



# Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

## *Public hearing summary*

The purpose of this document is to outline the meeting format for the public hearings, summarize the actions and alternatives in the amendment, and to let you know how to provide comments. More information, including the entire amendment, may be found at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/amendment-59-fishery-management-plan-snapper-grouper-fishery-south-atlantic-region/>.

## Background

NOAA Fisheries is developing Amendment 59 to end and prevent overfishing of the South Atlantic red snapper stock, maintain adequate rebuilding progress, and explore ways to increase fishing opportunities by further reducing dead discards of red snapper. In summary, through Amendment 59, NOAA Fisheries -

**Must take action to end overfishing consistent with federal law and a court ordered settlement agreement.**

**Wants to explore ways to increase fishing opportunities for red snapper.**

**Must reduce the number of dead discards in order to increase the catch limit for red snapper and related fishing opportunities.**

In 2021, a stock assessment for red snapper (Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review 73, [SEDAR 73, 2021]) indicated that red snapper remained overfished and undergoing overfishing, but that the stock was making adequate progress towards rebuilding. In July 2021 NOAA Fisheries sent a letter to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council notifying the Council of the results of the stock assessment and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requirements to end overfishing. NOAA Fisheries further explained at Council meetings that although the red snapper stock was rebuilding and the existing rebuilding plan did not need to be revised, the Council needed to take action to end overfishing of red snapper in compliance with the law.

The Council developed Regulatory Amendment 35 to the Snapper-Grouper Fishery Management Plan which, if implemented, would have reduced the catch levels of red snapper and specified gear requirements to reduce discards, but would not have ended overfishing. After taking final action to approve Regulatory Amendment 35 in March 2023, the Council later rescinded its final action to submit Regulatory Amendment 35 to NOAA Fisheries for implementation at its December 2023 meeting, and took no further action under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to end overfishing.

As a result, on June 14, 2024, NOAA Fisheries implemented temporary interim measures to reduce overfishing by reducing the catch limits for red snapper for the 2024 red snapper recreational and commercial fishing seasons pursuant to Magnuson-Stevens Act section 305(c), and these measures were in effect through December 11, 2024. Most red snapper mortality is attributed to dead discards in the recreational sector, both during the directed red snapper fishing season and during the closed red snapper season while fishers are targeting other snapper-grouper species that co-occur with red snapper.

An update of the SEDAR 73 (2021) assessment completed by NOAA Fisheries in December 2024 using data through 2023 (SEDAR 73 Update Assessment (2024)) indicated the stock is still experiencing overfishing but has increased above the minimum stock size threshold, and is no longer overfished (<https://sedarweb.org/assessments/sedar-73/>) but because red snapper still needs to rebuild to the target level in the rebuilding plan, it will continue to be managed under the rebuilding plan.

## Public Hearing Format

4:00 p.m. - Doors open

4:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. - Informational Presentations. The presentations will be the same and you only need to listen to one of the public hearing presentations.

8:00 p.m. - End of meeting

- Please provide information, such as your name and affiliation, before you enter the public hearing rooms.
- Throughout the hearing, NOAA Fisheries will be receiving verbal public comments and will be present to answer questions and provide additional information.
- The public hearing on March 5th during the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council meeting will be different from the other public hearings. The informational presentation will be given in the afternoon after 1:00 p.m. and the public comment period will begin at 4:00 p.m.

## Ways to Provide Comments

You may verbally provide comments at this public hearing. There is a room designated for NOAA Fisheries to receive comments. We are also accepting comments on the amendment and proposed rule through March 17, 2025, and supporting analytical document, including the draft environmental impact statement, through March 3, 2025.

a. To submit comments electronically via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal:

1. Go to: <https://www.regulations.gov/docket/NOAA-NMFS-2024-0142>
2. Click the "Open for Comments" icon, then the "Comment" icon, and then complete the required fields.
3. Enter or attach your comments.

b. Send written via mail to:

NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Regional Office,  
Sustainable Fisheries Division  
263 13th Avenue South  
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505

## The Actions in Amendment 59

There are eight actions in the amendment.

### Action 1. Revise the Fishing Mortality at Maximum Sustainable Yield Proxy for Red Snapper Overfishing

Would change when overfishing occurs from when current  $F > F_{MSY}$  or  $F_{30\%SPR}$  to when current  $F > F_{MSY}$  or a reasonable proxy, based on the best scientific information available consistent with National Standard 2. This action would enable NOAA Fisheries to base overfishing determinations on the best scientific information available at the time of the determination without having to first revise or establish a new  $F_{MSY}$  proxy through an amendment to the Snapper-Grouper fishery management plan. Based on the SEDAR 73 Update Assessment, the  $F_{MSY}$  proxy would be equivalent to  $F_{2021-2023}$ , and the red snapper stock would no longer be classified as undergoing overfishing.

### Action 2. Modify the Acceptable Biological Catch for Red Snapper

Would change the acceptable biological catch from 53,000 fish to 464,000 or 509,000 fish. The preferred alternative is 509,000 fish.

### Action 3. Reduce Dead Discards and Increase the Red Snapper Annual Catch Limits

The table below shows the total annual catch limits (landings + dead discards) and sector annual catch limits (landings) resulting from dead discard reduction scenarios in ACL Alternatives 2-4 based on Acceptable Biological Catch Alternatives 2 and 3 in Action 2. The Commercial annual catch limit is in lbs ww and the recreational annual catch limit is in numbers of fish. The preferred alternative is bolded.

Action 3 ACL Alternative	Required Dead Discard Reduction	Total ACL (landings + dead discards (n))		Commercial ACL (lbs ww)		Recreational ACL (n)	
		Action 2 Preferred ABC Alt 2	Action 2 ABC Alt 2 or Alt 3	Action 2 ABC Preferred Alt 2	Action 2 ABC Alt 2 or Alt 3	Action 2 ABC Preferred Alt 2	Action 2 ABC Alt 2 or Alt 3
Alternative 1		42,510*		124,815		29,656	
Alternative 2	16%	505,000 (105,000 + 400,000)	464,000 (65,000 + 399,000)	300,000	233,000	64,000	40,000
Preferred Alternative 3	24%	<b>500,000</b> <b>(139,000 +</b> <b>360,000)</b>	459,000 (96,000 + 363,000)	<b>346,000</b>	284,000	<b>85,000**</b>	59,000
Alternative 4	32%	496,000 (172,000 + 323,000)	454,000 (131,000 + 323,000)	390,000	330,000	105,000	80,000

\*Landings only. \*\* The recreational ACL of 85,000 fish equates to 887,000 lbs ww.

Source: NMFS SERO. Commercial average weight (2021-2023) = 9.19 lbs.

Recreational average weight (2021-2023) = 11.085 lbs.

#### Action 4. Establish New Management Measures to Achieve Dead Discard Targets

This table summarizes the discard reduction season and area alternatives in this amendment, including the percent reduction in red snapper discards expected. FL/GA=Florida/Georgia border, JAX=Jacksonville, ST.AUG=St. Augustine, DAYBEA=Daytona Beach, CC=Cape Canaveral. The preferred alternative is bolded.

**This table only serves as a summary and the detailed alternatives are contained in the amendment.**

Alt	Temporal	Spatial		Percent reduction
		Location	Appx Depth (ft)	
2	Establish management measures for the recreational sector to reduce dead discards of red snapper by at least 16%.			
2a		JAX, CC	80-150	16%
2b	Close EEZ from 28 degrees to FL/GA line from Jan 1. through Feb. 14 each year			17%
3	Establish management measures for the recreational sector to reduce dead discards of red snapper by at least 24%.			
3a		JAX ST.AUG CC	80-150	25%
3b	Close EEZ from 28 degrees to FL/GA line from Dec. 1 through Feb. 28/29 each year			26%
4	Establish management measures for the recreational sector to reduce dead discards of red snapper by at least 32%.			
4a		JAX ST.AUG DAYBEA CC	70-110	32%
4b		JAX	80-150	33%
	Close entire EEZ from Jan. 1 through Feb. 28/29 each year			
Note: Sub-alternative 4B consists of both a discard reduction season (Jan and Feb each year for the entire South Atlantic EEZ) and a discard reduction area off Jacksonville year-round.				

#### Action 5. Modify Commercial Management Measures to Further Optimize Yield

##### Sub-Action 5a. Increase the Commercial Trip Limit for Red Snapper

Would increase the commercial trip during the open season from 75 pounds gutted weight to 100, 150, or 200 pounds gutted weight. The preferred alternative is 150 pounds gutted weight.

### **Sub-Action 5b. Modify the Commercial Fishing Season for Red Snapper**

Would change the start date of the commercial fishing season from the second Monday in July each year to either May 1 or June 1, starting in 2026. The preferred alternative is May 1 beginning in 2026.

### **Action 6. Modify the Recreational Fishing Season for Red Snapper to Further Increase Fishing Opportunities/Optimize Yield**

Currently, the recreational season, which consists of weekends only (Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays) begins on the second Friday in July. The amendment considers the elimination of Friday as a day open during the recreational season. The current preferred alternative, for 2025, is to begin the season the second Saturday in July and the season would consist of Saturdays and Sundays. The current preferred alternative, for 2026, is to begin the season the second Saturday in June and the season would consist of Saturdays and Sundays.

### **Action 7. Establish an Annual Experimental Studies Program**

Establish an annual process for requesting, evaluating, and approving proposals for innovative projects intended to reduce red snapper discards and increase fishing opportunities. Authorize a total or combined amount of red snapper not to exceed (1) the amount of the difference between the acceptable biological catch and total annual catch limit of snapper (2) not to exceed 10,000 fish or the amount of the difference between the acceptable biological catch and total annual catch limit chosen in Actions 2 and 3, whichever is less. The preferred alternative is the latter.

### **Action 8. Modify the Fishing Year for Red Snapper**

Would change the fishing year from January 1 through December 31 to either May 1 through April 30 or June 1 through May 31. The preferred alternative is May 1 through April 30.

The amendment, including the full range of actions and alternatives, may be found at

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/amendment-59-fishery-management-plan-snapper-grouper-fishery-south-atlantic-region/>.

