



Butterfish Fishery Information Document

June 2022

This Fishery Information Document provides a brief overview of the biology, stock condition, management system, and fishery performance for butterfish, with an emphasis on 2021. Data sources for Fishery Information Documents include unpublished National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) survey, dealer, vessel trip report (VTR), permit, and Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) databases and should be considered preliminary. For more resources, including previous Fishery Information Documents, please visit <http://www.mafmc.org/msb>.

Key Facts

- Landings have generally been variable and well below the quota in recent years. 2021 landings and revenues were down compared to 2020. The average ex-vessel price for butterfish increased.
- The recently completed research track and management track assessments found that butterfish was neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, and biomass in 2021 was above the target.
- Considerable variability is expected in abundance, availability, and landings due to butterfish's relatively short lifespan, environmental factors, and market conditions.

Basic Biology

Atlantic butterfish is a semi-pelagic/semi-demersal schooling fish species primarily distributed between Nova Scotia, Canada and Florida. They are most abundant from the Gulf of Maine to Cape Hatteras and form loose schools. They winter near the edge of the continental shelf and migrate inshore in the spring and offshore in the fall.

Butterfish are relatively short-lived and grow rapidly; few individuals live beyond 3 years. The maximum age reported is 6 years. The recent assessment reevaluated median length (L50) at maturity and median age at maturity (A50) using NEFSC spring bottom trawl survey data for 5,686 females and 5,089 males (1985–2019). For both females and males, the median length at maturity was just over 11 cm and the median age at maturity was about 3/4 of one year.

See the 2022 Research Track Assessment report (long version) for more life history information at: https://apps-nefsc.fisheries.noaa.gov/saw/sasi/sasi_report_options.php.

Status of the Stock

Based on the 2022 management track assessment (MTA), the status of butterfish in 2021 was not overfished, with no overfishing occurring, and the stock size was above the target (available at https://apps-nefsc.fisheries.noaa.gov/saw/sasi/sasi_report_options.php). (Figure 1).

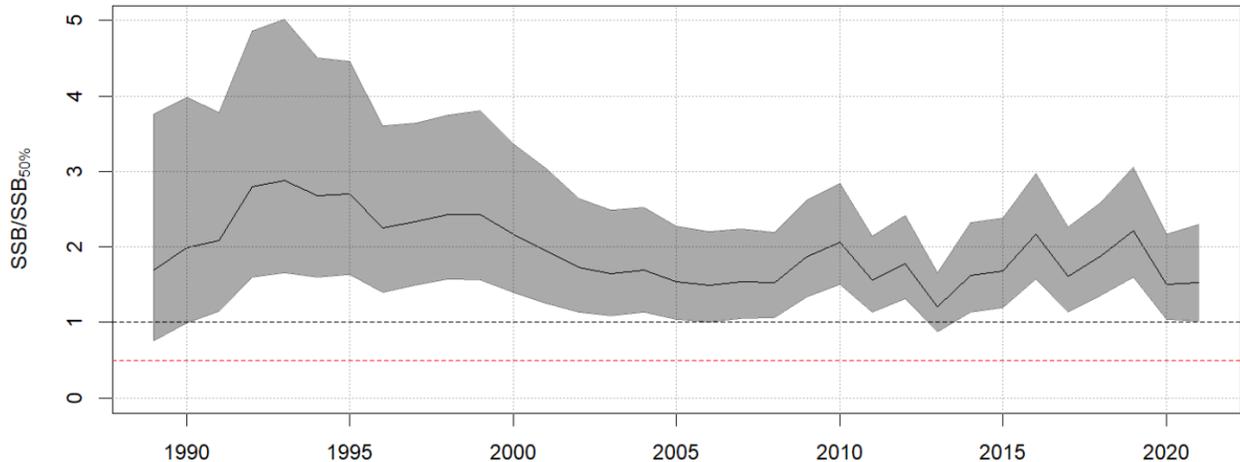


Figure 1. Butterfish stock status, 1989–2021, relative to the 2021 MTA’s revised biological reference points, biomass target = “1” or 39,436 MT (upper horizontal dashed line) and overfished threshold = 0.5 or 19,718 MT (lower horizontal dashed line).

Management System and Fishery Performance

Management

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (the Council or MAFMC) established management of butterfish in 1978 and the management unit includes all federal East Coast waters.

Limited access commercial vessels can fish year-round until quotas are achieved, subject to applicable gear requirements. Incidental permits are limited to 600 pounds per trip. The ABC for 2022 is 17,854 MT, with a commercial quota of 11,495 MT. If landings get within 1,000 MT of the quota, a 5,000-pound trip limit is implemented to slow the fishery and avoid having to go to the lower 600-pound trip limit that is implemented once the full quota is reached. Additional summary regulatory information is available at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/region/new-england-mid-atlantic>.

Recreational landings are negligible. There are no recreational regulations except for party/charter vessel permits to catch butterfish, and any vessel that has any Mid-Atlantic party/charter permits must report ALL catch on ALL trips.

Commercial Fishery

Figure 2 below, from the 2022 MTA, describes U.S. butterfish catch 1965-2021. Following, Figures 3-4 describe domestic landings, ex-vessel revenues and prices (inflation adjusted) since 1996. The Gross Domestic Product Implicit Price Deflator was used to report revenues/prices as “2021 dollars.” Table 1 describes 2021 butterfish landings by state, and Table 2 describes 2021 butterfish landings by gear type. Table 3 describes 2021 butterfish landings by NMFS Statistical Area as reported in Vessel Trip Reports (Figure 5 at the end shows where the NMFS Statistical Areas are located).

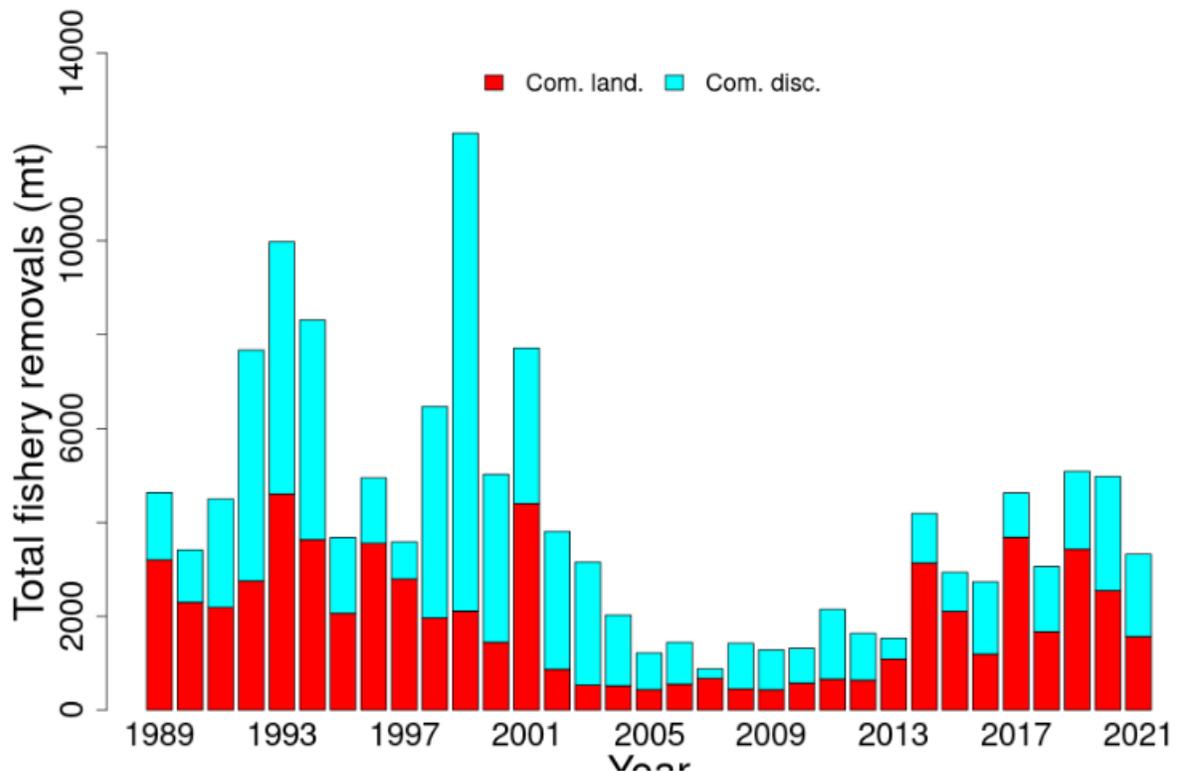


Figure 2. Total commercial catch of butterfish between 1989 and 2021 (landings and discards).

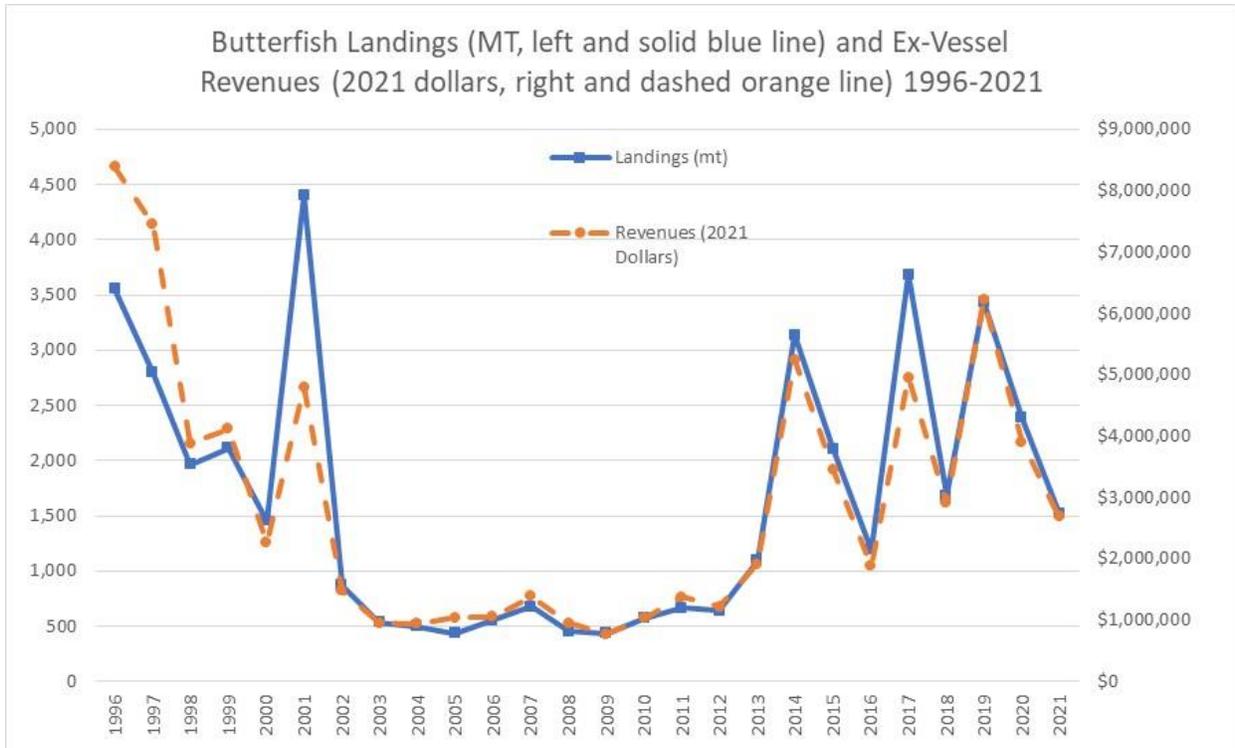


Figure 3. U.S. Butterfish Landings and Butterfish Ex-Vessel Values 1996-2021. Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

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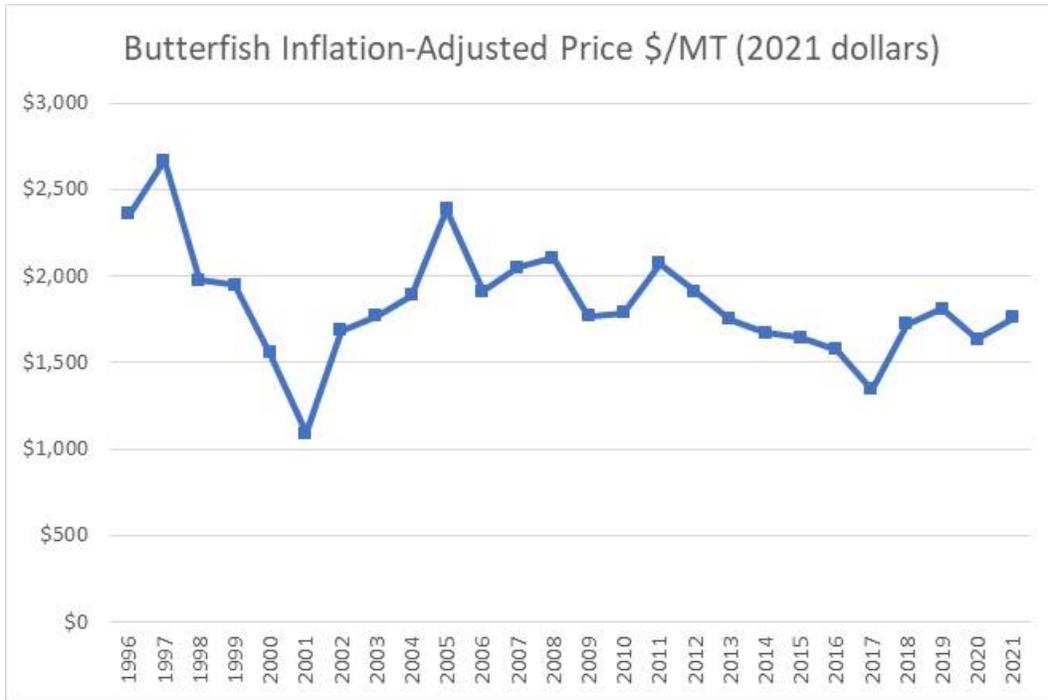


Figure 4. Ex-Vessel Butterfish Prices 1996-2021 Adjusted to 2021 Dollars Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

Table 1. Commercial Butterfish landings by state in 2021. Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

State	Metric Tons
RI	1,207
NY	180
MA	61
CT	48
NJ	27
Other	2
Total	1,524

Table 2. Commercial Butterfish landings by gear in 2021. Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

GEAR	Metric Tons
TRAWL,OTTER,BOTTOM,FISH	1,399
UNKNOWN	100
TRAWL,OTTER,BOTTOM,OTHER	15
POUND NET, OTHER	5
Other	5
Total	1,524

Table 3. Commercial butterfish landings by statistical area in 2021. Source: NMFS unpublished VTR data.

Stat Area	Metric Tons
526	773
537	233
539	139
534	80
616	57
611	56
613	53
525	22
562	17
Other	57
Total	1,486

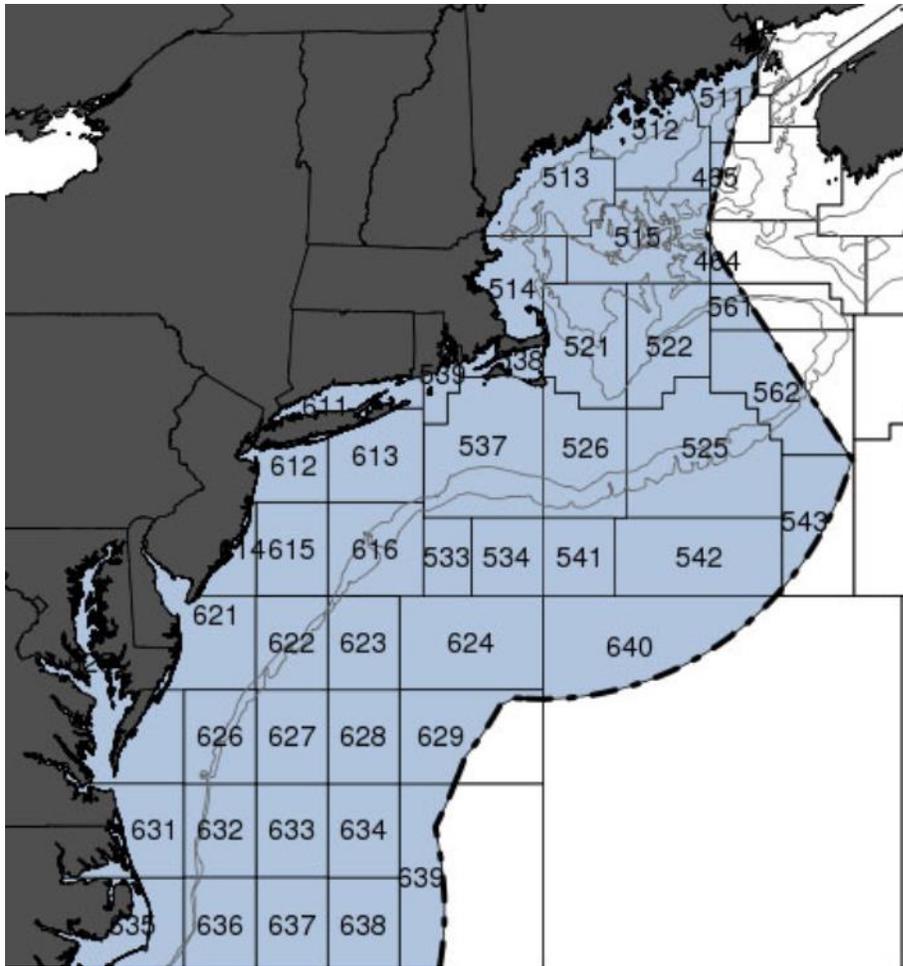


Figure 5. NMFS Statistical Areas

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