

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
BLACK DRUM
AUGUST 2026**

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

FMP Documentation:	ASMFC FMP	June 2013
	Addendum I	May 2018

Comprehensive Review: 2028

In June 2013, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Black Drum and required all states to maintain their current regulations and implement a maximum possession limit and minimum size limit (of no less than 12 in) by January 1, 2014 (ASMFC 2013). States were also required to further increase the minimum size limit (to no less than 14 in) by January 1, 2016. In response to the ASMFC requirement, the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) implemented a 14- to 25-in total length (TL) slot size limit (with one fish over 25 in), 10-fish recreational bag limit, and a 500-lb commercial trip limit effective January 1, 2014 (Proclamation FF-73-2013). The FMP also includes an adaptive management framework to respond to future concerns or changes in the fishery or population. Concerns about the increase in harvest by both recreational and commercial were alleviated by the findings of the 2015 stock assessment which determined the stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring (ASMFC 2015). In May 2018, ASMFC approved Addendum I to the Black Drum FMP to allow Maryland to reopen its Black Drum commercial fishery in Chesapeake Bay with a daily vessel limit of up to 10 fish and a 28-in minimum size (ASMFC 2018). The Black Drum Technical Committee (TC) noted reopening the fishery would not likely lead to overfishing due to the relatively small size of the fishery and recommended that biological monitoring be conducted in the commercial fishery. In 2023, a benchmark stock assessment concluded the stock was not overfished and not experiencing overfishing (ASMFC 2023). The ASMFC Interstate FMP Policy Board determined no immediate management action was needed. However, due to the relatively high level of uncertainty in qualitative estimates of stock status, stock indicators should be closely monitored between assessments.

To ensure compliance with interstate requirements, North Carolina also manages this species under the North Carolina Fishery Management Plan for Interjurisdictional Fisheries (IJ FMP). The goal of the IJ FMP is to adopt fishery management plans, consistent with N.C. law, approved by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, or the ASMFC by reference and implement corresponding fishery regulations in North Carolina to provide compliance or compatibility with approved fishery management plans and amendments, now and in the future. The goal of these plans, established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (federal council plans) and the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (ASMFC plans) are like the goals of the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 to “ensure long-term viability” of these fisheries (NCDMF 2022).

Management Unit

The ASMFC FMP includes all states from Florida to New Jersey. The management unit is defined as the Black Drum (*Pogonias cromis*) resource throughout the range of the species within U.S. waters of the northwest Atlantic Ocean from the estuaries eastward to the offshore boundaries of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (ASMFC 2015).

Goal and Objectives

The goal of the Black Drum FMP is to provide an efficient management structure to implement coastwide management measures (ASMFC 2013). The objectives of the FMP include:

- Provide a flexible management system to address future changes in resource abundance, scientific information, and fishing patterns among user groups or area.
- Promote cooperative collection of biological, economic, and sociological data required to effectively monitor and assess the status of the black drum resource and evaluate the management efforts.
- Manage the black drum fishery to protect both young individuals and established breeding stock.
- Develop research priorities that will further refine the black drum management program to maximize the biological, social, and economic benefits derived from the black drum population.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

Black Drum is the largest member of the drum family (Sciaenidae), reaching sizes of over 46 in and 120 lb (Jones and Wells 1998). The range of black drum extends along the nearshore western Atlantic coast from the Gulf of Maine to Florida, into the Gulf of Mexico, and as far south as Argentina (Bigelow and Schroeder 1953; Simmons and Breuer 1962). Along the Atlantic coast, Black Drum are thought to migrate northward and inshore each spring and southward and offshore by late fall (Jones and Wells 1998). Juvenile Black Drum can be found throughout the estuarine waters of North Carolina, while adults tend to congregate around structures including bridge and dock pilings. They are primarily bottom feeders; juvenile diets consist mainly of amphipods, polychaetes, mollusks, crustaceans, and small fish, while the adult diet consists primarily of worms, bivalves, mollusks, crustaceans, and fish (Peters and McMichael 1990; Murphy and Muller 1995; Rubio et al. 2018). Spawning is thought to occur in the offshore waters of the mid-Atlantic during the winter and early spring (Richards 1973; Joseph et al. 1964; Wells and Jones 2002; Chesapeake Bay Program 2004). The number of juvenile fish entering the population annually (recruitment) is thought to be highly variable and dependent on natural environmental conditions (Murphey and Muller 1995). Females are sexually mature between the ages of 4 and 6 (25 to 28 in) and spawn yearly through adulthood (Murphy and Taylor 1989). An average-sized female may spawn 32 million eggs each year (Fitzhugh et al. 1993). At ages 4 and 5 (22 to 25 in) males are mature (Murphy and Taylor 1989). The species is long-lived, reaching up to 67 years of age (Jones and Wells 1998; Campana and Jones 1998; ASMFC 2023). Black Drum are approximately 11 to 14 in at age-1, 15 to 17 in at age-2, and 19 to 21 in at age-3 (Murphy and Taylor 1989; Murphy and Muller 1995; Jones and Wells 1998).

Stock Status

The 2023 ASMFC Black Drum Stock Assessment determined the stock is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing (ASMFC 2023).

Stock Assessment

Variable catch history in state surveys and fisheries, coupled with complex migratory patterns, made the use of traditional statistical catch-at-age models difficult. In 2023, a benchmark stock assessment was completed and approved for use for management by the ASMFC (ASMFC 2023). The assessment model, JABBA-Select, was developed as an extension to the Just Another Bayesian Biomass Assessment (JABBA) surplus production modeling framework as a means of incorporating life history and fishery selectivity information into an age-structured production type model (Winker et al. 2020). The JABBA-Select model allowed the inclusion of the recalibrated Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data as an index of abundance and catch history (Dettloff and Matter 2019). Annual spawning abundance (SB), annual exploitation (H), and biological reference points are estimated internally in the model, using an index of

abundance (MRIP), total fishery removals, life history information, and selectivity information to describe Black Drum’s vulnerability to fisheries. The stock is considered overfished when SB falls below the SB_{MSY} threshold ($SB_y / SB_{MSY} < 1$). Overfishing is occurring when H exceeds the H_{MSY} threshold ($H_y / H_{MSY} > 1$). In 2020, the median relative spawning biomass value was 2.92 and the median relative exploitation value was 0.29, indicating the stock was not overfished and not experiencing overfishing in the terminal year (ASMFC 2023; Figure 1). Results indicated greater certainty that the stock is not overfished; however, there was less certainty regarding the exploitation status. While overall stock indicators that monitor year class strength, sub-adult abundance, exploitable abundance, range expansion, and regional catch do not appear negative at this time, they will be closely monitored between assessments. The next benchmark stock assessment is scheduled to occur in 2028.

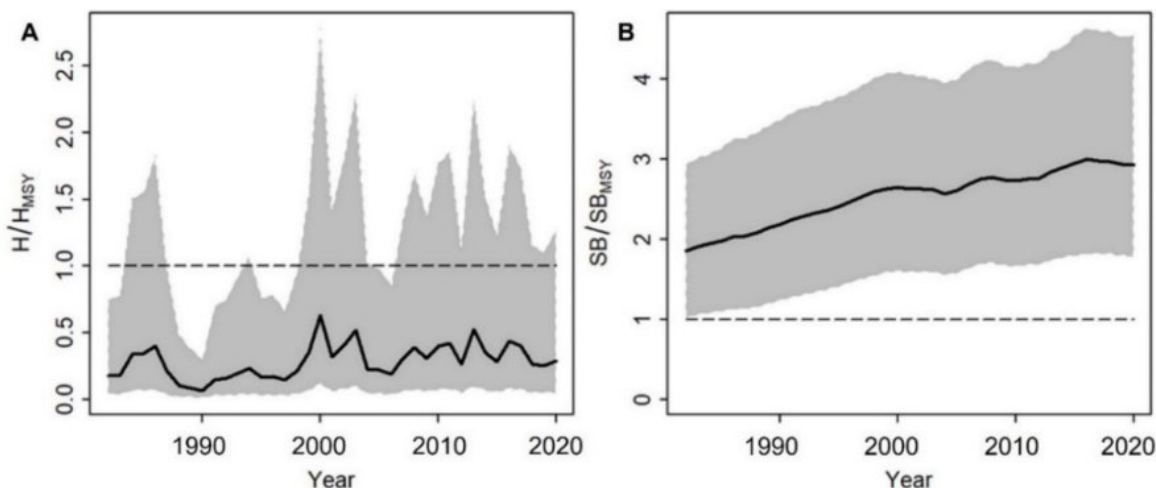


Figure 1. Black Drum exploitation (A) and spawning biomass (B) relative to threshold reference points estimated in JABBA-Select. The solid line is the median and the shaded region is the 95% credible interval. The dashed line indicates the estimate at its respective threshold level. (Source: ASMFC 2023 Black Drum Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report)

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

All harvest is limited to Black Drum between a 14 in TL minimum size and 25 in TL maximum size for both the recreational and commercial fisheries, except that one Black Drum over 25-in TL may be retained. The recreational bag limit is 10 fish per day. A daily commercial possession limit of no more than 500 lb per trip is allowed for a commercial fishing operation, regardless of the number of persons, license holders, or vessels involved in the operation ([Proclamation FF-73-2013](#)).

Commercial Fishery

Since 1994, the North Carolina Trip Ticket Program has collected data on the commercial harvest of Black Drum. Black Drum is primarily caught as bycatch in several North Carolina commercial fisheries; however, the majority are landed in the gill net (76%) and pound net (22%) fisheries (Figure 2). The annual commercial harvest of Black Drum has been highly variable (Table 1; Figure 3A). On average 128,526 lb of Black Drum were landed annually from 1994 to 2025. Commercial landings ranged from a low of 27,750 lb in 1998 to a high of 497,479 lb in 2002. Commercial landings decreased 30% from 2024 to 2025. In 2025, 169,072 lb of Black Drum were landed in the commercial fishery.

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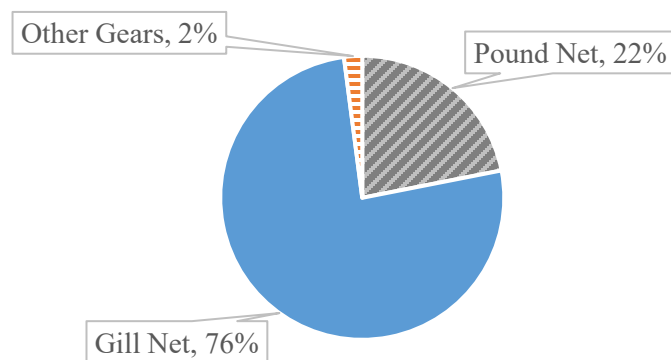


Figure 2. Black Drum commercial harvest in 2025 by gear type reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program. “Other Gears” includes hook and line, gig, long line, haul seines, crab pots, fyke nets, and trawls.

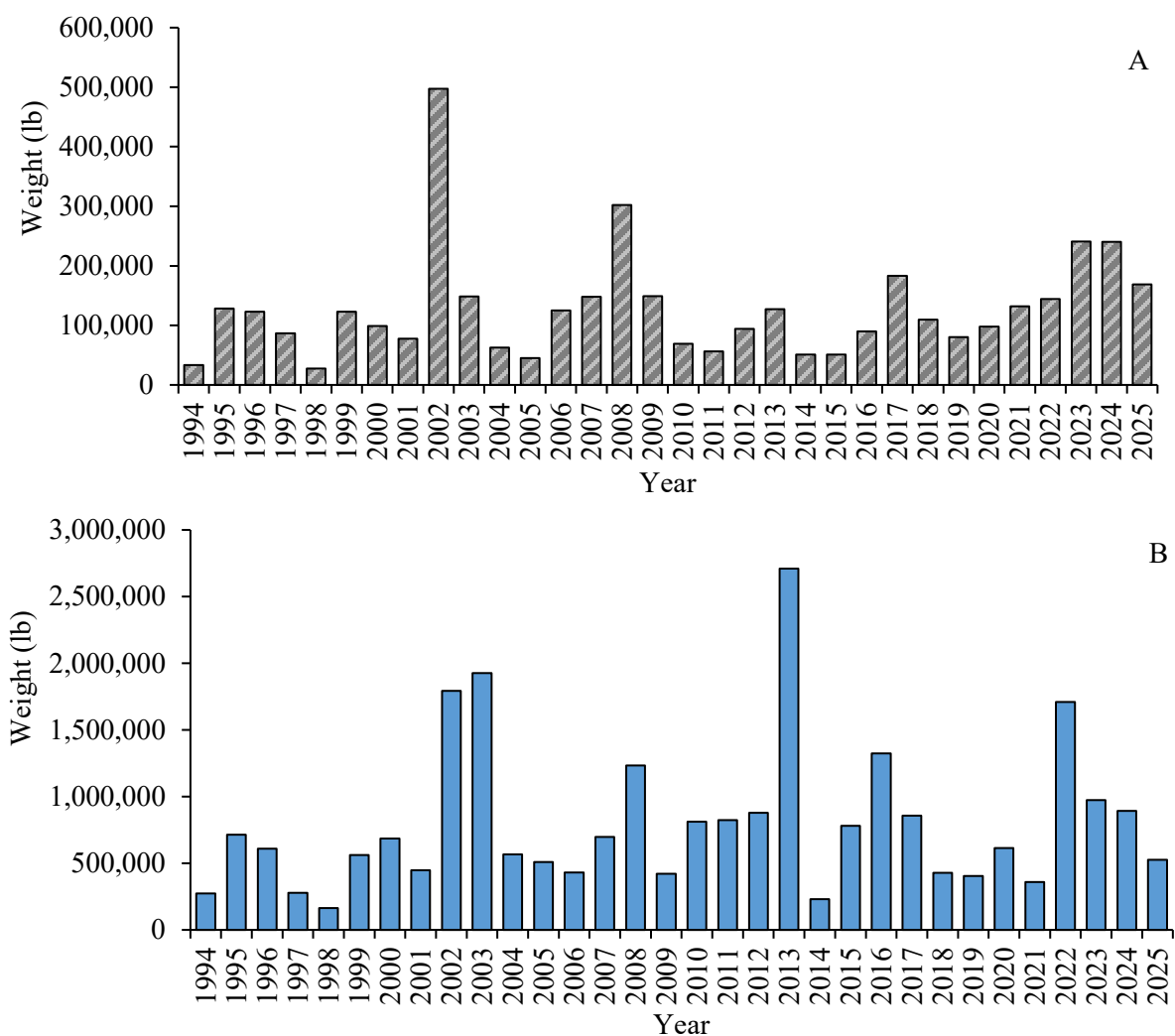


Figure 3. Annual commercial (A) and recreational (B) landings for Black Drum in North Carolina, 1994–2025. Commercial landings are reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program and recreational landings through the Marine Recreational Information Program.

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

Table 1. Recreational harvest and releases and commercial harvest of Black Drum from North Carolina, 1994–2025. Commercial landings are reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program and recreational landings through the Marine Recreational Information Program.

Year	Recreational			Commercial	Total Weight Landed (lb)
	Number Landed	Number Released	Weight Landed (lb)	Weight Landed (lb)	
1994	132,517	9,122	272,820	33,536	306,356
1995	931,269	227,608	713,652	128,221	841,873
1996	468,766	176,061	608,460	122,837	731,297
1997	106,854	62,498	277,316	86,610	363,926
1998	105,349	95,834	164,280	27,750	192,030
1999	374,245	267,723	561,678	122,772	684,450
2000	293,983	112,470	685,687	98,784	784,471
2001	400,983	325,234	446,202	77,892	524,094
2002	846,855	215,810	1,791,703	497,479	2,289,182
2003	1,265,995	481,742	1,926,671	148,785	2,075,456
2004	296,531	255,753	566,484	62,445	628,929
2005	465,076	376,363	509,328	44,989	554,317
2006	276,257	265,369	431,212	125,214	556,426
2007	876,178	832,132	697,822	148,231	846,053
2008	925,963	548,931	1,232,589	301,998	1,534,587
2009	449,901	411,358	421,788	148,994	570,782
2010	650,010	427,577	812,699	69,194	881,893
2011	1,259,216	711,755	823,423	56,083	879,506
2012	556,482	397,155	879,401	94,352	973,753
2013	1,511,995	497,334	2,709,269	127,170	2,836,439
2014	109,307	1,964,749	230,834	51,217	282,051
2015	276,126	1,791,758	780,876	51,097	831,973
2016	459,078	2,530,596	1,322,547	90,055	1,412,602
2017	355,544	2,336,352	856,081	182,989	1,039,070
2018	134,624	1,450,855	428,273	109,781	538,054
2019	156,401	756,749	404,452	80,049	484,501
2020	213,320	704,357	612,932	98,143	711,075
2021	121,454	681,121	359,481	131,825	491,306
2022	264,634	647,304	1,710,528	144,417	1,854,945
2023	348,374	591,980	973,869	240,799	1,214,668
2024	187,457	558,226	893,292	240,065	1,133,357
2025	146,295	478,880	525,366	169,072	694,438
Mean	467,720	662,211	800,969	128,526	929,496

Recreational Fishery

Recreational estimates across all years have been updated and are now based on the MRIP new Fishing Effort Survey-based calibrated estimates. For more information on MRIP see <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/recreational-fishing-data>.

The recreational landings have been highly variable, ranging from a low of 164,280 lb in 1998 to a high of 2,709,269 lb in 2013 (Table 1; Figure 3B). In 2025, 525,366 lb of Black Drum were harvested, below the time-series average of 800,969 lb. The harvest (pounds of fish) decreased 41%; and the harvest (number of fish) decreased 22% from 2024 to 2025. Slightly smaller fish were landed in 2025 than in 2024. The mean weight of fish harvested in 2024 was 4.8 lb, and the maximum weight was 21 lb; whereas, in 2025 the mean

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

weight was 3.6 lb, and the maximum weight was 12 lb. Recreational releases (number of fish) decreased 14% from 2024 to 2025.

The division offers award citations for exceptional catches of Black Drum. Historically, citations for Black Drum were only for landed fish but a release category was added along with a minimum size requirement in 2024. Citations are awarded for Black Drum greater than 30 lb or 40 in TL. In 2025, 121 citations were awarded, 59 of which were released fish (Figure 4).

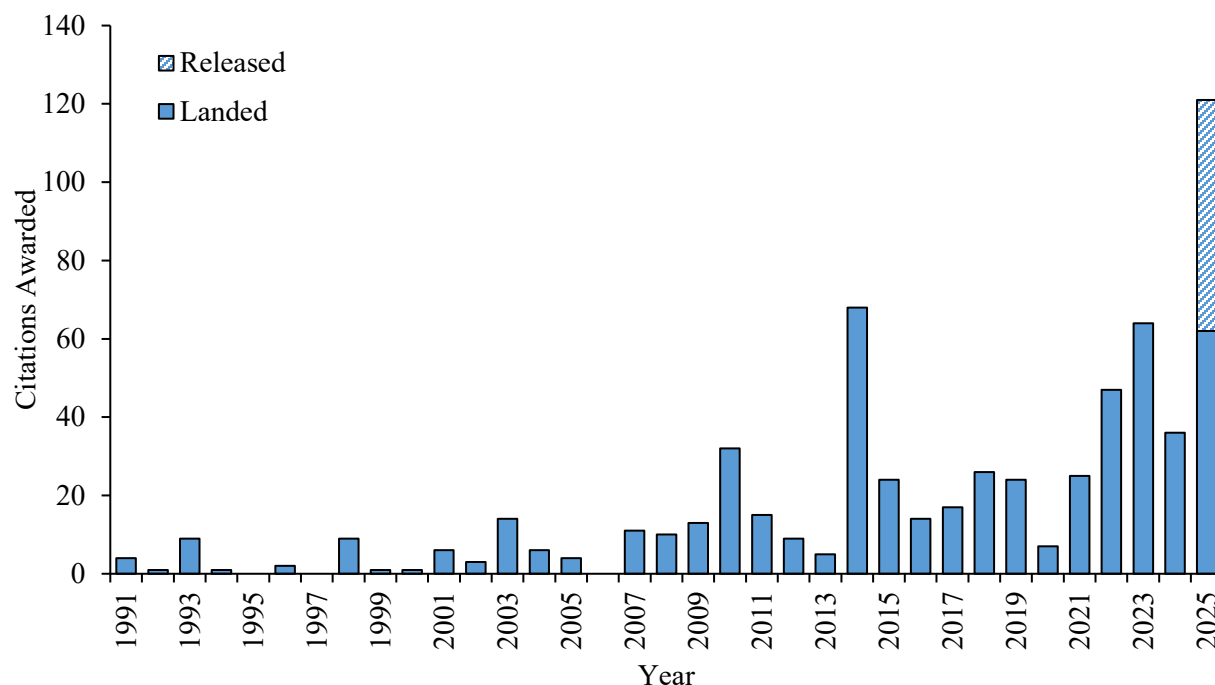


Figure 4. North Carolina Saltwater Fishing Tournament citations awarded for Black Drum, 1991–2025. Citations are awarded for Black Drum greater than 30 lb or 40-in TL. Black Drum release citations began in 2024.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Commercial fishing activity is monitored through fishery dependent sampling conducted under Title III of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act ongoing since 1982. Biological samples (lengths, aggregate weights) are obtained from several DMF commercial fishery-dependent sampling programs. Black Drum lengths and aging structures are collected at local fish houses. After sampling a portion of the catch, the total weight of the catch by species and market grade are obtained for each trip, either by using the trip ticket weights or some other reliable estimate.

Since the implementation of the 14- to 25-in slot limit in 2014, the mean TL of commercially harvested Black Drum has increased, ranging from 16 to 19 in (Table 2). In 2025, the minimum TL was 14 in, and the maximum TL was 36 in (Table 2; Figure 5).

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

Table 2. Mean, minimum, maximum length (TL, in), and total number of Black Drum measured from commercial fish house and Marine Recreational Information Program samples, 1994–2025.

Year	Commercial				Recreational			
	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1994	14	9	17	43	15	9	32	121
1995	11	8	43	209	11	7	30	390
1996	14	8	26	223	12	7	25	339
1997	16	8	23	102	15	9	33	144
1998	17	6	25	76	12	7	26	167
1999	14	8	48	673	13	8	31	248
2000	16	8	30	878	15	8	24	178
2001	15	8	36	432	11	8	25	173
2002	15	8	47	2,151	14	8	30	219
2003	16	8	49	609	11	7	52	198
2004	16	8	48	276	14	8	27	127
2005	15	5	44	314	11	7	34	89
2006	14	7	48	1,510	13	9	33	104
2007	14	7	50	2,086	11	7	20	191
2008	14	7	50	2,863	12	7	48	363
2009	16	7	48	1,072	11	8	25	191
2010	17	8	49	619	11	7	29	258
2011	12	7	33	1,467	10	7	24	567
2012	15	6	37	1,096	13	7	26	237
2013	16	5	36	806	13	7	26	154
2014	17	10	47	369	15	7	24	33
2015	19	10	44	299	17	11	25	75
2016	17	10	47	777	17	10	28	116
2017	18	10	30	494	16	9	27	162
2018	19	14	46	397	16	8	26	128
2019	18	12	43	421	16	10	44	106
2020	18	10	31	437	16	10	44	215
2021	17	8	28	579	16	9	46	155
2022	17	13	29	503	19	13	37	122
2023	16	9	45	657	17	9	36	133
2024	17	13	43	521	19	13	33	127
2025	19	14	36	229	18	14	28	100

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

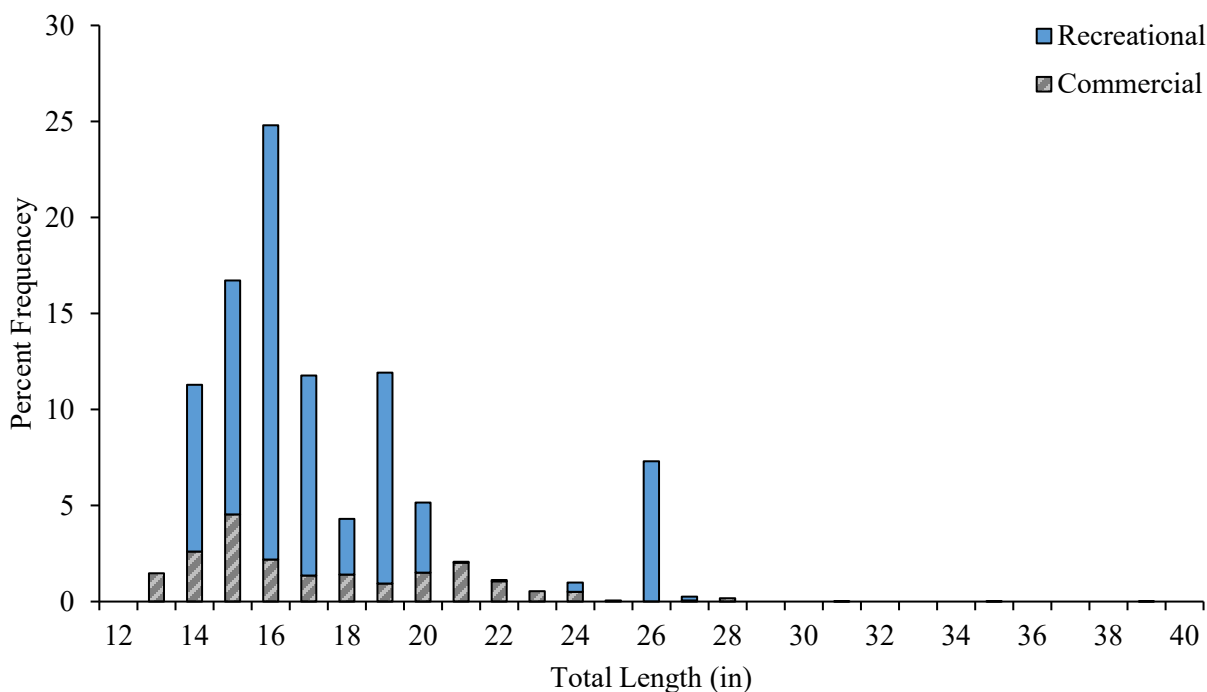


Figure 5. Commercial and recreational expanded length frequency of Black Drum harvested in 2025 reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program and the Marine Recreational Information Program.

The mean TL of recreational harvested Black Drum ranged from 15 to 19 in from 2014 to 2025 (Table 2). In 2025, the minimum TL was 14 in, and the maximum TL was 28 in (Table 2; Figure 5). Undersized Black Drum continued to be harvested in both commercial and recreational fisheries since the implementation of the 14-in TL minimum size limit established in 2014 (Figures 6 and 7). Likely due to fishermen confusing Black Drum with Sheepshead. In 2025, the minimum size limit of sheepshead was smaller than the minimum size limit for Black Drum at 10-in fork length. To better align Sheepshead regulations with Black Drum, the Sheepshead minimum size was increased to 14-in TL effective March 1, 2026 ([Proclamation FF-16-2026](#)).

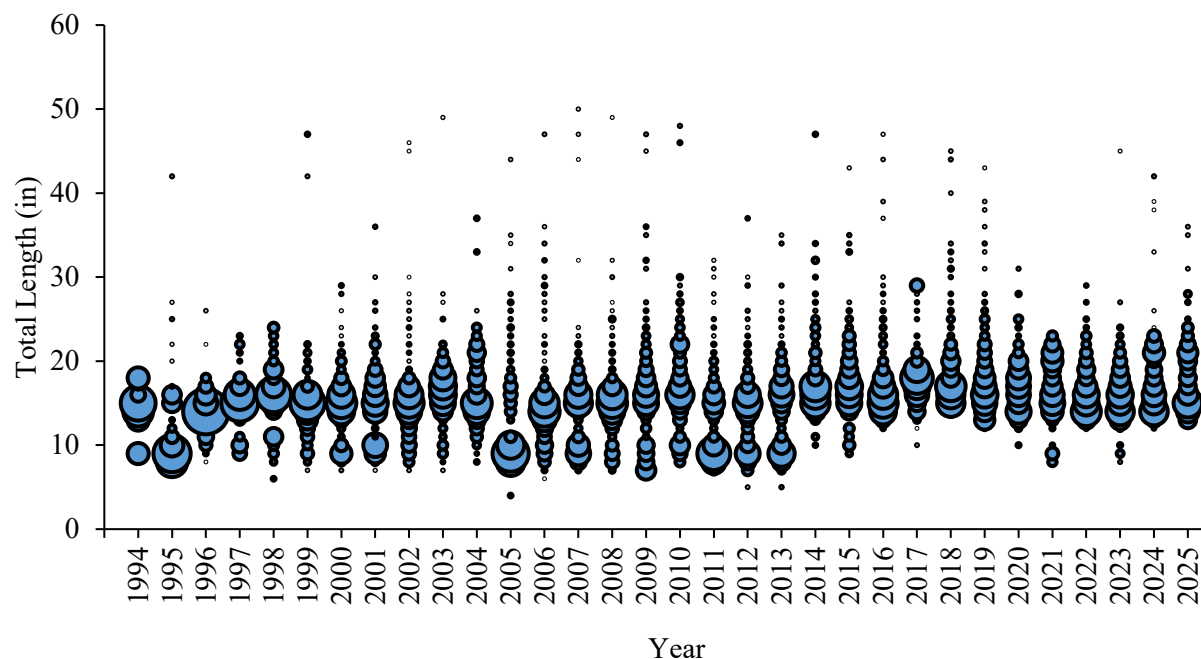


Figure 6. Commercial length frequency of Black Drum harvested in North Carolina reported from commercial fish house sampling, 1994–2025. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

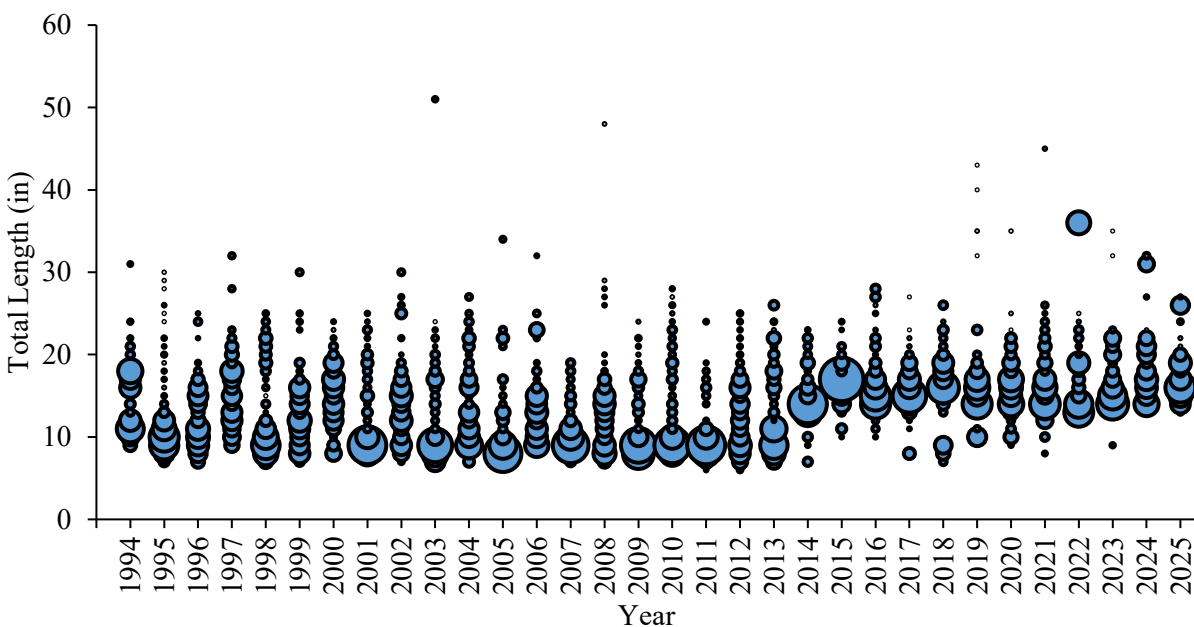


Figure 7. Recreational length frequency of Black Drum harvested in North Carolina reported from the Marine Recreational Information Program, 1994–2025. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

A fishery-independent gill net survey (Program 915) was initiated by the DMF in May 2001. The survey utilizes a stratified random sampling scheme designed to characterize the size and age distribution for key

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

estuarine species in Pamlico Sound and the Neuse, Pamlico, and Pungo rivers. By continuing a long-term database of age composition and developing a relative index of abundance for Black Drum this survey helps managers assess the Black Drum stocks without relying solely on commercial and recreational fishery dependent data. Additionally, data collected is used to improve bycatch estimates, evaluate the success of management measures, and look at habitat usage. Sampling in this program was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and protected species interactions but resumed July 2021. The annual Black Drum relative index of abundance from the independent gill net survey has ranged from a high of 1.24 in 2016 to a low of 0.33 in 2013 (Figure 8). Proportional Standard Error (PSE) has ranged from 10 to 34. In 2025, the relative index of abundance was 0.45, below the time-series average (0.65 Black Drum per set). Survey data from the Pamlico Sound and Neuse, Pamlico, and Pungo river systems are one of two sub-adult indices (age 0-3) used in the 2023 ASMFC benchmark stock assessment for Black Drum as annual index of relative abundance for sub-adult Black Drum. Data from this survey is also used as a stock indicator to monitor the stock between assessments.

Black Drum age structures are collected from various fishery independent (scientific surveys) and dependent (fisheries) sources throughout the year. In 2025, 363 Black Drum were aged and ages ranged from 0 to 34 years (Table 3). The oldest Black Drum harvested in North Carolina was age-60. Beyond age 3, there is significant overlap in the length at age for Black Drum (Figure 9).

Table 3. Summary of Black Drum age samples collected from both DMF fishery-dependent (commercial and recreational fisheries) and independent (surveys) sources, 2011–2025. Samples collected from partial carcasses were not included.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
2011	0	0	60	235
2012	1	0	3	324
2013	2	0	4	190
2014	1	0	31	407
2015	0	0	2	397
2016	1	0	13	667
2017	1	0	42	742
2018	1	0	46	429
2019	1	0	32	444
2020	1	1	4	104
2021	1	0	5	415
2022	1	0	4	367
2023	1	0	31	485
2024	2	0	34	471
2025	2	0	22	363

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

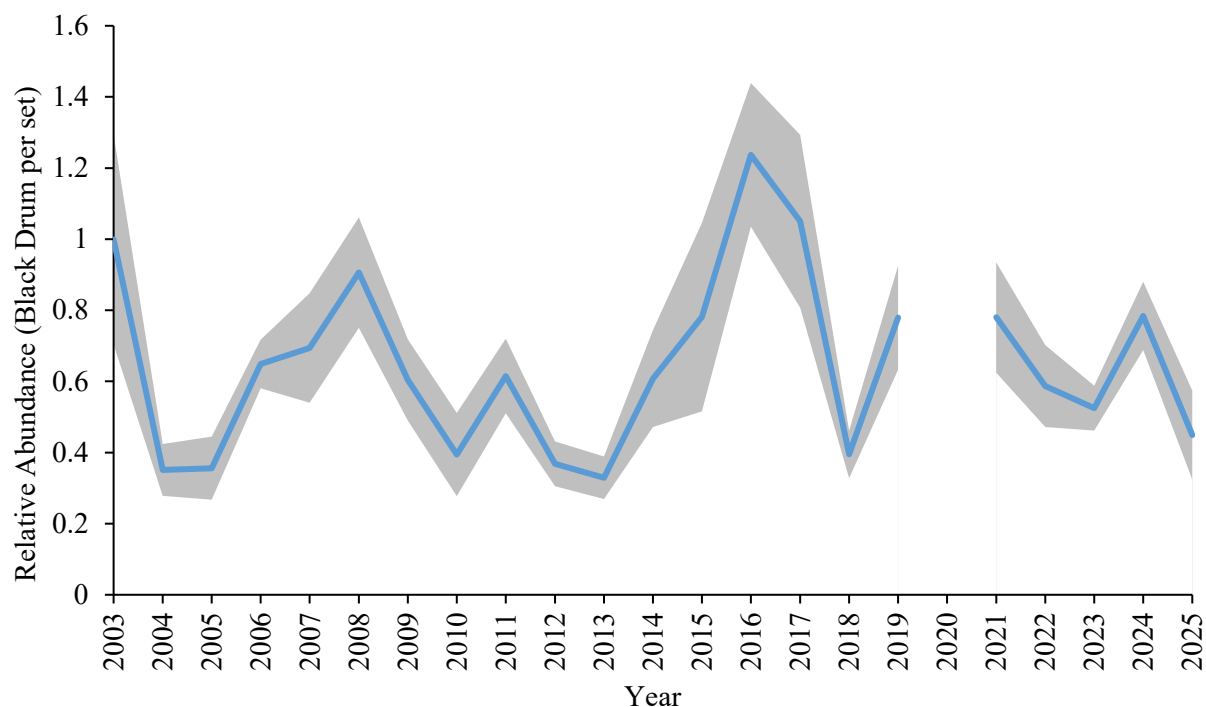


Figure 8. Annual Black Drum index of relative abundance from the DMF Independent Gill Net Survey (Program 915) in the Pamlico Sound and Neuse, Pamlico, and Pungo river systems, 2003–2025. Shaded area represents ± 1 SE. Sampling in this program was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and protected species interactions but resumed July 2021.

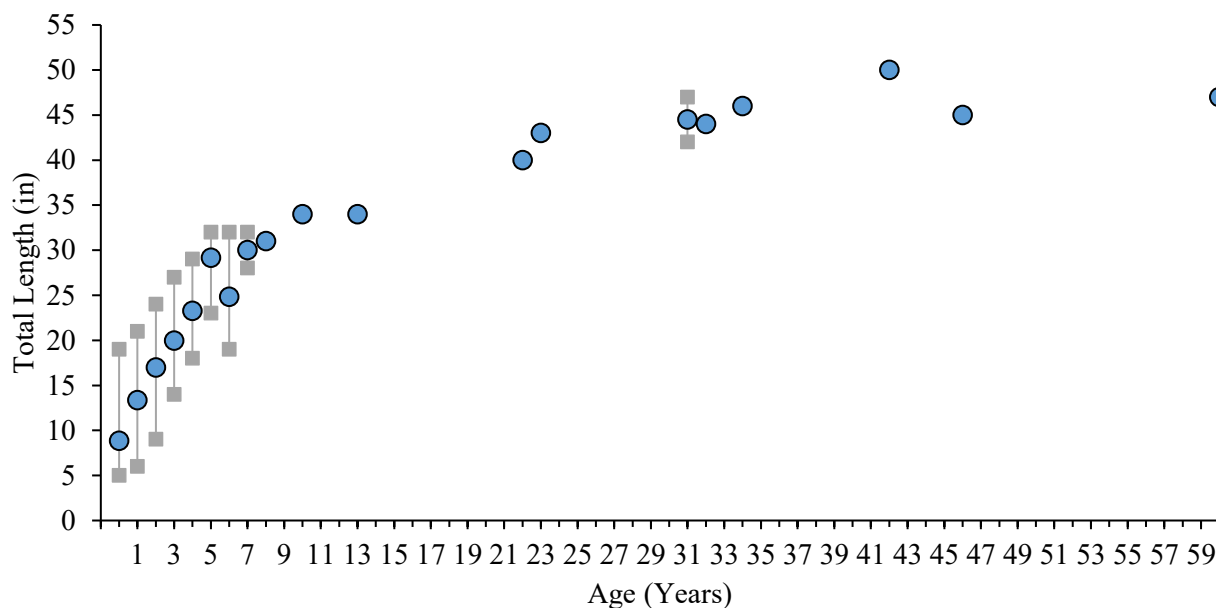


Figure 9. Black Drum length at age based on all age samples collected from 2011 to 2025. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age. Samples collected from partial carcasses were not included.

RESEARCH NEEDS

The 2023 Benchmark Stock Assessment Report (ASMFC 2023) recommends a new benchmark stock assessment be completed by 2027. However, if stock indicators identify any concerning trends an expedited assessment should be completed before 2027. The complete list of the research priorities and recommendations can be found in the [2023 Benchmark Stock Assessment Report](#).

- Conduct a high reward tagging program to obtain return rate estimates. Continue and expand current tagging programs to obtain total mortality, catch and release mortality, and growth information and movement-at-size data.
- Continue all current fishery-independent surveys recommended as stock indicators for Black Drum and collect biological samples for Black Drum on all surveys.
- Evaluate use of MRIP site-use weighting factors to improve CPUE estimates.
- Evaluate data the use of data poor models as annual indicators to show current relationships between stock and removals (I_{target}) and the ongoing trend of relative F (Skate).
- A process should be developed for appropriately combining MRIP and supplemental recreational sampling program data for characterizing the size structure of the recreational harvest. The process needs to consider spatial information, as there are likely spatial effects within states' supplemental sampling programs (e.g., VMRC Freezer Program representing Eastern Shore harvest).

MANAGEMENT

The management strategies currently in place for Black Drum have resulted in a stock that has met ongoing management targets (Table 6). Each year the ASMFC Black Drum Plan Review Team monitors each states' compliance with the FMP during its annual review. States must demonstrate the compliance criteria of the FMP are satisfied and submit an annual report concerning its fisheries and management programs. Following the review of the 2024 fishing year, the Plan Review Team (PRT) determined all states were compliant with the FMP (ASMFC 2025).

Table 6. Summary of ASMFC management strategies and their implementation status for Black Drum Fishery Management Plan.

Management Strategy	Implementation Status
<i>Harvest Management</i>	
Implement a maximum possession limit and size limit (of no less than 12 in) by Jan 1, 2014	Accomplished (other states)
Implement a maximum possession limit and size limit (of no less than 14 in) by Jan 1, 2016	Proclamation FF-73-2013
Implement a 10 fish and 28-in minimum size limit for Maryland's commercial fishery by Feb 25, 2019	Accomplished (Maryland)

In October 2024, the ASMFC Black Drum TC reviewed the stock indicators developed to monitor the stock with an additional three years of data through 2023 (ASMFC 2024a). The indicators included abundance (young-of-year, age 0–1, subadult, and exploitable abundance), range expansion, recreational live releases and harvest, and commercial landings. Overall, there were mixed signs of stability and declines in some of the indicators, but the three additional years of data were within the historical range of the times series and that there were no concerning trends in the indicators relative to coastwide stock status. The TC also noted that increases in recreational and commercial landings in the south could indicate higher availability of fish, that fishing pressure is increasing, or both, and that some of these increases may be driven by more state-specific regulations for other species (i.e., Southern Flounder); thus, causing concern at these localized

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

levels. The TC recommended scheduling the next data update to the indicators in 2026 and moving the scheduled Black Drum stock assessment from 2027 to 2028. The Sciaenids Board agreed with the TC's recommendations at its October 2024 meeting (ASMFC 2024b).

At its February 2024 business meeting, the MFC requested DMF staff to investigate if changes to Black Drum size, bag and trips limits are needed due to ongoing concerns with the growth of North Carolina's recreational and commercial Black Drum fisheries. While higher availability of fish may have resulted in localized increases in harvest in recent years, there were signs of mixed stability in North Carolina's Black Drum fisheries (NCDMF 2025). No changes to the current size, bag, and trip limits were recommended following the review of the 2004-2024 data. The division will continue to monitor trends in harvest and relative abundance as part of the ASMFC review of the stock indicators in Fall 2026. The next benchmark stock assessment is scheduled to occur in 2028; however, if any concerning trends are identified, an expedited stock assessment could occur sooner. Division staff are active participants of the ASMFC, including members of the Black Drum TC, Plan Review Team, and Board.

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ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLACK DRUM

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