20 fish per person per day inclusive of all snapper grouper species currently not under a bag limit, excluding tomtate and blue runners; and specified that vessels with bottom longline gear aboard may only possess snowy grouper, Warsaw grouper, yellowedge grouper, misty grouper, golden tilefish, blueline tilefish, and sand tilefish.

Amendment 10 (SAFMC 1998b; 65 FR 37292) identified Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and EFH - Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) for species in the snapper grouper management unit.

Amendment 11 (SAFMC 1998c; 64 FR 59126) amended the FMP as required to make definitions of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), OY, overfishing and overfished consistent with "National Standard Guidelines"; identified and defined fishing communities; and addressed bycatch management measures.

Regulatory Amendment 8 (65 FR 61114) established 12 SMZs at artificial reefs off Georgia; revised boundaries of seven existing SMZs off Georgia to meet Coast Guard permit specifications; restricted fishing in new and revised SMZs.

Amendment 12 (SAFMC 2000; 65 FR 51248) set regulatory limits for red porgy including a recreational bag limit, a commercial incidental catch limit, and a recreational and commercial size limit. It also permitted the transfer of the 225-pound trip limited commercial permit to another vessel (not another person) regardless of vessel size.

Amendment 13A (SAFMC 2003; 69 FR 15731) extended regulations within the Oculina Experimental Closed Area off the east coast of Florida that prohibit fishing for and retention of snapper grouper species for an indefinite period with a 10-year re-evaluation by the Council. The Council will review the configuration and size of the area within three years of publication of the Final Rule (March 26, 2004).

Amendment 13C (SAFMC 2006; 71 FR 55096) addressed overfishing for snowy grouper, golden tilefish, black sea bass, and vermilion snapper. The amendment also allowed for a moderate increase in the harvest of red porgy as stock continues to rebuild.

Amendment 14 (SAFMC 2007a; 74 FR 1621) established a series of deepwater marine protected areas in the South Atlantic EEZ.

Amendment 15A (SAFMC 2008a; 73 FR 14942) updated management reference points for snowy grouper, black sea bass, and red porgy; modified rebuilding schedules for snowy grouper and black sea bass; defined rebuilding strategies for snowy grouper, black sea bass, and red porgy; and redefined the minimum stock size threshold for the snowy grouper stock.

Amendment 15B (SAFMC 2008b; 74 FR 58902) prohibited sale the sale of bag-limit caught snapper grouper species; reduced the effects of incidental hooking on sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish; changed the commercial permit renewal period and transferability requirements; implemented a plan to monitor and address bycatch; and established management reference points for golden tilefish. Amendment 15B also established allocations between recreational and commercial fishermen for snowy grouper and red porgy.

Amendment 16(SAFMC 2009a; 74 FR 30964) included measures to end overfishing for gag grouper and vermilion snapper; established commercial and recreational allocations for both species; established a January through April spawning season closure for gag, black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, tiger grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney; reduced the aggregate grouper bag limit from five fish to three fish, and within that, reduced the gag bag limit from two fish to one gag or black grouper, combined; reduced the vermilion snapper bag limit from 10 fish to five fish; established a recreational closed season for vermilion snapper of November through March; excluded captain and crew on for-hire vessels from retaining a bag limit of groupers; and required the use of dehooking tools to reduce bycatch mortality.

Amendment 19 (SAFMC 2009b; 75 FR 35330) was included under the Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 1 (CE-BA 1) and included measures to provide presentation of spatial information for EFH and EFH-HAPC designations under the Snapper Grouper FMP; and designation of deep-water coral HAPCs.

Amendment 17A (SAFMC 2010a; 75 FR 76874) addressed management measures to end overfishing of red snapper and rebuild the stock, including Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) and Accountability Measures (AMs). It extended the prohibition of red snapper in federal waters throughout the South Atlantic EEZ effective immediately. Amendment 17A also included a regulation requiring the use of non-stainless circle hooks north of 28 degrees N latitude effective March 3, 2011.

Amendment 17B (SAFMC 2010b; 75 FR 82280) established ACLs and AMs and addressed overfishing for nine species in the snapper grouper management complex: golden tilefish, snowy grouper, speckled hind, Warsaw grouper, black grouper, black sea bass, gag, red grouper, and vermilion snapper. Measures in Amendment 17B included a deep-water closure (240 feet seaward) for deep-water species to help protect Warsaw grouper and speckled hind. Additional

measures in the amendment included a reduction in the snowy grouper bag limit; establishment of a combined ACL for gag, black grouper, and red grouper; an allocation of 97% commercial and 3% recreational for the golden tilefish fishery based on landings history; and establishment of AMs as necessary.

Regulatory Amendment 10 (SAFMC 2011a; 76 FR 23728) eliminated the large area closure in Amendment 17A for all snapper grouper species off the coasts of southern Georgia and north/central Florida. The regulatory amendment modified measures implemented in Amendment 17A to end overfishing for red snapper.

Regulatory Amendment 9 (SAFMC 2011b; 76 FR 34892) reduced the bag limit for black sea bass from 15 fish per person to five fish per person, established trip limits on vermilion snapper and gag, and increased the trip limit for greater amberjack.

Regulatory Amendment 11 (SAFMC 2011c; 77 FR 27374) eliminated a restriction on the possession or harvest of some deep-water snapper grouper species in waters greater than 240 feet deep.

Amendment 25 (Comprehensive Annual Catch Limit Amendment) (SAFMC 2011d; 77 FR 15916) met the 2011 deadline mandated by the Magnuson-Stevens Act to establish ACLs and AMs for species managed by the Council that are not undergoing overfishing.

Amendment 24 (SAFMC 2011e; 77 FR 34254) proposed measures to end overfishing and establish a rebuilding plan for red grouper. The amendment also implemented or revised parameters such as Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST), ACLs, AMs, and specified allocations for the commercial and recreational sectors.

Amendment 23 (Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 2) (SAFMC 2011f; 76 FR 82183) included measures to designate the Deepwater MPAs as EFH-HAPCs; limited harvest of snapper grouper species in South Carolina SMZs to the bag limit; and modified sea turtle release gear.

Amendment 18A (SAFMC 2012a; 77 FR 32408; 77 FR 72991) established management actions to limit participation and effort in the black sea bass fishery. Measures included establishment of an endorsement program and other modifications to the commercial black sea bass pot fishery; establishment of a commercial trip limit (all gear-types) for black sea bass; and increased minimum size limits for both commercial and recreational black sea bass fisheries.

Amendment 20A (SAFMC 2012b; 77 FR 59129) defined and reverted inactive shares within the wreckfish ITQ program; redistributed reverted shares to active shareholders; established a share cap; and implemented an appeals process.

Regulatory Amendment 12 (77 FR 61295) adjusted the ACL and OY for golden tilefish; specified a commercial Annual Catch Target (ACT); and revised recreational AMs for golden tilefish.

Amendment 18B (SAFMC 2012c; 78 FR 23858) addressed management of golden tilefish. Actions included in the amendment are: An endorsement program for the longline sector of the golden tilefish component of the snapper grouper fishery; establishment of landings criteria to determine who will receive endorsements; an appeals process for the golden tilefish endorsement program; establishment of a procedure to allow transferability of golden tilefish endorsements; allocation of 75% of the commercial ACL to the longline sector and 25% to the hook-and-line sector; and modification of the golden tilefish trip limit.

Regulatory Amendment 13 (SAFMC 2012d; 78 FR 36113) revised the acceptable biological catch (ABC) estimates, ACLs (including sector ACLs), and recreational annual catch targets for 37 un-

assessed snapper grouper species. The revisions incorporated updates to the recreational data for these species, as per the new Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), as well as revisions to commercial and for-hire landings. Regulatory Amendment 13 was necessary to avoid triggering AMs for these snapper grouper species based on ACLs that were established by the Comprehensive Annual Catch Limit Amendment in April 2012, using recreational data under the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey system.

Regulatory Amendment 14 (SAFMC 2013a; 79 FR 66316) modified the fishing year for greater amberjack; revised the minimum size limit measurement for gray triggerfish; increased the minimum size limit for hogfish; modified the commercial and recreational fishing year for black sea bass; adjusted the commercial fishing season for vermilion snapper; modified the aggregate grouper bag limit; and revised the AMs for gag and vermilion snapper.

Regulatory Amendment 15 (SAFMC 2013b; 78 FR 49183) modified the existing specification of OY and ACLs for yellowtail snapper in the South Atlantic; modified existing regulations for yellowtail snapper in the South Atlantic; and modified the existing gag commercial ACL and AM for gag that requires a closure of all other shallow water groupers (black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, graysby, coney, yellowmouth grouper, and yellowfin grouper) in the South Atlantic when the gag commercial ACL is met or projected to be met.

Amendment 27 (SAFMC 2013c; 78 FR 78770) assumed management of Nassau grouper in the Gulf of Mexico; modified the crew size restriction for dual-permitted vessels (those with a Snapper Grouper Unlimited or 225-Pound Permit and a Charter/Headboat Permit for Snapper Grouper); modified the bag limit retention restriction for captain and crew of for-hire vessels; changed the existing snapper grouper framework procedure to allow for more timely adjustments to ACLs; and removed blue runner from the fishery management unit.

Amendment 31 (Joint South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Generic Headboat Reporting Amendment) (SAFMC 2013d; 78 FR 78779) modified logbook reporting for headboats to require fishing records to be reported electronically for snapper grouper species on a weekly basis.

Amendment 28 (SAFMC 2013e; 78 FR 44461) established a process to determine if a red snapper fishing season will occur each year, including specification of the allowable harvest for both sectors and season length for the recreational sector; an equation to determine the ACL for red snapper for each sector; and management measures if fishing for red snapper is allowed.

Regulatory Amendment 18 (SAFMC 2013f; 78 FR 47574) adjusted the ACL (and sector ACLs) for vermilion snapper and red porgy based on the stock assessment updates for those two species and removed the annual recreational closure for vermilion snapper.

Regulatory Amendment 19 (SAFMC 2013g; 78 FR 58249) adjusted the black sea bass ACLs based on the results of the 2013 assessment. Because the increase to the ACL was substantial, there was concern that this could extend fishing with pots into the calving season for right whales and create a risk of entanglement for large migratory whales during the fall months. To minimize this risk, the amendment also established a closure to black sea bass pot gear from November 1 to April 30.

Regulatory Amendment 21 (SAFMC 2014a; 79 FR 60379) prevents snapper grouper species with low natural mortality rates (red snapper, blueline tilefish, gag, black grouper, yellowtail snapper, vermilion snapper, red porgy, and greater amberjack) from being unnecessarily classified as overfished. For these species, even small fluctuations in biomass due to natural conditions rather than fishing mortality may cause a stock to be classified as overfished. Modifying the minimum

stock size threshold definition (used in determining whether a species is overfished) prevents these species from being classified as overfished unnecessarily.

Amendment 32 (SAFMC 2014b; 80 FR 16583) addressed the determination that blueline tilefish are overfished and undergoing overfishing. The amendment removed blueline tilefish from the deep-water complex; established blueline tilefish commercial and recreational sector ACLs and AMs; revised the deep-water complex ACLs and AMs; established a blueline tilefish commercial trip limit; and revised the blueline tilefish recreational bag limit and harvest season.

Amendment 29 (SAFMC 2014c; 80 FR 30947) revised ACLs and recreational ACTs for four unassessed snapper grouper species (bar jack, Atlantic spadefish, scamp, and gray triggerfish) and three snapper grouper species complexes (snappers, grunts, and shallow water groupers) based on an update to the ABC control rule and revised ABCs for 14 snapper grouper stocks (bar jack, margate, red hind, cubera snapper, yellowedge grouper, silk snapper, Atlantic spadefish, gray snapper, lane snapper, rock hind, tomtate, white grunt, scamp, and gray triggerfish). Additionally, this final rule revises management measures for gray triggerfish in federal waters in the South Atlantic region, including modifying minimum size limits, establishing a split commercial season, and establishing a commercial trip limit.

Regulatory Amendment 22 (SAFMC 2015a; 80 FR 48277) adjusted the ACLs and OY for gag and wreckfish. Changes to the gag recreational bag limit were proposed, but status quo was maintained.

Regulatory Amendment 20 (SAFMC 2014d; 80 FR 43033) increased the recreational and commercial ACLs for snowy grouper, increased the commercial trip limit, and modified the recreational fishing season. This amendment also adjusted the re-building strategy for snowy grouper.

Amendment 33 (SAFMC 2015b; 80 FR 80686) updated regulations that allow snapper grouper fillets to be brought into the U.S. EEZ from the Bahamas. Snapper grouper fillets from the Bahamas must have the skin intact, two fillets (regardless of size) will count as one fish towards the bag limit, and fishermen must abide by both U.S. and Bahamian bag/possession limits (whichever is more restrictive). All boats must have the proper permits, and fishermen must carry passports which are required to be stamped and dated to prove vessel passengers were in the Bahamas. All fishing gear must be appropriately stowed while in transit.

Amendment 34 (SAFMC 2015c; 81 FR 3731) revised the AMs for several snapper grouper species (black grouper, mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, greater amberjack, red porgy, gag, golden tilefish, red grouper, snowy grouper, gray triggerfish, hogfish, scamp, Atlantic spadefish, bar jack, snappers complex, jacks complex, shallow water grouper complex, porgies complex, and wreckfish (recreational).

Amendment 35 (SAFMC 2015d; 81 FR 32249) clarified regulations governing the use of golden tilefish longline endorsements to align them with the SAFMC's intent when the program was originally implemented. Four species were removed from the FMP (black snapper, mahogany snapper, dog snapper, and schoolmaster).

Regulatory Amendment 25 (SAFMC 2016b; 81 FR 45245) revised the commercial and recreational ACLs, the commercial trip limit, and recreational bag limit for blueline tilefish. This amendment also revised the black seabass recreational bag limit and the commercial and recreational fishing years for yellowtail snapper.



Regulatory Amendment 16 (SAFMC 2016a; 81 FR 95893) revised the current seasonal prohibition on the use of black sea bass pot gear in the South Atlantic and added an additional gear marking requirement for black sea bass pot gear.

Amendment 36 (SAFMC 2016c; 82 FR 29772) establish spawning special management zones (Spawning SMZs) to enhance protection for snapper grouper species in spawning condition, including speckled hind and Warsaw grouper.

Amendment 37 (SAFMC 2016d; 82 FR 34584) modified the hogfish fishery management unit and specified fishing levels for the two South Atlantic hogfish stocks. It established/revised management measures for both hogfish stocks in the South Atlantic Region, such as size limits, recreational bag limits, and commercial trip limits. Additionally, this amendment established a rebuilding plan for the Florida Keys/East Florida stock.

Amendment 41 (SAFMC 2017n; 83 FR 1305) updated the ABC, ACL, MSY, MSST, OY, and revised management measures for mutton snapper.

Amendment 43 (SAFMC 2017k; 83 FR 35428) revised the commercial and recreational ACLs and allowed for limited harvest of red snapper in federal waters of the South Atlantic.

Abbreviated Framework Amendment 1 (SAFMC 2017i; FR 83 35435) reduced the commercial and recreational ACLs for red grouper to address overfishing.

Regulatory Amendment 28 (SAFMC 2018a; FR 83 62508) revised the commercial and recreational ACLs for golden tilefish. The purpose of this final rule is to end overfishing of golden tilefish while minimizing, to the extent practicable, adverse socio-economic effects and achieve OY on a continuing basis.

Abbreviated Framework Amendment 2 (SAFMC 2018b; FR 84 14021) increased the commercial and recreational ACLs for vermilion snapper and decreased the commercial and recreational ACLs for black sea bass in response to the latest stock assessments.

Amendment 42 (SAFMC 2019a; FR 84 67236) modified the sea turtle handling and release gear requirements for the snapper grouper fishery, clarified the requirements for other release gears, and modified the FMP framework procedure to implement newly approved devices and handling requirements for sea turtles and other protected resources.

Regulatory Amendment 27 (SAFMC 2019b; FR 85 4588) modified the commercial trip limits for blueline tilefish, greater amberjack, red porgy, and vermilion snapper; established commercial split seasons for snowy grouper, greater amberjack, and red porgy; established a commercial trip limit for the "other" jacks complex; established a minimum size limit for almaco jack; and removed the minimum size limits for silk, queen, and blackfin snappers; and reduced the minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in the EEZ off the east coast of Florida.

Regulatory Amendment 30 (SAFMC 2019c; FR 85 6825) revised the rebuilding schedule for red grouper based on the most recent stock assessment and modified the spawning season closure for the commercial and recreational sectors in the EEZ off North Carolina and South Carolina and established a 200-pound commercial trip limit.

Regulatory Amendment 26 (SAFMC 2019d; FR 85 11307) removed the recreational minimum size limits for silk snapper, queen snapper, and blackfin snapper, reduced the recreational minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in the EEZ off the east coast of Florida, and modified the snapper grouper aggregate bag limit for the 20-fish aggregate.

Regulatory Amendment 29 (SAFMC 2020c; FR 85 36166) modified gear requirements for South Atlantic snapper grouper species. Actions include requirements for descending and venting devices, and modifications to requirements for circle hooks and powerheads.

Abbreviated Framework Amendment 3 (SAFMC 2020d; FR 85 43145) increased the commercial and recreational ACLs and increased the recreational ACT for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic EEZ based on updated information from a SouthEast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) benchmark assessment that was completed for the Atlantic stock of blueline tilefish, using data through 2015 (SEDAR 50).

Regulatory Amendment 33 (SAFMC 2020b; FR 85 64978) removed the four-day minimum season length requirement for South Atlantic red snapper (commercial or recreational) to improve access to South Atlantic red snapper, particularly for the recreational sector.

Amendment 39 (SAFMC 2020e; FR 85 10331) established new, and revised existing, electronic reporting requirements for federally permitted charter vessels and headboats, in certain Atlantic fisheries to increase and improve fisheries information collected from federally permitted for-hire vessels in the Atlantic.

Regulatory Amendment 34 (SAFMC 2020a; FR 86 17318) created 34 special management zones (SMZs) around artificial reefs in the EEZ off North Carolina and South Carolina to designate new SMZs and to restrict fishing gear with greater potential to result in high exploitation rates.

Amendment 50 (SAFMC 2023a; FR 87 77742) responded to the overfished and overfishing status of red porgy by establishing a rebuilding plan, revising sector annual catch limits, sector allocations, management measures and accountability measures.

Amendment 49 (SAFMC 2023b; FR 88 65819) adjusted the ABC, catch levels, allocations, and other management measures for greater amberjack, as well as removed recreational ACTs in the snapper grouper fishery based on the results of the latest stock assessment of greater amberjack (SEDAR 59).

Amendment 53 (SAFMC 2023c; FR 88 65135) revised the sector annual catch limits, commercial trip limits, recreational bag, vessel, and possession limits, and recreational accountability measures for gag and revised the recreational bag, vessel, and possession limits for black grouper. In addition, Amendment 53 established a rebuilding plan, and revised the overfishing levels, acceptable biological catch, annual optimum yield, and sector allocations for gag.

Amendment 52 (SAFMC 2023d; FR 88 76696) revised the golden tilefish acceptable biological catch, total annual catch limit, and annual optimum yield; revised sector allocations and sector annual catch limits for golden tilefish; modified recreational accountability measures for golden tilefish; modified blueline tilefish recreational bag limit; and modified recreational accountability measures for blueline tilefish.

Amendment 51 (SAFMC 2023e; FR 88 83860) modified management of South Atlantic snowy grouper by revising the acceptable biological catch, annual catch limits, annual optimum yield, sector allocations, recreational accountability measures, and the recreational season.

Amendment 45 (SAFMC 2024a; FR 89 271) modified the ABC Control Rule, including specification of scientific uncertainty and management risk components, application of the Control Rule to rebuilding stocks, criteria and procedures for phase-in of ABC changes, criteria and procedures for carry-over of unused portions of the annual catch limit, and established a framework procedure to allow carry-overs.

There are several other amendments either in development or under secretarial review (Table 1).

To ensure compliance with interstate requirements, North Carolina also manages this species complex under the North Carolina Interjurisdictional Fisheries Fishery Management Plan (IJ FMP). The goal of the IJ FMP is to adopt FMPs, consistent with North Carolina law, approved by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC), SAFMC, or the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) by reference and implement corresponding fishery regulations in North Carolina to provide compliance or compatibility with approved fishery management plans and amendments, now and in the future. The goal of these plans, established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (federal council plans) and the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (ASMFC plans) are like the goals of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 to “ensure long-term viability” of these fisheries (NCDMF 2022).

Table 1. Amendments under consideration/review by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC). Summaries of the issues the amendment addresses are included; documentation is provided as available.

Amendment	Issue addressed	Where in process	Documentation
Amendment 56	Respond to most recent black seabass stock assessment (SEDAR 76).	Pre-scoping	SAFMC 2024b
Amendment 35	Release mortality issues in the snapper grouper fishery and modifications to red snapper catch levels	Final Approval	SAFMC 2022a
Amendment 57	Limited entry for the for-hire components of the snapper grouper, coastal migratory pelagics, and dolphin wahoo fisheries.	Pre-scoping	SAFMC 2024c
Amendment 36	On-demand pots as an allowable gear for commercial harvest of black sea bass. Revise recreational vessel limits for gag and black grouper.	Pre-scoping	SAFMC 2024d
Amendment 44	Yellowtail snapper catch levels	Public Hearing	SAFMC 2022e
Amendment 46	Private recreational reporting and permitting	Public Hearing	SAFMC 2022f
Amendment 45	Modifies the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule to address scientific uncertainty, management risk, and rebuilding stocks. Specifies criteria and procedures for phase-in of ABC changes and carry-over of unused portions of annual catch limits	Final Approval	SAFMC 2022g
Amendment 55	Respond to the latest scamp/yellowmouth stock assessment (SEDAR 68).	Pre-scoping	SAFMC 2023f
Amendment 54	Reporting requirements for commercial logbooks in the snapper grouper, coastal migratory pelagics, and dolphin-wahoo fisheries.	Secretarial Review	SAFMC 2022h

## Management Unit

The original SAFMC plan stated the management unit of the snapper grouper fishery is the stocks within the EEZ from North Carolina/Virginia border through the east coast of Florida. In the case

of black sea bass, the unit is limited to south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Since the inception of the FMP, there has been the addition of four species: wreckfish, spadefish, banded rudderfish, and lesser amberjack. In recent years, 14 species have been removed: 13 in 2012 (tiger grouper, sheepshead, queen triggerfish, puddingwife, black margate, yellow jack, Crevalle jack, porkfish, grass porgy, small mouth grunt, French grunt, Spanish grunt, and blue striped grunt) and one in 2014 (blue runner). In June 2016, Amendment 35 removed four additional species from the complex (black snapper, mahogany snapper, dog snapper, and schoolmaster).

### **Goal and Objectives**

The following are the FMP objectives for the snapper grouper fishery as specified by the Council. These were last updated in Snapper Grouper FMP Amendment 8 in July 1997 (SAFMC 1997).

- Prevent overfishing.
- Collect necessary data.
- Promote orderly utilization of the resource.
- Provide for a flexible management system.
- Minimize habitat damage.
- Promote public compliance and enforcement.
- Mechanism to vest participants.
- Promote stability and facilitate long-run planning.
- Create market-driven harvest pace and increase product continuity.
- Minimize gear and area conflicts among fishermen.
- Decrease incentives for overcapitalization.
- Prevent continual dissipation of returns from fishing through open access.
- Evaluate and minimize localized depletion.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK**

#### **Biological Profile**

Fifty-five species make up the snapper grouper complex, which is managed by the SAFMC. Included in the complex are three sea bass species, 17 grouper species, 10 snapper species, seven porgy species, five grunt species, five jack species, three tilefish species, two triggerfish species, hogfish, spadefish and wreckfish. The majority of these species are long lived, slow growing, late maturing and hermaphroditic (can change sexes). Most of these species are considered reef fish and are associated with hard bottom (live bottom) offshore habitats but can be found in waters 1,000 feet deep or shallower. Some are migratory, exhibiting seasonal and/or ontogenetic (occurring during a certain life stage) east to west migratory behavior (black sea bass), as well as some species making north to south migrations (gag grouper). The full list of the species in the complex is available online at: <https://safmc.net/fishery-management-plans/snapper-grouper/>.

#### **Stock Status**

Of the 55 species in the SAFMC management unit, several species are either overfished or experiencing some degree of overfishing. The overfished stocks include gag grouper, red grouper,

red porgy, red snapper, hogfish (east Florida), black sea bass, and snowy grouper. Stocks experiencing overfishing are gag grouper, red snapper, and snowy grouper.

### Stock Assessment

The status of several species within the snapper grouper complex is unknown. However, for some of the species, assessments are available through various federal entities; the snapper grouper complex is regionally (North Carolina south to eastern Florida) managed, and none of the assessments have been conducted by the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) (Table 2).

Table 2. Stock status of the 55 species within the snapper grouper complex. Documentation is provided for the assessment associated with each species. No assessments have been conducted by North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries due to the nature of the fishery.

Family (species aggregate)	Species	Overfishing?	Overfished?	Documentation
Serranidae (Sea basses and groupers)	Gag ( <i>Mycteroperca microlepis</i> )	Yes	Yes	SEDAR 71 (SEDAR 2021a); NMFS 2024
	Red grouper ( <i>Epinephelus morio</i> )	No	Yes	SEDAR 53 (SEDAR 2017a); NMFS 2024
	Scamp ( <i>Mycteroperca phenax</i> )	No	Unknown	SEDAR 68 (SEDAR 2022) NMFS 2024
	Black grouper ( <i>Mycteroperca bonaci</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 19 (SEDAR 2010); NMFS 2024
	Rock hind ( <i>Epinephelus adcionis</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Red hind ( <i>Epinephelus guttatus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Graysby ( <i>Cephalopholis cruentata</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Yellowfin grouper ( <i>Mycteroperca venenosa</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Coney ( <i>Cephalopholis fulva</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Yellowmouth grouper ( <i>Mycteroperca interstitialis</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Goliath grouper ( <i>Epinephelus itajara</i> )	No (Permanent closure)	Unknown	SEDAR 47 (SEDAR 2016d); NMFS 2024
	Nassau grouper ( <i>Epinephelus striatus</i> )	No (Permanent closure)	Unknown	NMFS 2024
Serranidae (Sea basses and groupers)	Snowy grouper ( <i>Epinephelus niveatus</i> )	Yes	Yes	SEDAR 36 Update (SEDAR 2020c); NMFS 2024
	Yellowedge grouper ( <i>Epinephelus flavolimbatus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024

Family (species aggregate)	Species	Overfishing?	Overfished?	Documentation
Serranidae (Sea basses and groupers) cont.	Warsaw grouper ( <i>Epinephelus nigritus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	SG Amendment 17b (SAFMC 2010b); NMFS 2024
	Speckled hind ( <i>Epinephelus drummondhayi</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	SG Amendment 17b (SAFMC 2010b); NMFS 2024
	Misty grouper ( <i>Epinephelus mystacinus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Black sea bass ( <i>Centropristis striata</i> )	No	Yes	SEDAR 76 (SEDAR 2023)
	Bank sea bass ( <i>Centropristis ocyurus</i> )*	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Rock sea bass ( <i>Centropristis philadelphica</i> )*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Polyprionidae (Wreckfish)	Wreckfish ( <i>Polyprion americanus</i> )	No	No	Rademeyer and Butterworth 2014; NMFS 2024
Lutjanidae (Snappers)	Queen snapper ( <i>Etelis oculatus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Yellowtail snapper ( <i>Ocyurus chrysurus</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 64 (SEDAR 2020d); NMFS 2024
	Gray snapper ( <i>Lutjanus griseus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Mutton snapper ( <i>Lutjanus analis</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 15A Update (SEDAR 2015); NMFS 2024
	Lane snapper ( <i>Lutjanus synagris</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Cubera snapper ( <i>Lutjanus cyanopterus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Vermilion snapper ( <i>Rhomboplites aurorubens</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 55 (SEDAR 2018a); NMFS 2024
	Red snapper ( <i>Lutjanus campechanus</i> )	Yes	Yes	SEDAR 73 (SEDAR 2021b); NMFS 2024
	Silk snapper ( <i>Lutjanus vivanus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
Lutjanidae (Snappers)	Blackfin snapper ( <i>Lutjanus buccanella</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
Sparidae (Porgies)	Red Porgy ( <i>Pagrus pagrus</i> )	No	Yes	SEDAR 60 (SEDAR 2020a); NMFS 2024
	Knobbed porgy ( <i>Calamus nodosus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Jolthead porgy ( <i>Calamus bajonado</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024

Family (species aggregate)	Species	Overfishing?	Overfished?	Documentation
Sparidae (Porgies) cont.	Scup ( <i>Stenotomus chrysops</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Whitebone porgy ( <i>Calamus leucosteus</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Longspine porgy ( <i>Stenotomus caprinus</i> )*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Haemulidae (Grunts)	White grunt ( <i>Haemulon plumieri</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Margate ( <i>Haemulon album</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Tomtate ( <i>Haemulon aurolineatum</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Sailor's choice ( <i>Haemulon parra</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Cottonwick ( <i>Haemulon melanurum</i> )*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Carangidae (Jacks)	Greater Amberjack ( <i>Seriola dumerili</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 59 (SEDAR 2020b); NMFS 2024
	Almaco jack ( <i>Seriola rivoliana</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Banded rudderfish ( <i>Seriola zonanta</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Bar jack ( <i>Caranx ruber</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
	Lesser Amberjack ( <i>Seriola fasciata</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
Malacanthidae (Tilefishes)	Golden tilefish ( <i>Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 66 (SEDAR 2021c); NMFS 2024
	Blueline (or gray) tilefish ( <i>Caulolatilus microps</i> )	No	No	SEDAR 50 (SEDAR 2017b); NMFS 2024
	Sand tilefish ( <i>Malacanthus plumier</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024
Balistidae (Triggerfishes)	Gray triggerfish ( <i>Balistes capricus</i> )	No	Unknown	SEDAR Assessment 41 (SEDAR 2016c); NMFS 2024
Balistidae (Triggerfishes)	Ocean triggerfish ( <i>Canthidermis sufflamen</i> )*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Labridae (Wrasses)	Hogfish ( <i>Lachnolaimus maximus</i> )	Unknown (Carolinas); No (Florida)	Unknown (Carolinas); Yes (Florida)	SEDAR 37 (SEDAR 2013b); NFMS 2024
Ephippidae (Spadefishes)	Atlantic spadefish ( <i>Chaetodipterus faber</i> )	Unknown	Unknown	NMFS 2024

\* Indicates ecosystem component species which do not have management measures in place and are not assessed.

Since 2002, stock assessments have been conducted through the SEDAR which is the cooperative process by which stock assessment projects are conducted in National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries' Southeast Region. Currently, stock assessments are available for 16 of the complex species.

Some of the other species have status updates provided by NOAA Fisheries. These updates are based on landings data to determine whether the stock is overfished or undergoing overfishing. This information is updated quarterly by NOAA Fisheries and available on their website at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/population-assessments/fishery-stock-status-updates>.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY**

### **Current Regulations**

The following species have state and federal regulations for minimum lengths:

- Greater amberjack: 28-inch fork length (FL) (recreational); 36-inch FL (commercial)
- Black and gag groupers: 24-inch TL
- Red, scamp, yellowfin, and yellowmouth groupers: 20-inch TL
- Black sea bass: 13-inch TL (recreational); 11-inch TL (commercial)
- Red porgy: 14-inch TL
- Vermilion, gray, cubera and yellowtail snappers: 12-inch TL
- Hogfish (*Lachnolaimus maximus*): 17-inch FL
- Mutton snapper: 18-inch TL
- Gray triggerfish: 12-inch FL
- Lane snapper: 8-inch TL
- Almaco jack: 20-inch FL (commercial)

All species have sector ACLs and recreational bag limits and/or commercial trip limits. See the SAFMC (<https://safmc.net/regulations/>) or DMF (<https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/rules-proclamations-and-size-and-bag-limits/fisheries-management-proclamations#currentprocs>) websites for the most current information.

The fisheries are open year-round, with the exception of:

- Goliath grouper, Nassau grouper, Warsaw grouper, and speckled hind, unlawful to possess/harvest (commercial and recreational)
- Red snapper, unlawful to possess/harvest (commercial and recreational); limited season may occur based on previous years' landings and/or catch data
- January-April shallow water grouper spawning closure (commercial and recreational); red grouper remains closed through May in North and South Carolina
- Wreckfish have commercial spawning closure January 15-April 15; recreational fishery open July 1-August 31 annually.
- April closure for greater amberjack
- Snowy grouper recreational fishery open May 1- June 30



- Blueline tilefish recreational fishery open May 1 – July 18
- Red porgy recreational fishery open May 1 – June 30

Temporary closures may result for a species if the ACL is met or projected to be met. NOAA Fisheries monitors the landings for species managed by the SAFMC, and this information is available online for both the commercial and recreational sectors (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/southeast-region-annual-catch-limit-acl-monitoring>). See also the SAFMC or DMF websites for more details, and the most current information.

### Commercial Fishery

Commercial gear used in the snapper grouper fishery includes bandit reels, electric reels, manual hook and line, long lines, fish pots, spear, and trolling. Bandit reels, followed by electric rods and reels are the two most prevalent gear types used, especially south of Cape Hatteras (NCDMF 2015b). Spear fishing appears to be limited to south of Cape Hatteras, while longlines are primarily fished north of Cape Hatteras (NCDMF 2015b); their use is limited to six deep-water species and depths greater than 50 fathoms. Fish pots are used primarily to target black sea bass. Trip lengths vary dependent on the area fished and the gear used but tended to average between two to three days in length over the past five years; trips ranged from one day to 12 days for the entire commercial snapper grouper fleet (NCDMF 2015b).

The average landings for commercially caught snapper grouper from 1994-2023 was 1,893,866 pounds with a dockside value of \$3,991,753 (Table 3). In 2023, 945,251 pounds of snapper grouper species were caught commercially in North Carolina. The highest landings in the past 28 years were in 2008, after which landings dropped; landings have been under two million pounds for the last 13 years (Figure 1). The decline in landings over the past 13 years is most likely due to the removal of species from the complex, as well as the changes to ACLs and trip limits as well as implementation of a seasonal spawning closure by the SAFMC.

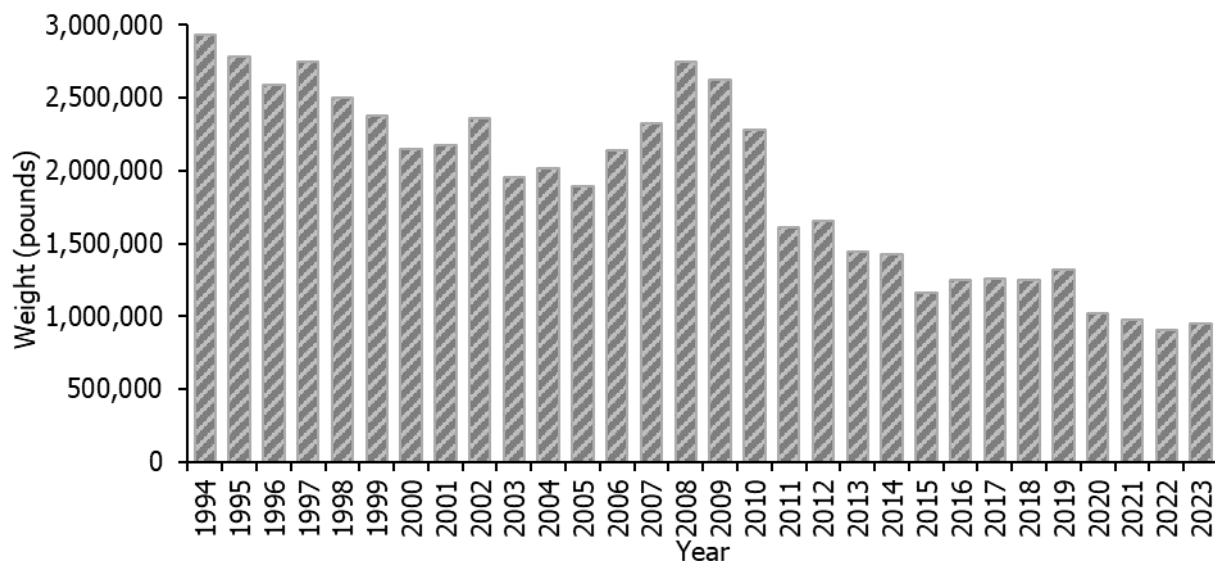


Figure 1. Annual commercial landings in pounds for snapper grouper species in North Carolina, 1994–2023.

Table 3. Landings of all snapper grouper species for the commercial fishery, 1994–2023. Sheepshead were removed from the fishery in 2012 and therefore not included past 2011.

Year	Weight of harvested fish (lb)	Value of Landings (USD)
1994	2,933,539	\$4,086,083
1995	2,785,341	\$3,844,101
1996	2,587,420	\$3,601,653
1997	2,748,108	\$4,053,605
1998	2,501,675	\$3,931,486
1999	2,372,628	\$3,981,018
2000	2,151,794	\$3,762,289
2001	2,178,180	\$3,652,941
2002	2,356,054	\$3,930,576
2003	1,953,932	\$3,375,178
2004	2,014,492	\$3,522,424
2005	1,889,092	\$3,567,878
2006	2,140,637	\$4,332,982
2007	2,324,604	\$5,247,795
2008	2,748,623	\$5,990,469
2009	2,625,263	\$5,262,980
2010	2,281,867	\$4,877,050
2011	1,613,929	\$3,911,719
2012	1,651,545	\$4,169,682
2013	1,445,346	\$3,918,164
2014	1,427,568	\$3,845,196
2015	1,161,861	\$3,324,493
2016	1,246,432	\$3,715,347
2017	1,259,683	\$3,825,047
2018	1,250,722	\$3,887,748
2019	1,315,444	\$4,452,724
2020	1,021,921	\$3,397,185
2021	977,083	\$3,278,421
2022	905,945	\$3,425,362
2023	945,251	\$3,624,800
Mean	1,893,866	\$3,991,753

Over the last five years, landings have been dominated by six main aggregates; black sea bass, grouper, snapper, triggerfish, jacks, and tilefish (though the dominant group varies by year) (Table 4). The top ten dominant species are: black sea bass, vermilion snapper, blueline tilefish, gag, triggerfish, red grouper, red porgy, amberjack, scamp, and grunts (NCDMF 2015b).

### Recreational Fishery

Recreational fishing uses many of the same gear types as the commercial fishery, with the exception of fish pots and longlines. Recreational estimates across all years have been updated and are now based on the MRIP new Fishing Effort Survey-based calibrated estimates. For more information on MRIP see <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/recreational-fishing-data>.

Table 4. Landings (in pounds) of snapper grouper, by aggregate groups, for the commercial fishery, 1994–2023. Aggregate groups are those used by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and are done by family (as in Table 2). Sheepshead were removed from the fishery in 2012 and therefore not included past 2011; these are included in the porgy aggregate. Only black sea bass from south of Cape Hatteras are included, as the northern populations are managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council. Wreckfish landings are confidential and are excluded.

Year	Black sea bass	Grouper	Snapper	Porgies	Grunts	Jacks	Tilefish	Triggerfish	Hogfish	Spadefish	Unclassified
1994	456,284	775,414	450,221	344,117	202,940	151,984	231,584	271,503	19,133	23,347	7,011
1995	348,030	773,372	403,499	355,210	184,799	171,510	160,860	304,540	33,507	40,873	9,142
1996	489,845	651,105	350,206	338,242	106,851	139,669	158,586	277,741	13,841	55,890	5,445
1997	518,223	719,513	366,482	264,012	131,974	178,310	149,402	342,123	14,010	57,384	6,676
1998	523,253	745,591	352,020	269,092	108,162	101,739	67,770	274,641	12,037	38,994	8,375
1999	491,401	758,059	441,783	178,690	95,008	129,245	76,697	150,387	12,405	34,320	4,634
2000	414,281	636,942	510,897	143,212	81,338	127,116	85,467	88,277	7,727	46,235	10,303
2001	477,123	558,626	523,742	148,513	94,422	121,966	106,674	87,628	8,203	41,994	9,290
2002	432,321	699,579	490,591	145,394	102,158	120,644	220,331	90,934	10,637	38,400	5,067
2003	476,511	651,941	269,230	108,931	65,379	135,991	87,102	117,396	9,135	28,519	3,797
2004	506,376	584,722	339,453	127,543	81,075	106,507	78,126	136,211	8,902	44,521	1,055
2005	321,858	579,194	432,829	101,936	90,364	122,361	44,014	145,636	7,877	35,445	7,578
2006	443,565	708,823	345,071	130,363	118,234	101,722	138,090	126,354	7,296	19,623	1,496
2007	277,453	827,622	550,617	175,215	118,545	133,519	58,218	155,261	7,112	19,567	1,476
2008	275,761	785,429	602,838	204,349	91,292	160,769	404,295	198,724	13,035	11,694	438
2009	437,954	637,438	374,081	231,478	74,054	153,099	469,293	215,757	10,839	20,636	635
2010	292,879	561,753	320,260	242,520	47,219	128,466	430,394	225,682	13,046	18,827	821
2011	173,681	408,332	326,371	211,792	33,451	72,797	133,824	220,204	10,793	21,535	1,149
2012	194,778	381,929	279,368	83,969	49,734	124,325	361,094	143,114	8,256	24,238	739
2013	241,367	311,056	276,533	72,966	44,718	90,122	217,079	160,861	7,847	20,369	2,429
2014	316,421	299,555	251,087	82,918	39,333	193,049	91,074	116,782	9,767	22,761	4,822
2015	226,337	261,031	232,030	54,496	32,702	146,584	45,354	131,536	8,238	15,997	7,556
2016	198,595	257,743	280,043	47,326	39,953	139,061	111,788	135,545	9,195	15,231	11,952
2017	243,356	223,383	286,861	54,531	42,392	128,125	88,754	152,958	15,776	18,834	4,713
2018	180,623	239,135	323,276	59,007	37,269	142,459	68,509	174,047	13,755	9,838	2,803
2019	106,249	302,728	422,970	49,135	44,752	104,756	90,118	165,126	14,486	12,262	2,862
2020	53,562	199,012	277,175	31,842	35,002	152,977	115,363	126,655	11,640	14,903	4,194
2021	53,226	186,870	224,168	28,462	25,051	230,049	119,269	67,353	13,147	27,282	2,207
2022	52,868	152,912	246,279	23,409	19,555	183,902	106,413	88,167	11,987	23,409	1,405
2023	57,004	158,589	259,576	11,779	16,021	209,109	119,909	74,375	11,779	11,779	1,457

The average recreational catch of snapper grouper species was 1,872,569 pounds for 1994-2023. Since 2008, the total amount of fish landed declined steadily until 2013 (Table 5; Figure 2). The number of fish harvested declined roughly 60% from 2017 to 2018 and harvest weight decreased 48%. As no major management changes in the recreational sector contributed to this decrease in landings, it is likely due to the impacts of Hurricane Florence on coastal North Carolina. The number of fish harvested increased 121% from 2022 to 2023 and harvest weight increased 186%. Recreational landings (by weight) have dropped roughly 58% since a 29-year high (4,773,359 pounds) in 2008. As with the commercial fishery, this is most likely due to the removal of species from the complex, as well as the changes to ACLs and the seasonal spawning closure by the SAFMC. For the last five years, the number of releases has been around 54% of the total fish caught (driven by the 13-inch TL size limit for black sea bass implemented in 2013, which has resulted in an increase of sublegal fish being discarded).

Table 5. Landings of all snapper grouper species for the recreational fishery, 1994–2023. Sheepshead were removed from the fishery in 2012 and therefore not included past 2011.

Year	Number Harvested	Weight Harvested (lb)	Number Released	Percent Released
1994	1,122,704	1,536,118	2,085,119	36
1995	760,710	1,272,346	1,017,649	34
1996	520,600	1,035,700	516,966	39
1997	758,210	1,275,604	982,893	39
1998	462,922	638,255	1,180,941	37
1999	512,259	1,115,025	1,279,859	40
2000	814,533	1,875,322	2,070,305	40
2001	885,512	1,951,012	1,793,595	35
2002	763,191	2,119,881	1,385,078	31
2003	1,120,047	2,335,324	1,327,321	29
2004	1,153,460	2,731,095	2,578,785	33
2005	1,157,612	2,736,693	2,562,520	35
2006	885,567	3,378,064	3,380,922	34
2007	1,230,325	4,245,321	3,463,009	49
2008	1,328,295	4,773,359	2,778,672	49
2009	1,179,139	3,986,022	2,519,259	40
2010	933,735	2,803,945	2,763,289	47
2011	611,220	1,361,512	3,132,003	50
2012	592,316	1,375,815	4,942,686	45
2013	383,259	1,004,917	3,413,860	43
2014	527,044	1,119,307	5,665,011	55
2015	585,640	1,236,957	5,585,899	43
2016	629,119	1,354,061	7,792,792	57
2017	851,774	1,659,890	6,795,091	47
2018	342,750	859,989	2,485,376	44
2019	434,400	885,120	3,346,307	63
2020	551,571	1,767,713	3,096,666	44
2021	320,255	1,019,528	3,034,845	59
2022	331,328	706,250	4,224,225	50
2023	732,824	2,016,926	4,451,629	54

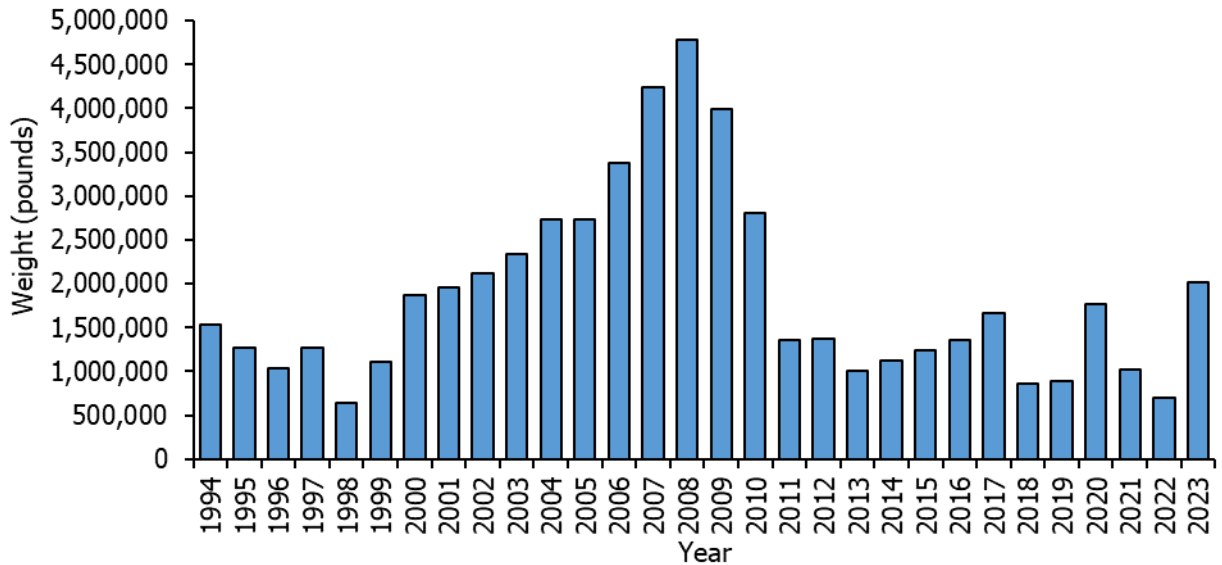


Figure 2. Annual recreational landings in pounds for snapper grouper species in North Carolina, 1994–2023.

In 2023, the dominant species (by pounds) landed were groupers, snappers, jacks, triggerfish, tilefish, and black sea bass (Table 6). This pattern mainly holds true for the last five years; however, other species are occasionally more dominant.

### MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-dependent and fishery-independent data collected by DMF from the snapper grouper fishery is provided to NOAA Fisheries. In 2006, the division received a Marine Fisheries Initiative Program (MARFIN) grant to collect ageing structures of the snapper grouper species, determine the age structure of the black sea bass stock south of Cape Hatteras, and estimate release mortality of the of the commercial snapper grouper fishery. Funding for the grant ended in 2014. Data collected for this grant is summarized in the final MARFIN reports (NCDMF 2015b, c).

### Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Commercial fisheries are monitored by port agents (state and federal) who collect information on trips, as well as biological information. Information is collected through the Trip Information Program (TIP), seafood dealer reporting, and logbooks (SAMFC 2014e). Recreational fisheries are monitored by creel clerks through the Southeast Region Headboat Survey program and the Marine Recreation Information Program (MRIP) (SAFMC 2014e). North Carolina contributes to this data through the collection of trip and biological information for both fisheries.

Table 6. Recreational landings (in pounds), by aggregate groups, 1994–2023. Aggregate groups are those used by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and are done by family (as in Table 2). Sheepshead were removed from the fishery in 2012 and therefore not included past 2011; these are included in the porgy aggregate. Only black sea bass from south of Cape Hatteras are included, as the northern population is managed by Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Council and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

Year	Black sea bass	Groupers	Snappers	Porgies	Grunts	Jacks	Tilefish	Triggerfish	Hogfish	Spadefish	Wreckfish
1994	255,936	192,300	86,864	348,920	405,116	142,011	-	96,569	256	8,146	-
1995	192,882	120,308	55,390	484,602	112,911	147,991	27,907	25,071	83,710	21,574	-
1996	222,898	44,050	31,717	289,437	77,503	276,636	540	77,012	-	15,907	-
1997	225,333	175,595	48,080	396,527	77,153	186,042	71,038	72,236	1,146	22,454	-
1998	154,986	60,962	9,577	250,646	37,113	89,045	-	25,188	-	10,738	-
1999	59,202	83,222	14,977	773,977	31,670	71,471	2,332	26,159	-	52,015	-
2000	373,028	52,463	23,294	820,377	9,520	548,623	3,724	26,184	-	18,109	-
2001	401,777	193,874	53,284	722,015	162,741	242,933	22,253	81,602	-	70,533	-
2002	183,634	348,809	143,786	865,924	337,495	159,670	7,290	54,879	11,499	6,895	-
2003	300,241	309,336	54,508	1,055,668	237,379	220,407	20,207	62,147	1,719	73,712	-
2004	507,359	1,022,259	170,615	558,545	266,540	94,406	29,313	64,317	1,300	16,441	-
2005	447,869	883,330	213,954	431,621	345,702	119,282	132,444	56,314	19,319	86,858	-
2006	175,048	1,671,117	54,160	476,295	235,456	316,341	330,140	64,556	19,365	35,586	-
2007	246,920	1,348,151	37,518	1,542,134	277,955	194,892	361,745	127,338	-	108,668	-
2008	104,582	1,946,062	114,550	1,139,132	302,233	468,560	404,734	269,507	1,813	22,186	-
2009	158,882	1,435,703	125,579	678,816	182,410	699,654	161,626	450,795	5,043	87,514	-
2010	206,765	325,422	50,327	1,016,739	84,349	567,382	51,649	257,445	8,658	235,209	-
2011	151,366	190,108	21,234	541,299	67,802	237,212	31,528	107,820	2,431	10,712	-
2012	219,859	215,213	78,050	42,963	171,618	262,534	65,879	221,703	24,243	73,281	472
2013	101,797	98,178	17,303	29,682	44,549	470,545	42,557	146,636	7,116	46,554	-
2014	562,393	28,173	25,717	21,247	86,365	154,373	45,541	102,145	-	93,353	-
2015	448,876	102,038	60,137	26,547	76,945	402,160	8,128	76,733	-	35,393	-
2016	301,334	79,379	46,391	19,455	86,926	356,481	282,035	165,279	466	16,315	-
2017	506,489	55,465	42,040	52,667	60,245	234,338	125,497	397,002	45,064	141,083	-
2018	107,331	9,227	29,406	8,012	16,762	357,661	116,891	178,928	383	35,388	-
2019	208,739	109,848	50,678	11,947	91,273	136,613	121,689	134,476	433	19,424	-
2020	120,950	28,013	83,330	12,831	83,906	361,133	833,910	230,521	305	12,814	-
2021	72,631	107,991	117,205	21,748	34,696	306,312	190,012	130,101	141	38,691	-
2022	196,050	59,021	135,665	11,842	20,702	103,882	13,496	153,763	310	11,519	-
2023	326,339	342,876	180,883	24,357	63,988	503,756	368,676	169,021	212	36,818	-

Fishery dependent length-frequency information for the commercial snapper grouper fishery in North Carolina is collected by fish house samplers, the majority of which come from DMF Program 438 (Offshore Live Bottom Fishery). Length-frequency information for the recreational snapper grouper fishery is collected through the DMF Carcass Collection Program and MRIP. In 2023, DMF recorded 8,421 lengths from individual fish from the commercial and recreational snapper grouper fishery of which 638 were black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras (Table 7). In 2023, 120 black sea bass were measured from MRIP recreational samples with an average TL of 15 inches (Table 8; Figure 3). TL has ranged from 4 inches to 21 inches since 1994 (Table 8; Figure 4). In 2023, 578 black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras were measured from the commercial fishery with an average TL of 14 inches (Table 7; Figure 3). Black sea bass landed in the commercial fishery have ranged from 7 to 19 inches TL since 1994 (Figure 5). Differences in the commercial and recreational length frequency distribution of black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras in 2023 can be attributed to the different size limits (13 inches TL for recreational and 11 inches TL for commercial), as well differences in the size selectivity of the gears used (Figure 3).

Table 7. Number of lengths and aging structures collected by DMF Program 438 (Offshore Live Bottom Fishery dependent sampling) for all species landed by the commercial and recreational sectors combined of the snapper grouper fishery in 2023. Many species included in this table are not part of the South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Management Complex but are landed as incidental catch during the prosecution of the fishery.

Species	Number Measured	Number of Aging Structures
African Pompano	1	0
Almaco Jack	765	2
Atlantic Bearded Brotula	1	0
Atlantic Bonito	17	0
Balistes Triggerfishes	2	2
Banded Rudderfish	107	0
Bank Sea Bass	54	1
Bar Jack	1	0
Barrelfish	5	2
Big Roughy	1	1
Bigeye	5	0
Black Grouper	1	1
Black Sea Bass	638	636
Blackbar Drum	8	0
Blackbar Soldierfish	1	0
Blackbelly Rosefish	69	0
Blackfin Snapper	153	153
Blackfin Tuna	11	0
Blackline Tilefish	1	1
Bluefish	14	0
Blueline Tilefish	68	68
Caulolatilus Tilefishes	5	5
Cobia	20	1
Coney	2	2
Conger Eels	3	0
Cottonwick	77	3
Creole-fish	24	24
Cubbyu	3	0
Cubera Snapper	3	3
Dolphinfish	61	0
Gag	423	421
Goldface Tilefish	5	5

Species	Number Measured	Number of Aging Structures
Gray Snapper	3	3
Gray Triggerfish	534	531
Graysby	43	43
Great Barracuda	8	0
Greater Amberjack	427	4
Greater Soapfish	5	0
Green Moray	1	0
Grunts	2	2
Hogfish	35	17
King Mackerel	32	4
Knobbed Porgy	84	2
Lesser Amberjack	16	1
Little Tunny	20	0
Mutton Snapper	23	23
Pigfish	38	0
Queen Snapper	1	1
Queen Triggerfish	6	5
Rainbow Runner	1	0
Red Grouper	13	13
Red Hind	7	7
Red Lionfish	9	0
Red Porgy	343	343
Red Snapper	400	400
Rock Hind	10	10
Saddle Bass	1	0
Sand Perch	2	0
Sand Tilefish	117	1
Scamp	169	169
Scup	69	0
Sheepshead	1	0
Short Bigeye	27	0
Silk Snapper	816	816
Snowy Grouper	419	416
Spanish Flag	1	0
Spanish Hogfish	2	0
Spanish Mackerel	2	0
Spinycheek Scorpionfish	16	0
Spotfin Hogfish	4	0
Spottail Pinfish	128	0
Spotted Moray	2	0
Squirrelfish	115	4
Tilefish	25	25
Tomtate	103	9
Vermilion Snapper	1621	1604
Wahoo	6	0
White Grunt	129	128
Whitebone Porgy	4	0
Yellow Jack	1	0
Yellowcheek Wrasse	15	0
Yellowedge Grouper	5	5
Yellowfin Grouper	6	6
Yellowmouth Grouper	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,421</b>	<b>5,928</b>



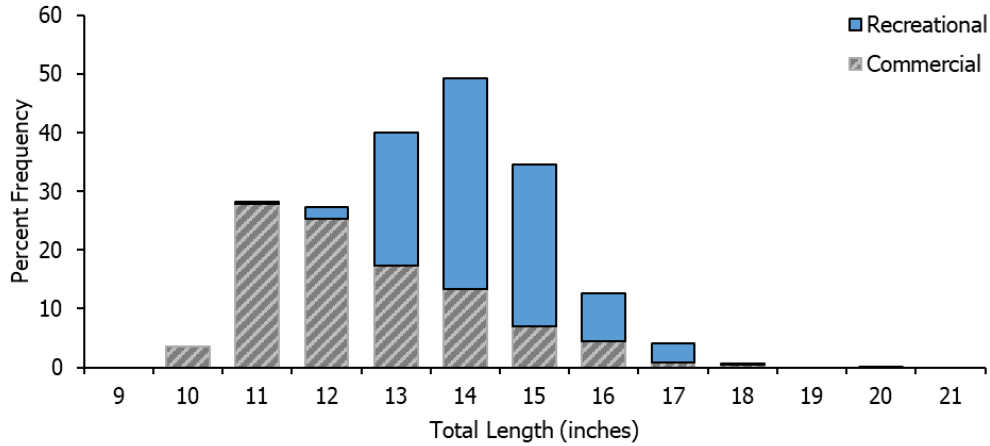


Figure 3. Commercial and recreational length frequency distribution from black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina harvested in 2023.

Table 8. Black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras length (total length, inches) data from Marine Recreational Information Program recreational samples, 1994–2023.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1994	10	4	21	211
1995	11	6	20	173
1996	11	7	19	177
1997	11	6	18	175
1998	10	6	21	173
1999	10	7	19	139
2000	11	8	15	102
2001	12	8	19	219
2002	12	9	20	46
2003	12	9	18	75
2004	12	9	18	125
2005	13	9	18	90
2006	12	10	19	85
2007	14	11	20	51
2008	14	9	18	72
2009	13	11	20	172
2010	13	6	19	297
2011	14	8	21	206
2012	14	9	19	217
2013	13	7	19	244
2014	13	5	17	135
2015	14	11	20	111
2016	15	12	18	115
2017	15	10	19	139
2018	14	10	17	152
2019	14	12	18	117
2020	14	11	18	152
2021	14	11	18	90
2022	14	9	18	74
2023	15	11	20	120

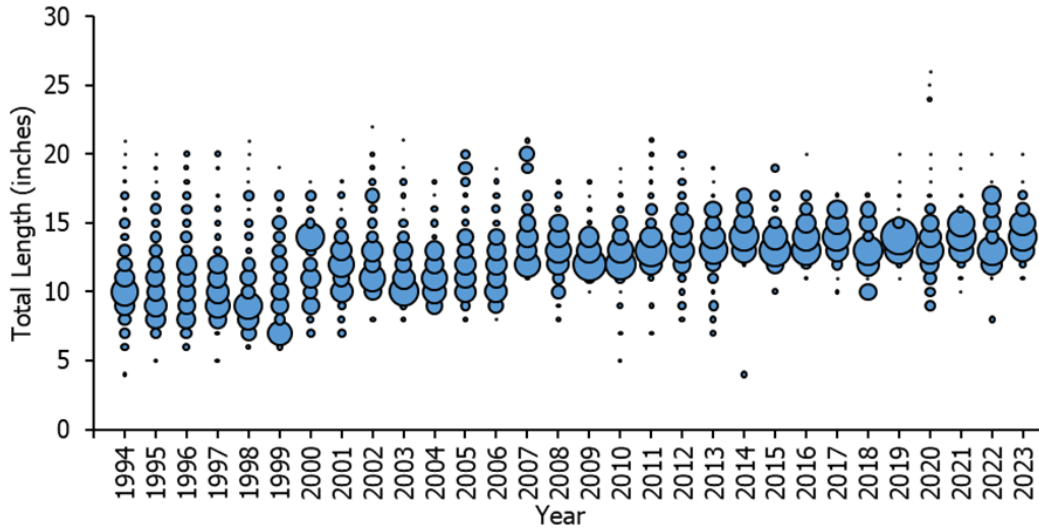


Figure 4. Recreational length frequency (total length, inches) of black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina harvested, 1994–2023. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

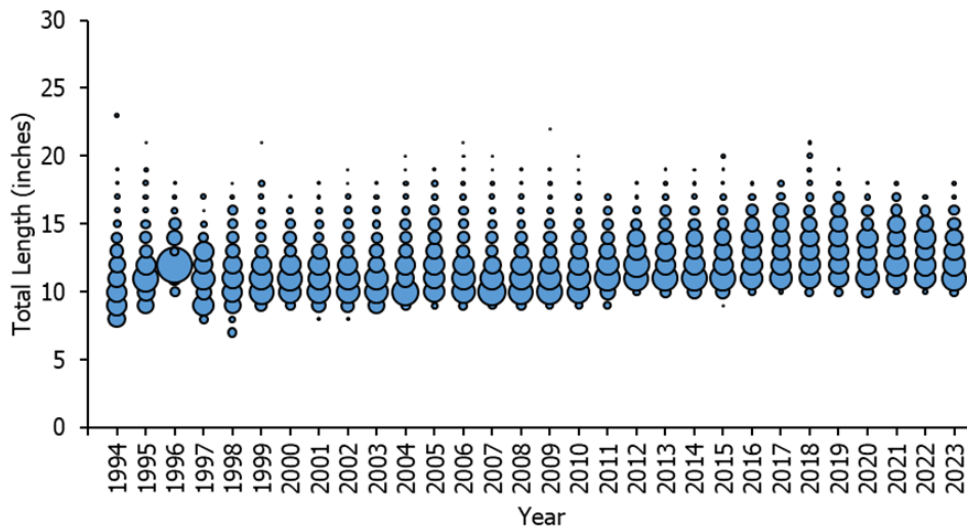


Figure 5. Commercial length frequency (total length, inches) of black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina harvested, 1994–2023. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

In order to describe the age structure of the harvest and indices, age structures are collected from various fishery-independent (scientific surveys) and dependent (fisheries) sources throughout the year. Aging structures are provided to the NOAA Beaufort Age Lab for analysis except for black sea bass caught south of Cape Hatteras, NC which are analyzed by DMF. In 2023, DMF collected 5,928 age structures from the snapper grouper fishery of which 636 came from black sea bass (Table 7). Since 2004, the modal age of black sea bass collected each year is 4 with the exception of 2011, 2018, 2019, and 2021 where the modal age was 3, 5, 6, and 5, respectively (Table 9). The maximum age recorded for black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras is 10. Black sea bass ages for 2023 have not been assessed yet. The age-length relationship for black sea bass is fairly unpredictable, as there is overlap in age for a given length (Figure 6).

Table 9. Summary of black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras age samples collected from both fishery-dependent (commercial and recreational fisheries) and fishery-independent (surveys) sources, 2004–2021. The 2023 otoliths have not been read.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
2004	4	2	8	316
2005	4	2	9	767
2006	4	2	8	699
2007	4	1	10	1837
2008	4	2	10	1452
2009	4	2	8	1473
2010	4	1	8	900
2011	3	1	8	798
2012	4	2	10	1116
2013	4	1	7	1251
2014	4	1	8	1546
2015	4	2	9	1039
2016	4	1	8	708
2017	4	1	7	1025
2018	5	2	7	964
2019	6	2	7	592
2020	4	2	7	314
2021	5	2	9	490

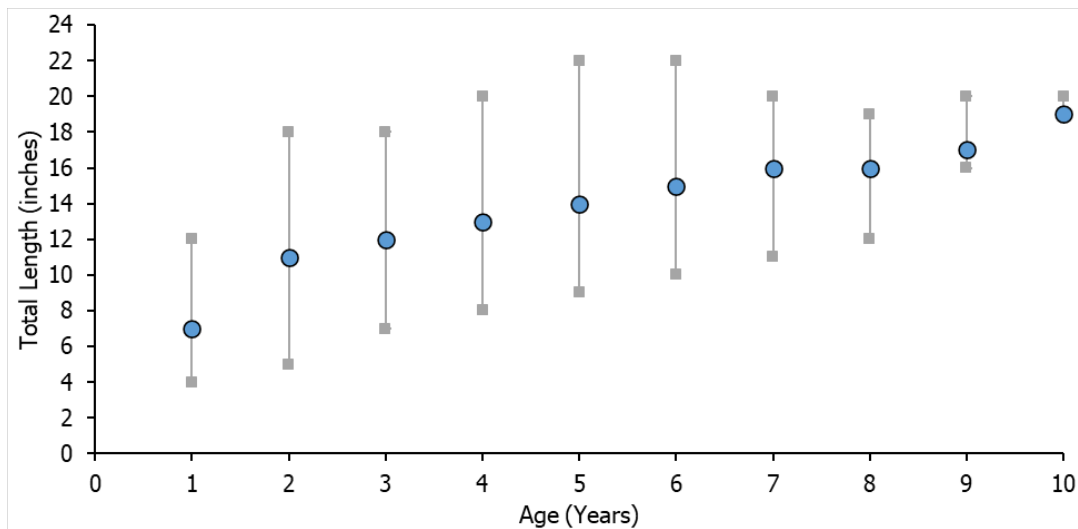


Figure 6. Black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras length at age based on all age samples collected, 2004–2021. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. The 2023 otoliths have not been read.

### Fishery-Independent Monitoring

The Southeast Reef Fish Survey (SERFS) maintains the fisheries-independent data for the snapper grouper complex. SERFS is a collective program for gathering fisheries-independent data within the South Atlantic federal waters. There are three primary programs that contribute to the data:

- Marine Resources Monitoring, Assessment, and Prediction (MARMAP) survey,
- Southeast Fisheries-Independent Survey (SEFIS), and

- Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) - South Atlantic (SAFMC 2015e).

North Carolina has contributed to the data collected through programs such as the gag ingress and tagging work done in partnership with SEAMAP and MARFIN.

## **RESEARCH NEEDS**

The reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 2006 directed that all regional management councils develop a prioritized research plan for annual submission to the Secretary of Commerce. The following (below) are research and management needs as determined by the council in 2007 (SAFMC 2007b). All needs are ongoing; however, the emphasis changes annually based on the SAFMC Science and Statistical Committee review of these needs. The reviewed list and priorities for the year are then approved for submission to the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center. The council has a series of research and monitoring needs for the period of 2012-2016 (SAFMC 2012e) and has developed another set of needs for 2015-2019 (SAFMC 2015f, 2017a). Research needs include:

- Continue monitoring of catches. — Ongoing
- Collect otoliths and spines for ageing. — Ongoing
- Estimate mortality rates. — Ongoing
- Determine if stock structure exists for many of the species. — Ongoing
- Note seasonal and spawning migrations. — Ongoing
- Identify and map essential/critical fish habitat. — Ongoing
- Determine spawning locations and seasons. — Ongoing
- Continue life history studies. — Ongoing
- Estimate reproductive parameters including fecundity, age and size of maturity, age and size of sexual transition, and sex ratio. — Ongoing
- Determine reliability of historical landings. — Ongoing
- Expand diet studies. — Ongoing
- Develop juvenile and adult indexes. — Ongoing

## **MANAGEMENT**

The snapper grouper complex is managed under the various amendments of the SAFMC FMP. The fishery is a regional fishery, and the Council has authority within the federal 200-mile limit of the Atlantic Ocean off the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and east Florida to Key West with the exception of black sea bass north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. In state waters, North Carolina defers to the Council and the same regulations are followed. Thresholds and targets for the species are determined by the SAFMC and are species dependent.

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