



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | P. Weston Townsend, Vice Chairman
Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

Date: November 29, 2021
To: Council and Board
From: José Montañez, Council staff
Subject: 2022-2023 Bluefish Recreational Measures

On Monday, December 13, the Council and Board will approve 2022-2023 recreational management measures for bluefish. Materials listed below are provided for the Council and Board's consideration of this agenda item. However, item number 2 was reviewed at the August 2021 Council meeting.

- 1) **Staff memo on 2022-2023 bluefish recreational measures**
- 2) **2021 Advisory Panel Fishery Performance Report**



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MEMORANDUM

Date: October 1, 2021
To: Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director
From: Matthew Seeley, Staff
Subject: 2022-2023 Bluefish Recreational Management Measures

Introduction and Background

In July 2021, the Monitoring Committee (MC) reviewed recent fishery performance and acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) that are consistent with the Council and Board-approved 7-year constant fishing mortality rebuilding plan projections. This allowed the MC to make a recommendation to the Council and Board regarding 2022-2023 annual catch targets (ACTs), total allowable landings (TALs), commercial quotas, and recreational harvest limits (RHLs) (Table 1). *Now, the MC is tasked with making a recommendation for 2022-2023 recreational management measures.*

A summary of bluefish quotas, landings, and management measures are available in Table 2. From 2001-2019, the recreational bag limit was set at 15 fish. As a result of the 2019 operational assessment, the bluefish stock was designated as overfished with overfishing not occurring. For 2020, the recreational sector was projected to land 13.27 million pounds, which exceeded the RHL by 28.56%. Therefore, the Council and Board approved recreational management measures to constrain harvest to the reduced RHL, which included 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 have remained unchanged since 2019.

Table 1. MC recommended and Council approved bluefish specifications for 2022-2023.

Management Measure	2022		2023		Basis
	mil lb.	mt	mil lb.	mt	
Overfishing Limit (OFL)	40.56	18,399	45.17	20,490	Stock assessment projections
ABC	25.26	11,460	30.62	13,890	Derived by SSC; Follows the rebuilding plan through NEFSC projections
ACL	25.26	11,460	30.62	13,890	Defined in FMP as equal to ABC
Commercial ACL	3.54	1,604	4.29	1,945	ABC x 14%
Commercial Management Uncertainty	0	0	0	0	Derived by the Monitoring Committee
Commercial ACT	3.54	1,604	4.29	1,945	(ACL – Commercial Management Uncertainty) x 14%
Recreational ACL	21.73	9,856	26.34	11,945	ABC x 86%
Recreational Management Uncertainty	0	0	0	0	Derived by the Monitoring Committee
Recreational ACT	21.73	9,856	26.34	11,945	(ACL – Recreational Management Uncertainty) x 86%
Recreational AMs	3.65	1,656	0	0	2022 only: 2020 ABC overage
Commercial Discards	0	0	0	0	Value used in assessment
Recreational Discards	4.19	1,901	4.19	1,901	2020 GARFO-estimated (MRIP) discards
Commercial TAL	3.54	1,604	4.29	1,945	Commercial ACT - commercial discards
Recreational TAL	13.89	6,298	22.14	10,044	Recreational ACT - recreational discards - Rec AMs
Combined TAL	17.42	7,903	26.43	11,989	Commercial TAL + Recreational TAL
Transfer	0	0	0	0	No transfer while overfished or overfishing
Expected Recreational Landings	13.58	6,160	13.58	6,160	2020 Recreational Landings
Commercial Quota	3.54	1,604	4.29	1,945	Commercial TAL +/- transfer
RHL	13.89	6,298	22.14	10,044	Recreational TAL +/- transfer

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	2022	2023
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	25.26	30.62
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	12.25	17.42	26.43
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	3.54	4.29
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	2.16	TBD		
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	13.89	22.14
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	N/A	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	13.58	TBD		
Rec. Possession Limit (# fish)	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	3: Private 5: For-Hire	3: Private 5: For-Hire	TBD	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	15.74	TBD		
Overage/Underage	-7.79	-5.37	-10.18	-11.77	-3.28	-5.85	-2.5	-2.82	-5.03	-12.98	N/A*	3.49	TBD		
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	19.93	TBD		
Overage/Underage	-8.98	-6.45	-11.35	-12.78	-3.41	-6.47	-2.89	-3.36	-4.99	-14.85	N/A*	3.65	TBD		

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 (cflders) 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 was developed using old MRIP estimates and cannot be directly compared to the new recreational landing estimates.

Necessary MC Action

To make a recommendation on recreational management measures for 2022-2023, the MC needs to compare expected recreational landings (ERL) to the Council and Board-approved RHL for 2022 to see if a reduction or liberalization in measures is warranted.

In recent years, expected recreational landings (and discards) have been calculated from three-year averages using the most recent complete fishing years during the July MC meetings. In July 2021, the MC recommended waiting until the fall to provide a recommendation for ERL but indicated using the previous year's landings (2020 = 13.58 million pounds) as a proxy for ERL was appropriate (in the meantime) given the lack of a Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) estimate for 2020 catch, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the regulatory change in 2020. The recommendation to use the terminal year estimate for ERL (and discards) differs from previous year's recommendations (3-year average; 2018-2020 average landings = 14.14 million pounds) mainly due to the regulatory change that occurred in 2020. The MC did note that the data gaps early in the year may not be a major factor for New England and Mid-Atlantic states due to them not having robust spring fisheries.

The Council and Board-approved RHL for 2022 is 13.89 million pounds. This harvest limit exceeds the MC-recommended ERL estimate of 13.58 million pounds by ~310,000 pounds. Given the RHL is anticipated to be almost fully landed based solely on the ERL, it appears there is no need to adjust the recreational management measures that are currently in place. To supplement the use of 2020 landings as ERL, projections of 2021 harvest were developed through wave 3. The MC typically waits until wave 4 recreational data is available to make the most up-to-date projections, however, given the RHL is expected to be almost fully landed based on the estimate of ERL, staff prepared projections through wave 3 to make a timely recommendation for the MC using 2020 data and average data from 2018-2020 (Table 3 and Table 4, respectively).

Table 3, which projects 2021 harvest using data from 2020 wave 1-3 harvest as a percent of annual harvest, indicates 2021 landings will be around 15.25 million pounds. Table 4, which projects 2021 harvest using data from 2018-2020 wave 1-3 harvest as percent of annual harvest, indicates 2021 landings will be around 13.69 million pounds. Both sets of projections are available for comparison to the Council and Board-approved ERL value of 13.58 million pounds given the MC's recommendation to sometimes use the terminal year estimate (as done in the current specifications package) as well as the three-year average estimate.

Table 3. 2021 projected recreational harvest by state. Projections are calculated using 2021 wave 1-3 harvest and the proportion of annual harvest by wave in 2020.

State	<u>2020</u> wave 1-3 harvest as % of annual harvest	2021 wave 1-3 harvest (pounds)	<u>2020</u> Harvest (pounds)	2021 projected annual harvest (pounds)
Maine	100%	0	0	0
New Hampshire	0%	0	1,800	0
Massachusetts	4%	67,386	553,242	1,670,659
Rhode Island	9%	109,032	508,227	1,266,496
Connecticut	15%	32,037	594,546	217,286
New York	44%	1,677,219	1,478,719	3,842,640
New Jersey	89%	1,854,965	1,808,548	2,072,638
Delaware	72%	1,494	94,901	2,070
Maryland	12%	84,958	214,992	686,355
Virginia	24%	36,096	305,092	151,268
North Carolina	72%	399,685	2,124,225	556,135
South Carolina	63%	78,778	154,421	125,555
Georgia	66%	8,548	9,902	12,970
Florida	37%	1,712,357	5,732,604	4,642,959
Coastwide	N/A	6,062,555	13,581,219	15,247,030

Table 4. 2021 projected recreational harvest by state. Projections are calculated using 2021 wave 1-3 harvest and the proportion of annual harvest by wave in 2018-2020.

State	<u>2018-2020</u> wave 1-3 harvest as % of annual harvest	2021 wave 1-3 harvest (pounds)	Average Harvest <u>2018-2020</u> (pounds)	2021 projected annual harvest (pounds)
Maine	100%	0	0	0
New Hampshire	0%	0	600	0
Massachusetts	7%	67,386	627,977	1,016,507
Rhode Island	31%	109,032	550,084	353,819
Connecticut	14%	32,037	698,772	234,620
New York	38%	1,677,219	2,133,222	4,383,367
New Jersey	67%	1,854,965	1,825,288	2,784,731
Delaware	53%	1,494	275,091	2,829
Maryland	9%	84,958	287,545	919,441
Virginia	18%	36,096	383,695	201,757
North Carolina	55%	399,685	2,588,796	726,537
South Carolina	65%	78,778	353,420	121,701
Georgia	49%	8,548	34,024	17,608
Florida	58%	1,712,357	4,377,475	2,929,788
Coastwide	N/A	6,062,555	14,135,990	13,692,704

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends status quo recreational management measures for the 2022-2023 fishing years, which includes 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. This recommendation is supported based on the following:

- There is still a high degree of uncertainty associated with the bluefish discard estimates given the estimates provided by GARFO and the NEFSC differed by greater than 10 million pounds in 2019 and there was no estimate of discards by the NEFSC in 2020 (because the 2021 operational assessment only included data through 2019). See the MC summary in the August Council meeting briefing package.¹
- The recreational management measures were not implemented by all states until mid-late 2020, which creates some challenges with determining the cumulative effect of the more restrictive measures on harvest.
- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted MRIP sampling in 2020, which led to imputations being developed for part of the fishing year. Furthermore, the imputations used 2018 and 2019 data to estimate 2020 harvest, which were years where the 3 and 5-fish bag limits were not in place. Therefore, the 2020 data does not completely reflect a harvest estimate that takes into consideration the smaller bag limits.
- Bluefish is entering a 7-year rebuilding plan in 2022. Managers indicated that they would like to see how the fishery performs relative to the rebuilding plan targets prior to altering recreational management measures.
- Bluefish will undergo a research track assessment in 2022 that will thoroughly explore discards (both recreational and commercial) and other data and model issues.

¹ https://www.mafmc.org/s/Tab01_Bluefish-Specs_2021-08.pdf



Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

June 2021

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Bluefish Advisory Panels (AP) met via webinar on June 17, 2021 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the bluefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

MAFMC Advisory Panel members present: Victor Hartley III (NJ – For-Hire) Thomas Roller (NC– For-Hire), and Judith Weis (NY– Researcher).

ASMFC Advisory Panel members present: Paul Caruso (MA) and Rusty Hudson (FL – Comm.)

Others present: Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC Staff), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), Paul Rago (MAFMC SSC), Cynthia Jones (MAFMC SSC), Maureen Davidson (MAFMC), David Stormer (MAFMC), James Fletcher (UNFA), Mike Waine (ASA), and Matthew Seeley (MAFMC Staff).

Written comments submitted by: John LaFountain (NY – Fox Seafood), TJ Karbowski (CT – For-hire), Kevin Wark (NJ – Comm.), and Charlie Locke (NC – Comm.).

Trigger questions

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

Factors Influencing Catch

Recreational

Despite a decrease in Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) landings estimates from 2019 to 2020, AP members discussed an increase in bluefish abundance coastwide (despite some lower effort during the beginning and height of the COVID-19 pandemic). Advisors also continue to indicate that larger bluefish are often identified to be further offshore and not

available to anglers that typically target bluefish from shore or in state waters. Small fish (1-3 lbs) continue to be available early in the year while larger fish (5-10 lbs) were not present until later in the year and then more offshore quickly. AP members speculate that this may have to do with increasing water temperatures. Finally, AP members indicated that the 2021 fishing season seems to be following a similar distribution pattern with slightly more fish.

NJ – From Raritan Bay to Rockaway Inlet, we have had a phenomenal bluefish year with lots of bunker and other bait, ultimately leading to an abundance of bluefish. Often, anglers catch their 5-fish limit very early on in trips and need to shift effort away from bluefish. Typically, these anglers will transition to seabass or striper fishing.

NJ – We get a lot of people who enjoy catching and releasing bluefish. The more bunker we see, the more bluefish we see. We are also having a fantastic striper season due to the abundance of bait.

NC – In North Carolina, we do not catch as many big bluefish as up north. The big bluefish we catch are mainly 6-7 pounds and people either really want to harvest them or they do not at all. However, anglers do often keep the 1-2 pounders. Anecdotal evidence supports that many people are keeping the smaller fish as bait, in addition to personal consumption.

MA – Like in 2019, we had a slight uptick in bluefish abundance, however distribution patterns are very different than the last 30 years. The age 2-3 fish come in shore earlier and stay later, which may be consistent with local bait abundance. Similar to other states, the bigger fish often come later in the year. In 2020, we experienced more shore fishing due to COVID-19. Overall, I believe abundance is related to environmental conditions and do not think the bag limits are constraining harvest (maybe shore mode for snappers).

NC – Bluefish are a very common species in North Carolina, that even when numbers are down, you are still going to catch them. As a fulltime guide, it is hard to not notice that stock biomass has gone down. There are definitely less bluefish, especially when trolling for Spanish mackerel. We catch bluefish (around 1.5-3 pounds) in their core habitat, but there are fewer large schools and a lot less bigger fish. Now, many charter vessels from the Outer Banks are catching lots of ribbon fish because there are fewer bluefish and Spanish mackerel. They fish the same spots using the same gear, so there is definitely something going on. However, North Carolina is very different than other states because we still have a lot of room to grow. Carteret County continues to have increased population growth and fishing effort. In shore fisheries are often not in the best shape, so many people turn to bluefish, which are doing “okay”. Bait abundance seems fairly high yet seems to be correlated with salinity and precipitation. Often, bluefish are landed specifically for king mackerel and shark bait.

NC (public) – There are now a lot more fishermen. Only 641,000 saltwater licenses sold. Therefore, we must use barbless hooks and encourage anglers to keep what they catch because dead discards are very impactful - both commercial and recreational.

NJ – For the for-hire fleet, the Golden eagle, Queen Mary, Miss Belmar Princess, and Lady Flamingo all share the issue of catching bluefish limits by mid-morning. Would like to see a 7-

fish bag limit since they are putting pressure on other fisheries.

NY – In northern NJ (Hackensack), which is fairly contaminated, we studied snapper abundance. Snappers were not feeding well despite the abundance of food (killifish and menhaden). This was the result of a behavioral problem due to interactions with contaminants (mercury and PCBs). Therefore, snappers did not have much food in their stomachs and thus, were not growing well. According to other studies, most snappers often have 60-70% of their gut full of food. These snappers were often much smaller and in turn, showed that the contaminants were affecting feeding behaviors. These fish would then be outcompeted by fish that spent their early life history in a more suitable environments.

FL – recreational landings are typically around 1M+, so the larger numbers may be due to the MRIP recalibration.

Commercial

NC (public) – Commercial landings are down because inlets are sometimes not passable. There is often less than 4 feet of depth for vessels to pass in Hatteras and Oregon inlet. Commercial vessels that traditionally fish with gill nets cannot get back into the inlets with a full catch because the weight prohibits this movement through the inlets, which has nothing to do with bluefish abundance. The Army Corp of Engineers and state do not maintain the channels as well as they should.

FL – Hurricane Dorian at the end of Aug 2019 led to poor fall and winter weather. Now, the spring had significant wind that kept people in, which extended the damage. Overall, there were few gill netters targeting bluefish. In Florida, we do not harvest as many fish when they are further offshore.

Market/Economic Conditions

NC (public) – Right now the price stays strong in the NY market, only below a certain amount. Over a certain amount the price drops significantly. Boston market has been pushed out of business due to price war with NY market. Bluefish ranging 2-4 pounds often bring in ~\$1.40/lb.

FL – Bluefish price has been fairly good in recent years, especially in the summer. When the weather is good, commercial fishermen do not have too much trouble getting a higher price for Spanish mackerel and bluefish. Prices varied from \$1.35 in September 2020 to \$2.01 in March 2021.

NC – For the for-hire fleet, COVID-19 caused business to fall off early in 2020. From June to the end of the year, I had more business than ever before. Most of Carteret County experienced this large uptick, specifically for smaller private companies, but we did not have many out of state tourists. The main difficulties we encountered were with the supply chains (e.g., tackle).

Management Issues

NJ – The for-hire fleet is not happy with the 5 fish bag limit and would like to see a 7-fish limit.

Public – Is there any evidence that the SSC reviews that could help understand the cyclical fluctuations often present in the bluefish fishery? Are there environmental factors that are reviewed by the SSC to better understand this cyclical nature?

Research Priorities

The AP reviewed all the research recommendations from the 2019 Operational Assessment and Council's Comprehensive 5-year Research Priorities (short-term). AP members agreed that the most important research focus moving forward is to more accurately characterize recreational discard lengths and weights.

NC – How can management validate release information that we collect? How do we know this data will be used? When you use software that is not required, it is hard to get individuals to actually report.

NJ – Any newly collected data reported by anglers may be more reliable than MRIP.

NC (public) – Can we look back at newspapers to reference the historical cycles? Also, can we set management measure that require the use of barbless hooks, which would support the catch-and-release fishery.

NC (public) – Researchers need to think about the NAO and shifts in environmental conditions. We need to relate overfishing/overfished statuses to the environmental conditions using lunar cycles and not specifically years.

Written Comments

-----Original Message-----

From: John LaFountain [<mailto:foxseafood@gmail.com>]

Sent: Thursday, June 17, 2021 8:58 AM

To: Dustin C. Leaning <DLeaning@asmfc.org>

Subject: [External] Bluefish meeting

Hi Dustin, I am not gonna be able to make it back for the meeting this morning. I'm actually waiting at the dock now for a boat to come in with bluefish. I'm short staffed like every other business out there right now. Very good sign of fish this year in New York and Rhode Island. Nice large bluefish. I've even seen quite a few guys catching them off the rocks in point Judith which I haven't seen in a while. I would like the fishery to remain as steady and consistent as possible. Good for everyone in the commercial fishery. My input would be to try to avoid any big decreases even if it means giving up some increases from year to year.

Regards,

I cannot attend. I will be on the water all day.

* Current observations for 2021. I have never seen so many bluefish this early in the season. Lots of forage around. Water temp has been fluctuating 58 - 61. If we didn't have those few years of lean

numbers you would think there were more bluefish around than ever. Various sizes represented.

Thank you,
Capt. TJ Karbowski
Rock & Roll Charters
Clinton, CT
203.314.3765
<https://rockandrollcharters.com/>

Hello all , I have a ROSA advisory committee call tomorrow so I will not be able to attend Bluefish AP but as for commercial this season so far amounted to some blue near shore in commercial quantities for just a few days in the spring mixed size they moved through quickly , as per the last several years Tilefish long liners are seeing Bluefish in 80 to 100 fathoms in the spring and they will not come into shore.

Regards Kevin Wark
F/V Dana Christine II

The Bluefish fishery in North Carolina is complicated right now with the reduced Commercial Quota we have. We still encounter plenty of bluefish in the inshore gill net fishery but have had to adapt how we fish due to a smaller trip limits. The Big blue fishery has been almost non existent due to the warmer water through the winter months offshore, it seems the Bigger fish are staying more North and offshore than previous years. Over all over the years i have seen this same cycle so at the moment the challenge is the reduced trip limit,so i think a new stock assessment is a priority for this species. As far as the reallocation to the Recreational sector,the commercial sector is tired of the shifting of our quota to the "Unaccountable Army" this new MRIP data that is affecting every aspect of the commercial fisheries up and down the coast is highly unfair to an industry that has to record every pound of harvest as well as all discards. The time has come to bring the recreational sector to the same standards as us as far as up to date landings accountability and discard interactions. until this happens any shift of quota to there side is HIGHLY unfair to us.

Thank You,
Charlie Locke (Bluefish AP member)
F/V Salvation
Wanchese, North Carolina