



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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MEMORANDUM

Date: October 26, 2020
To: Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director
From: Matthew Seeley, Staff
Subject: 2021 Bluefish Recreational Management Measures

Introduction and Background

The 2019 Atlantic bluefish operational stock assessment concluded that the stock is overfished but not experiencing overfishing. During their joint meeting in October 2019, the Council and Commission adopted a recreational harvest limit (RHL) of 9.48 million pounds for 2020 and 2021, which is an 18% decrease compared to the 2019 RHL. For 2020, the recreational sector was projected to land 13.27 million pounds, which would have exceeded the RHL by 28.56%. Therefore, the Council and Commission approved recreational management measures to constrain harvest to the reduced RHL.

The Council and Commission considered several combinations of bag limits and minimum size limits, including options to set a single set of regulations for all fishing modes or different regulations for shore/private and the for-hire mode. Although the Council's Bluefish Monitoring Committee (MC) recommended a coastwide 3-fish bag limit, the majority of comments from the public and Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) members expressed opposition to this option, noting that it would have severe economic consequences for the for-hire sector, which was only responsible for 3.6% of coastwide landings from 2016 to 2018. Additionally, AP members and the public emphasized that these proposed reductions come at a challenging time for for-hire stakeholders as they are also facing increased restrictions on striped bass, black sea bass, summer flounder, and scup.

After extensive discussion of various management measures and thorough consideration of public comments in 2019, the Council and Commission approved a 3-fish bag limit for private and shore modes and a 5-fish bag limit for the for-hire mode with no restrictions to minimum fish size or seasons. These measures were proposed to achieve the necessary 28.56% reduction in harvest from the expected recreational landings of 13.27 M lbs to the RHL of 9.48 M lbs. However, these measures were not officially implemented until mid-2020.

For 2021, the Council approved using the 2019 recreational discards estimate which resulted in a status quo commercial quota of 2.77 M lbs and revised RHL of 8.34 M lbs (Table 1). A time series of RHLs is presented in Table 2.

The MC is tasked with recommending revised management measures for 2021 that will constrain harvest to the 2021 RHL of 8.34 M lbs. This RHL is a 12.03% reduction compared to the 2020 RHL of 9.48 M lbs.

Table 1. Current approved (2020-2021) catch limits and management measures compared to the proposed revised 2021 catch limits and management measures.

Management Measure	Approved 2020-2021		Basis	Revised 2021		Basis
	M lb ¹	mt		M lb	mt	
OFL	37.98	17,228	Stock Assessment Projections	37.98	17,228	Stock Assessment Projections
ABC	16.28	7,385	Derived by SSC; Council P* policy	16.28	7,385	Derived by SSC; Council P* policy ²
ACL	16.28	7,385	Defined in FMP as equal to ABC	16.28	7,385	Defined in FMP as equal to ABC
Management Uncertainty	0	0	Derived by MC	0	0	Derived by MC
Commercial ACT	2.77	1,255	(ACL – Management Uncertainty) x 17%	2.77	1,255	(ACL – Management Uncertainty) x 17%
Recreational ACT	13.51	6,130	(ACL – Management Uncertainty) x 83%	13.51	6,130	(ACL – Management Uncertainty) x 83%
Commercial Discards	0	0	Value used in assessment	0	0	Value used in the assessment
Recreational Discards	4.03	1,829	2018 discards	5.17	2,343	2019 discards
Commercial TAL	2.77	1,255	Commercial ACT – commercial discards	2.77	1,255	Commercial ACT – commercial discards
Recreational TAL	9.48	4,301	Recreational ACT – recreational discards	8.34	3,785	Recreational ACT – recreational discards
TAL Combined	12.25	5,556	Commercial TAL + recreational TAL	11.11	5,042	Commercial TAL + recreational TAL
Transfer	0	0	Calculated so Expected Recreational Landings = RHL	0	0	Calculated so Expected Recreational Landings = RHL
Expected Recreational Landings	13.27	6,020	2018 Recreational Landings	15.56	7,056	2019 Recreational landings, but remains TBD in November
Commercial quota	2.77	1,255	Commercial TAL + transfer	2.77	1,255	Commercial TAL + transfer
RHL	9.48	4,301	Recreational TAL – transfer	8.34	3,785	Recreational TAL - transfer

¹ SSC recommendations are made in metric tons (mt) and thus, the management measures are developed using mt. When values are converted to millions of pounds (M lb) the numbers may slightly shift due to rounding. The conversion factor used is 1 mt = 2204.6226 pounds.

² Bluefish projections for the rebuilding plan were developed prior to the Council turning to the new risk policy, thus, the 2020 and 2021 ABCs were developed with the old risk policy. However, the ABCs for 2022 and beyond do incorporate the new Council risk policy.

Table 2. Summary of bluefish management measures, 2009 – 2021 (Values are in million pounds).

Management Measures	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019⁸	2020⁹	2021
TAC ¹ / ABC ²	34.08	34.38	31.74	32.04	27.47	24.43	21.54	19.45	20.64	21.81	21.81	16.28	16.28
TAL ³	29.36	29.26	27.29	28.27	23.86	21.08	18.19	16.46	18.19	18.82	19.33	12.25	11.11
Comm. Quota ⁴	9.83	10.21	9.38	10.32	9.08	7.46	5.24	4.88	8.54	7.24	7.71	2.77	2.77
Comm. Landings ⁵	7.1	7.55	5.61	4.66	4.12	4.77	4.02	4.1	3.64	2.20	2.78		
Rec. Harvest Limit ⁴	19.53	18.63	17.81	17.46	14.07	13.62	12.95	11.58	9.65	11.58	11.62	9.48	8.34
Rec. Landings, Old MRIP ⁶	14.47	16.34	11.5	11.84	16.46	10.46	11.67	9.54	9.52	3.64	N/A		
Rec. Landings, New MRIP	40.73	46.30	34.22	32.53	34.40	27.04	30.10	24.16	32.07	13.27	15.56		
Rec. Possession Limit (# fish)	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	3: Private 5: For-Hire	TBD
Total Landings	21.57	23.89	17.11	16.5	20.58	15.23	15.69	13.64	13.16	5.84	18.34		
Overage/Underage	-7.79	-5.37	-10.18	-11.77	-3.28	-5.85	-2.5	-2.82	-5.03	-12.98	N/A*		
Total Catch ⁷	25.10	27.93	20.39	19.26	24.06	17.96	18.65	16.09	15.65	6.96	23.50		
Overage/Underage	-8.98	-6.45	-11.35	-12.78	-3.41	-6.47	-2.89	-3.36	-4.99	-14.85	N/A*		

¹ Through 2011. ² 2012 fwd. ³ Not adjusted for RSA. ⁴ Adjusted downward for RSA. ⁵ Dealer and South Atlantic Canvas data used to generate values from 2000-2011; Dealer data (cfders) was used to generate commercial landings. ⁶ Old MRIP. ⁷ Recreational discards were calculated assuming MRIP mean weight of fish landed or harvested in a given year multiplied by the MRIP B2s and assumed discard mortality rate of 15%. ⁸ Values for 2019 and beyond are presented using the new MRIP estimates. ⁹ 2020 will be the first year that the new MRIP landings can be compared to the RHL – this will allow for calculation of total landings, catch, and overage/underages. *Note: 2019 is the transition year for when recreational landings are reported using only new MRIP estimates. The 2019 ABC, RHL, and Commercial Quota were developed using old MRIP estimates and cannot be directly compared to the new recreational landings estimates.

Past RHLs and Management Measures

From 2000-2018, the bluefish fishery exceeded the RHL twice, in 2007 and 2013 (Table 2). However, accountability measures were not triggered because the RHLs were exceeded due to transfers from the recreational to the commercial fishery. From 2000 to 2019, the only implemented management measures were a federal 15-fish bag limit. Due to the recent change in stock status to overfished, appropriate management measures were implemented for 2020-2021 (as indicated above) to constrain recreational harvest to a lower RHL. These measures implemented for the 2020 fishing year consisted of a 3-fish bag limit for private and shore modes and a 5-fish bag limit for the for-hire mode with no restrictions to minimum fish size or seasons.

Recreational Catch, Harvest, and 2020 Projections

According to re-calibrated MRIP estimates, recreational bluefish catch has fluctuated from a peak of 62.35 M fish in 2010 to a low of 25.08 M fish in 1995. Harvest shifted from a high of 59.80 M lbs in 1991 to a low of 13.27 M lbs in 2018. Thus, 2018 was the worst year for recreational harvest across the time series (Figure 1, Table 3 [1991-2019]). In 2019, catch and harvest estimates increased to 20.72 M lbs and 15.56 M lbs, respectively.

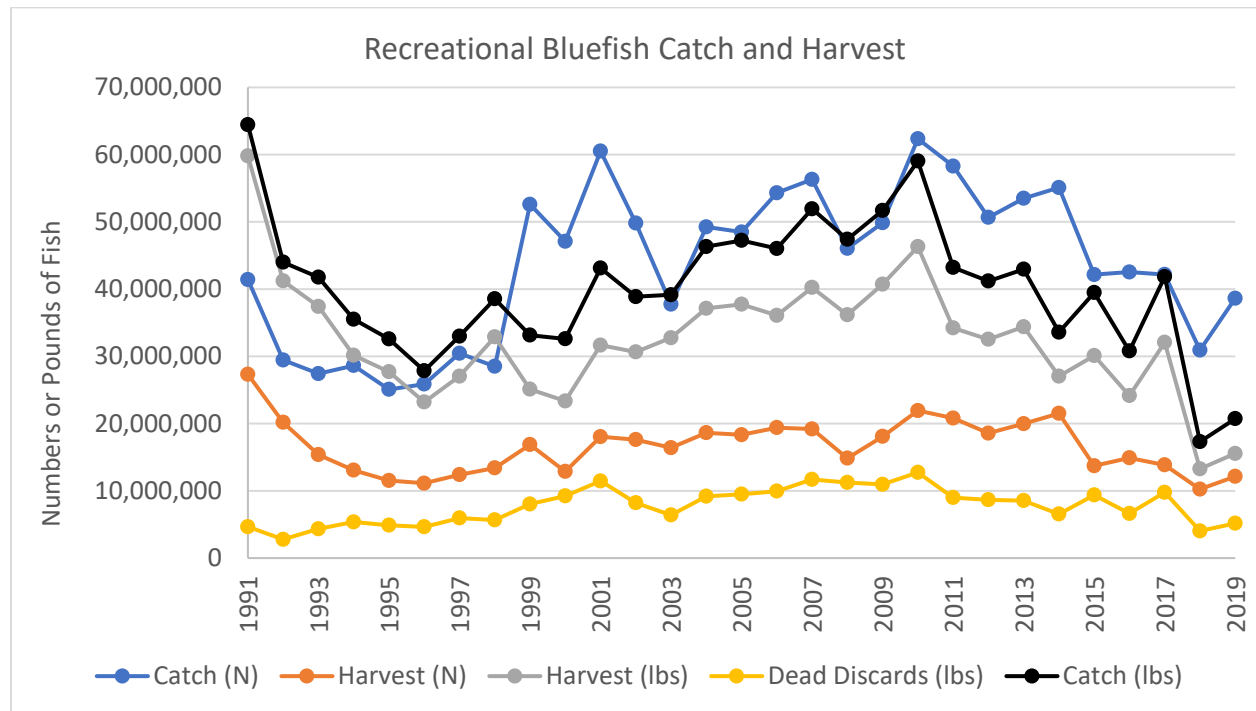


Figure 1. Recreational bluefish catch and harvest from 1991-2019.

Table 3. Number of bluefish recreational fishing trips, recreational harvest, and recreational landings per trip from 2000 to 2019.

Year	# of bluefish trips ^a	Recreational Harvest (N)	Recreational Harvest (lbs)	Recreational landings per “bluefish” trip
New MRIP Estimates				
2000	7,326,957	12,879,485	23,357,120	1.76
2001	9,491,374	18,048,645	31,654,978	1.90
2002	9,617,742	17,607,380	30,654,388	1.83
2003	9,586,532	16,411,932	32,758,670	1.71
2004	10,673,976	18,631,904	37,133,463	1.75
2005	10,927,244	18,341,452	37,742,807	1.68
2006	11,417,723	19,397,272	36,081,958	1.70
2007	12,574,704	19,189,747	40,239,101	1.53
2008	11,259,497	14,845,435	36,166,834	1.32
2009	10,926,384	18,085,386	40,731,438	1.66
2010	12,224,816	21,929,517	46,302,792	1.79
2011	11,057,635	20,814,884	34,218,748	1.88
2012	11,802,073	18,578,838	32,530,917	1.57
2013	9,171,936	19,975,051	34,398,327	2.18
2014	11,814,231	21,510,651	27,044,276	1.82
2015	9,121,415	13,725,106	30,098,649	1.50
2016	11,164,613	14,899,723	24,155,304	1.33
2017	10,354,921	13,845,806	32,071,432	1.34
2018	7,007,966	10,245,710	13,270,862	1.46
2019	8,301,107	12,137,290	15,555,889	1.46

^a Estimated number of recreational fishing trips where the primary target was bluefish or bluefish were harvested regardless of target, Maine – Florida's East Coast. Source: MRIP.

Figure 2 presents MRIP estimates of landings by mode (1991 through 2019) and indicates that the recent primary modes landing bluefish are private boats and shore mode. Based on recreational harvest in 2019, landings from shore represented 60% of overall landings, followed by private rental mode at 36% and the for-hire sector at 4%. From 2015-2019, 60% of the total bluefish landings came from shore, 35% from private/rental boats, and 5% from for-hire boats.

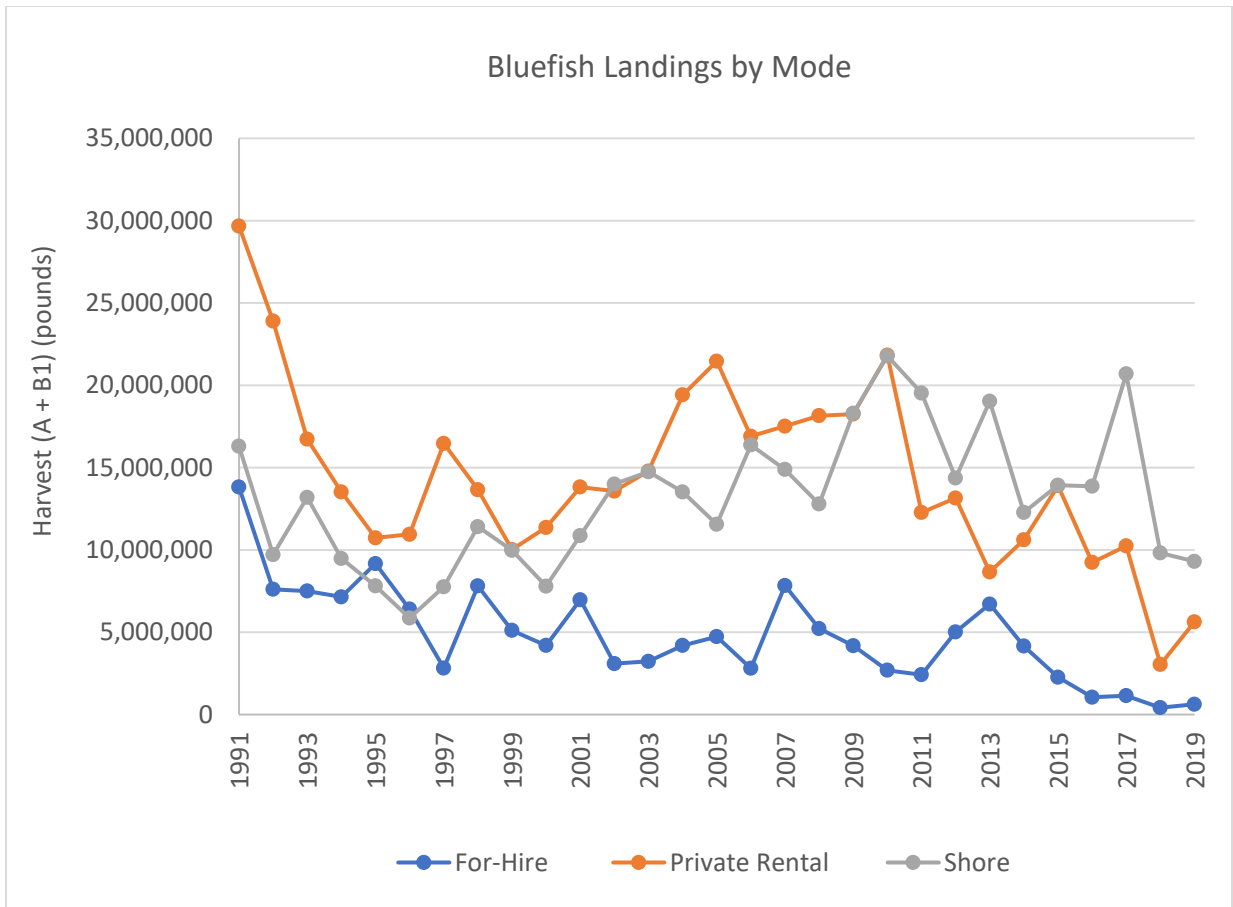


Figure 2. Bluefish recreational harvest (pounds) by mode on the Atlantic Coast, 1991-2019. Source: MRIP.

Typically, projections for the current year are used in conjunction with previous years landings to estimate next years expected recreational landings. Given the restrictions and disturbances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, bluefish landings projections through 2020 were not able to be developed as they were for 2019. Bluefish MRIP estimates for 2020 harvest broken down by wave were only available for Florida and North Carolina through wave 1 (Florida: 1,154,459 lbs, North Carolina: 7,140 lbs). However, estimates of overall effort for 2020 through wave 4 were available for *all species combined* and are summarized in Figures 3 and 4. Additionally, Table 4 further breaks down effort by mode for *all species combined* and shows that the percentage of fishing trips by private boats has increased from 2019-2020.

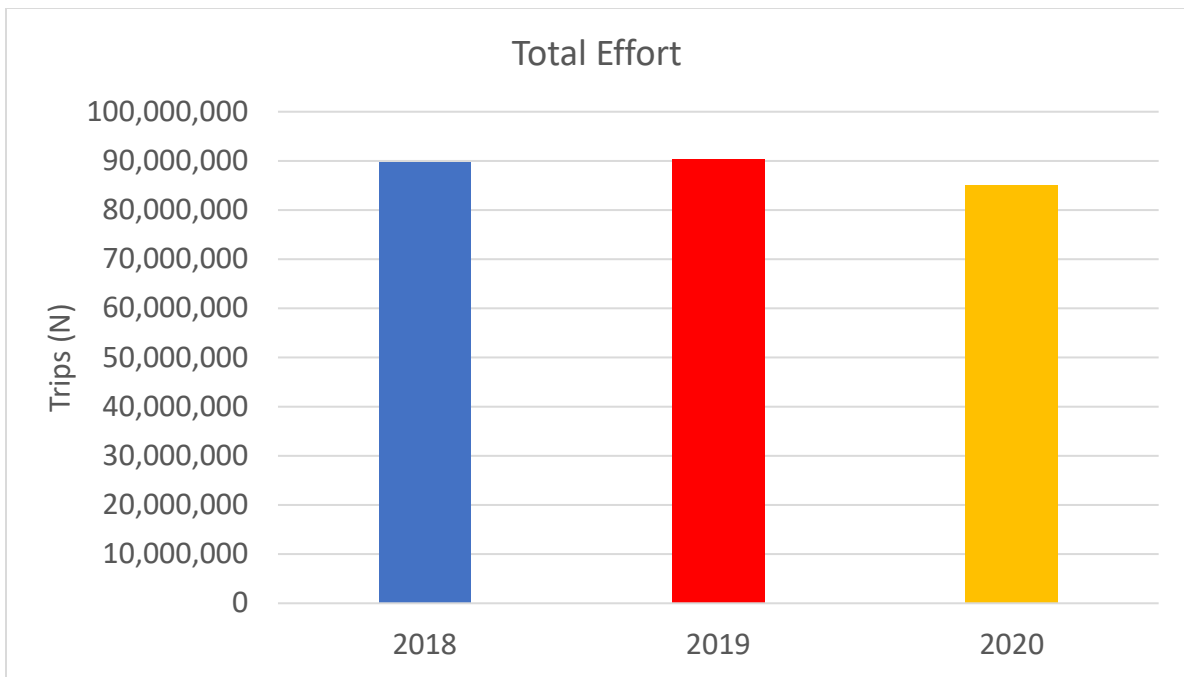


Figure 3. Coastwide fishing effort estimates combined for all species by year from 2018-2020.

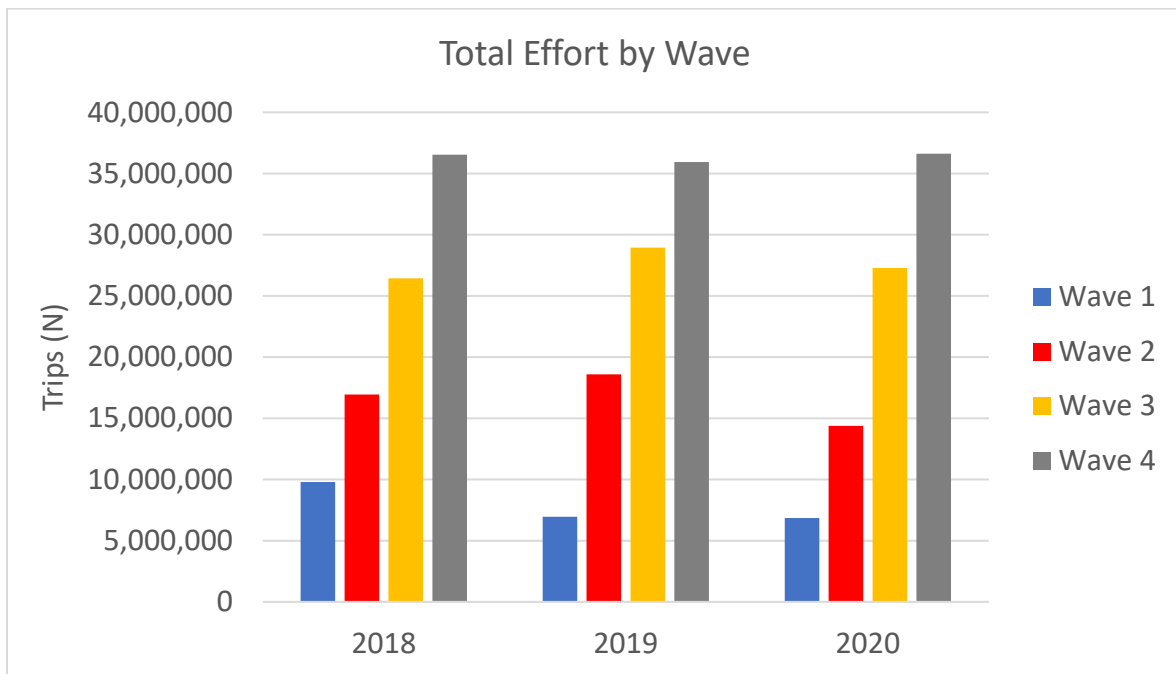


Figure 4. Coastwide fishing effort estimates combined for all species by year and wave from 2018-2020.

Table 4. Coastwide fishing effort estimates combined for all species summarized as percentages by mode and wave from 2018-2020.

Year	Mode	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
2018	Party/Charter	0.17%	0.59%	1.79%	1.90%
	Private	26.33%	29.45%	35.88%	38.28%
	Shore	73.50%	69.96%	62.33%	59.82%
2019	Party/Charter	0.41%	0.55%	1.68%	2.29%
	Private	34.20%	29.36%	33.78%	35.92%
	Shore	65.39%	70.08%	64.54%	61.79%
2020	Party/Charter	0.30%	0.23%	1.31%	1.64%
	Private	28.23%	38.78%	34.05%	40.71%
	Shore	71.47%	60.98%	64.64%	57.65%

Accountability Measures

In 2013, the Council modified the recreational accountability measures (AMs) for Mid-Atlantic species through the Omnibus Recreational AM Amendment. In the event of an Annual Catch Limit (ACL) overage, recreational AMs no longer necessarily require a direct pound-for-pound payback of the overage amount in a subsequent fishing year. Instead, AMs are tied to stock status. Though paybacks may be required in some circumstances, any potential payback amount is scaled relative to biomass, as described below.

The ACL is evaluated based on a single-year examination of total catch (landings and dead discards). Both landings and dead discards are evaluated in determining if the ACL has been exceeded. If the ACL is exceeded, the appropriate AM is determined based on the following criteria:

Recreational landings AM when the ACL is exceeded and no sector-to-sector transfer of allowable landings has occurred. If the fishery-level ACL is exceeded and landings from the recreational fishery are determined to be the sole cause of the overage, and no transfer between the commercial and recreational sector was made for the fishing year, as outlined in §648.162(b)(2), then the following procedure will be followed:

If biomass is below the threshold, the stock is under rebuilding, or biological reference points are unknown. If the most recent estimate of biomass is below the B_{MSY} threshold (i.e., B/B_{MSY} is less than 0.5), the stock is under a rebuilding plan, or the biological reference points (B or B_{MSY}) are unknown, and the ACL has been exceeded, then the exact amount, in pounds, by which the most recent year's recreational catch estimate exceeded the most recent year's ACL will be deducted from the following year's recreational ACT, or as soon as possible thereafter, once catch data are available, as a single-year adjustment.

If the ACL has been exceeded. If the ACL has been exceeded, then adjustments to the recreational management measures, taking into account the performance of the measures and conditions that precipitated the overage, will be made in the following fishing year, or as soon as possible thereafter, once catch data are available, as a single-year adjustment.

Monitoring Committee Responsibility

The MC must consider and recommend management measures to ensure that landings in 2021 will not exceed the 2021 RHL. Recreational possession limits, minimum fish size limits, and seasons can be modified to achieve this goal.

When considering management measures for future years, the MC operates under the assumption that fishery conditions remain fairly stable from year to year. In a typical year, the MC would project recreational harvest for 2020 and compare that to the 2021 harvest limit to determine how measures may need to be adjusted. However, preliminary 2020 bluefish estimates and harvest projections are not available this year due to gaps in recreational sampling related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recreational harvest in 2019 is also unlikely to be a good proxy for recent harvest, due to a substantial reduction in bag limit in mid-2020 to constrain harvest to a lower RHL. The currently implemented management measures were designed to achieve but not exceed an RHL of 9.48 million pounds, while the proposed 2021 RHL is 8.34 million pounds. Therefore, the MC could assume that *status quo* recreational management measures may result in a ~12% overage in 2021, assuming trends in effort and catch rates remain similar to those used to develop 2020 measures.

Staff Recommendation

The Council approved RHL of 8.34 M lbs is 12.03% lower than the 2020 RHL of 9.48 M lbs. Under normal circumstances, the reduced RHL would warrant increased management measures to constrain harvest, however, given the absence of MRIP angler intercept data in 2020 and timing of when state-specific bag limit went into effect in 2020 (Table 5), *staff recommends status quo management measures for 2021. These measures include a coastwide 3-fish bag limit for private anglers and 5-fish bag limit for for-hire anglers with no restrictions to minimum fish size or seasons.*

Table 5. Dates when Atlantic coast states implemented the 2020 bluefish management measures. CE – indicates conservation equivalency.

State	ME	NH	MA	RI	CT	NY	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	FL
Date Implemented in 2020	1/1	1/29	5/1	4/2	3/26	5/1	4/1	5/15	2/1	3/1	2/1	2/28	CE	TBD