



**Testimony before the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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Wilmington, NC**

Good afternoon. My name is Leda Dunmire, with The Pew Charitable Trusts. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input today. With one notable exception, this week's meeting has been characterized by progress towards long-term sustainable fishery management and opportunities for productive stakeholder involvement.

The snapper/grouper visioning project will move forward with port meetings in the spring. Fishermen and other coastal residents will weigh in with ideas for strategic and common-sense ways to manage these fisheries. Similar collaborative planning is underway to use electronic monitoring for smarter and timelier decision-making.

The Council is also undertaking important efforts in ecosystem-based fishery management. This includes the Fishery Ecosystem Plan update, and progress on Coral Amendment 8 to protect fragile deep-water corals on the Oculina Banks. Additionally, outside scientists and Council staff are updating a model to account for the role of forage fish in the South Atlantic Bight. This will help managers maintain a healthy marine food web.

This Council is known for taking deliberate steps to include public input and listening to stakeholders. You have carved out a niche on the U.S fishery management stage as a leader in habitat conservation to support healthy fisheries. You are known as the "habitat Council".

This is why we were disappointed to see public scoping of Regulatory Amendment 17 delayed. In September, the Council approved a motion to conduct in-person scoping meetings this January. Care was taken to locate the meetings in coastal towns where fishermen would be most impacted by the Amendment. Meeting dates and locations were recently published in the Federal Register. The Snapper/Grouper committee's decision to delay scoping adds confusion and uncertainty to an issue where consistency and transparency are critical.

Speckled hind, warsaw grouper, and other important fish species are struggling to recover from decades of overfishing. Bag limits, size limits, and, in some cases, a complete harvest prohibition have not been enough to bring them back. The Snapper/Grouper AP recently approved a unanimous recommendation that the Council "prioritize areas of known spawning activity" and "put in place targeted closures to bottom fishing." The protected area sites in RA 17 are a targeted, science-based approach to protect fish where they live and spawn.

Scoping meetings are an opportunity to constructively engage the public early in the decision-making process. They are especially important when decisions are difficult. Changing the scheduled January scoping meetings could unnecessarily sow doubt among stakeholders and undermine the visioning process, if the public perceives they are being invited to the decision-making table selectively.

We strongly urge the Council to stick with the original plan of scoping Regulatory Amendment 17 this coming January. We also recommend you set the meetings up as working group sessions, where participants can provide hands-on feedback through pre-printed maps from the draft options paper and discuss site mapping and delineation.

More than ever, the public looks to this Council for leadership in managing fisheries for a healthy future. Protecting small, high-value habitat areas for key snapper and grouper species is a strategic and common-sense approach. Moving forward will take courage, collaboration, and commitment. We hope you will heed the advice from your Snapper / Grouper AP, and revisit this decision at full Council.

Thank you for considering our comments. We look forward to working with the Council and fellow stakeholders toward a shared vision of sustainability and prosperity.