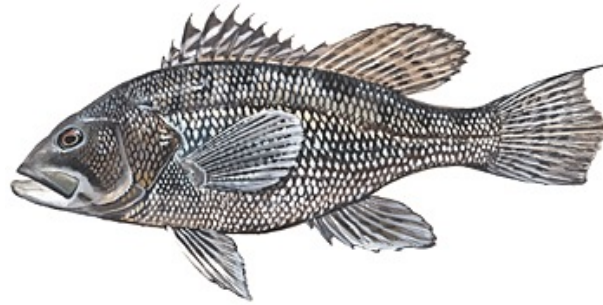


**Amendment 18A to the Fishery Management Plan for the
Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region**
January 2012



Black Sea bass (*Centropristis striata*)

General Questions:

What is the purpose of Amendment 18A?

- The primary purpose of Amendment 18A is to implement management measures that would optimize fishing opportunities for black sea bass.
- Additionally, Amendment 18A is intended to reduce bycatch of black sea bass and improve data reporting in the for-hire sector of the snapper-grouper fishery.

What are the actions in Amendment 18A?

- Updates to the rebuilding strategy for black sea bass based on data from the most recent stock assessment.
- Establishment of a black sea bass pot endorsement program where a vessel with an Unlimited Snapper-Grouper Permit may harvest black sea bass using pot gear only if the vessel also has a black sea bass pot endorsement.
- Establishment of an appeals process for those who feel they were incorrectly excluded from the black sea bass pot endorsement program.
- A transfer allowance for black sea bass pot endorsements.
- Modifications to the the current system of accountability measures for black sea bass to include an in-season closure for the recreational sector regardless of the overfished status of black sea bass when the ACL is projected to be met, and an ACL payback provision in the fishing year following an ACL overage.
- A limit of 35 black sea bass pot tags issued to each endorsement holder each permit year.
- A requirement that all pots be brought to shore at the end of each trip.
- Establish a 1,000 pound gutted weight (1,180 pound whole weight) commercial trip limit.
- An Increase to the commercial minimum size limit for black sea bass from 10 inches total length (TL) to 11 inches TL, and an increase to the recreational size limit form 12 inches TL to 13 inches TL.
- A requirement for selected for-hire vessels to report landings information electronically on a weekly or daily basis.

Who will be affected by Amendment 18A?

- Fishermen holding federal commercial unlimited, 225 pound trip limited, and for-hire snapper-grouper permits.
- Fishermen who actively fish for black sea bass in the South Atlantic, including recreational fishermen.

When will Amendment 18A go into effect?

- It is likely the actions in Amendment 18A, if approved, would be implemented in the summer of 2012.

Is black sea bass overfished or undergoing overfishing?

- The most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 25, November 2011) indicates the South Atlantic black sea bass stock is not overfished, but not yet fully rebuilt. Black sea bass is in a rebuilding plan that is expected to rebuild the stock by 2016.
- The stock assessment indicates that the stock is undergoing overfishing to a small extent.

Why does the black sea bass fishery continue to close early in the fishing season?

- Targeting of black sea bass has increased as restrictions are placed on other species.
- Black sea bass has been in a constant catch rebuilding plan since 2006, where the allowable catch is held steady as the stock rebuilds.
- The stock is rebuilding, so fish are being harvested at a faster rate because the population size has increased.

What actions in Amendment 18A are expected to extend the length of the commercial fishing season?

- Management measures in Amendment 18A including a black sea bass pot endorsement program, commercial trip limit, limit on the number of pots tags to be issued each permit year, and minimum size limit modifications could extend the commercial fishing season.

If the regulations are implemented, how long would the commercial fishing season be extended?

- The commercial 2012/2013 fishing season would be open until approximately August or September 2012, and the 2013/2014 commercial fishing season would be open until July or August 2013.

What actions in Amendment 18A are expected to extend the length of the recreational fishing season?

- The action to increase the recreational black sea bass minimum size limit is expected to slow the rate of harvest in the recreational sector.

How can I comment on Amendment 18A?

- Comments on Amendment 18A must be received by April 2, 2012.
- To comment on Amendment 18A electronically through the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov> (select "Submit Comment", then type in NOAA-NMFS-2011-0282 in the "Keyword or ID" box).

- To submit written comments through the U.S. Postal Service, mail comments to:
NOAA Fisheries Service
Southeast Regional Office
Sustainable Fisheries Division
c/o Kate Michie
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701
- All comments received are part of the public record and will generally be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov> without change. All personal identifying information (for example, name, address, etc.) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information. NOAA Fisheries Service will accept anonymous comments. Attachments to electronic comments will be accepted in Microsoft Word, Excel, WordPerfect, or Adobe PDF file formats only. Comments received through means not specified in this bulletin may not be considered.
- The public will have additional opportunities to submit written comments on Amendment 18A when the proposed rule is published in the *Federal Register*.
- Fishery bulletins will be sent to permit holders announcing public comment opportunities, and announcements will also be made on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Web page at: www.SAFMC.net

Black Sea Bass Pot Endorsement Questions:

Under the preferred alternative in the draft environmental impact statement, what conditions must be met to obtain a black sea bass pot endorsement?

- To qualify for an endorsement under the South Atlantic Council's preferred alternative, **all** the following conditions would apply to a person:
 - Own a valid or renewable Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit as of the effective date of the final rule implementing Amendment 18A;
 - Average black sea bass landings using pot gear of at least 2,500 pounds whole weight between January 1, 1999, and December 31, 2010; and
 - At least 1 pound of reported black sea bass commercial landings between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2010.

What would the black sea bass pot endorsement allow me to do?

- With the endorsement, you are legally allowed to deploy black sea bass pot gear in the South Atlantic for the purposes of harvesting black sea bass.

Would there be an appeals process for those who feel they should have been issued an endorsement but did not receive one?

- Yes. The appeals process stipulates a 90-day time limit to submit an appeals application beginning from the effective date of the final rule. This date would be announced in the final rule as well as in the fishery bulletin sent out at the final rule stage of the rulemaking process.
- The Regional Administrator would determine the outcome of appeals based only on National Marine Fisheries Service logbooks and/or state landings records.

- No hardship arguments would be considered.

What are the basic characteristics of the proposed black sea bass pot endorsements?

- Endorsements would be linked to a qualifying Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit.
- Endorsements could be transferred with or without the Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit upon implementation of the endorsement program.
- Endorsements would be renewed automatically with the associated Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit.
- Landings of black sea bass with the endorsement would be associated with the Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit, not the endorsement.
- If you qualify for an endorsement you will receive the endorsement with a letter of explanation. If you hold a valid Unlimited South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Permit and do not qualify for an endorsement you will also receive a letter explaining why you did not qualify and how to appeal your eligibility if you choose to do so.

For More Information on Amendment 18A

- Contact NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast Regional Office
By Mail: Southeast Regional Office, c/o Kate Michie
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505
By FAX: (727) 824-5308
By Phone: (727) 824-5305
- Amendment 18A is available on line at: NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast Regional Office Web site: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/SASnapperGrouperHomepage.htm>
or, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Web site:
<http://www.safmc.net/Library/SnapperGrouper/tabid/415/Default.aspx>