

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
BLUEFISH
AUGUST 2026**

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

FMP Documentation	1990	
(MAFMC)	Amendment 1	2000
	Framework 1	2001
	Amendment 2	2007
	Amendment 3	2011
	Addendum I	2012
	Amendment 4	2013
	Amendment 5	2015
	Amendment 6	2017
	Framework 2	2017
	Framework 3	2018
	Framework 4	2020
	Framework 5	2020
	Amendment 7	2021
	Framework 6	2023
	Framework 7	2026

Comprehensive Review: 2027

The Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Bluefish was developed through a joint management effort between the interstate Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and the federal Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC). Amendment 1 initiated a 10-year rebuilding schedule to eliminate overfishing and allow for stock rebuilding which was achieved in 2009. Amendment 1 also established commercial and recreational quota allocations, state-specific commercial allocations, and allowed for the transfer of unused recreational quota to the commercial fishery. Framework 1 established annual harvest allocations specifically for biological monitoring programs. Amendment 2 and Amendment 5 were implemented to establish a strategy for monitoring Bluefish bycatch. Amendment 3 added a formalizing process to incorporate scientific and management uncertainty when establishing catch limits. Addendum I established a coast-wide biological monitoring program to improve the quantity and quality of information available for use in Bluefish stock assessments. Amendment 4 modified the accountability measures for the recreational Bluefish fishery. Amendment 6 addressed considerations for examining potential influence of the removal of forage fish species by increasing directed fishing and advocated for future ecosystem-based management approaches. Framework 2 required for-hire vessels with federal permits for species managed by MAFMC to submit electronic vessel trip reports to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Framework 3 established a process to specify constant multi-year acceptable biological catches. Framework 4 established a requirement for commercial vessels with federal permits for any species managed by the Mid-Atlantic and New England Councils to submit vessel trip reports electronically within 48 h after entering port at the conclusion of a trip. Framework 5 modified the Council's acceptable biological catch control rule and risk policy. The revised risk policy is intended to reduce the probability of overfishing as stock size falls below the target biomass while allowing for increased risk and greater economic benefit under higher stock biomass conditions. This action also removed the typical/atypical species distinction currently included in the risk policy. Amendment 7, the Bluefish Allocation and Rebuilding Amendment, revised the goals and objectives of the fishery management plan, reallocated quota between the commercial and recreational fisheries, reallocated

commercial quota among the states, implemented a rebuilding plan, revised the sector quota transfer process, and revised how management uncertainty is applied during the specifications process. Amendment 7 took effect on January 1, 2022. Framework 6 established a new process for setting recreational bag, size, and season limits for Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass, and Bluefish. This action also modified recreational accountability measures for these species. Framework 6 took effect on March 9, 2023. The Bluefish FMP, associated amendment documents, and framework information can be found at [MSFMC.org](https://www.msfmc.org).

To ensure compliance with interstate requirements, North Carolina also manages Bluefish 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 and approved by the MAFMC, 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 2022a).

Management Unit

The FMP defines the management unit of Bluefish as a single stock occurring in U.S. waters of the western Atlantic Ocean. All member Atlantic states participate in the ASMFC Bluefish FMP process except for Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia.

Goal and Objectives

Amendment 7 revised the goals and objectives of the Bluefish FMP to the following:

- Goal 1: Conserve the Bluefish resource through stakeholder engagement to maintain sustainable recreational fishing and commercial harvest.
 - Objective 1.1: Achieve and maintain a sustainable spawning stock biomass and rate of fishing mortality.
 - Objective 1.2: Promote practices that reduce release mortality within the recreational and commercial fishery.
 - Objective 1.3: Maintain effective coordination between the National Marine Fisheries Service, Council, Commission, and member states by promoting compliance and to support the development and implementation of management measures.
 - Objective 1.4: Promote compliance and effective enforcement of regulations.
 - Objective 1.5: Promote science, monitoring, and data collection that support and enhance effective ecosystem-based management of the Bluefish resource.
- Goal 2: Provide fair and equitable access to the fishery across all user groups throughout the management unit.
 - Objective 2.1: Ensure the implementation of management measures provides fair and equitable access to the resource across all user groups within the management unit.
 - Objective 2.2: Consider the economic and social needs and priorities of all groups that access the Bluefish resource in the development of new management measures.
 - Objective 2.3: Maintain effective coordination with stakeholder groups to ensure optimization of economic and social benefits.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*) are a migratory, open water (pelagic) species found throughout the Atlantic Ocean. Bluefish migrate seasonally, moving north as water temperatures rise during spring and summer

and south during the fall and winter to areas along the South Atlantic Bight (Shepherd et al. 2006). During the summer, Bluefish mostly concentrate in waters from Maine to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina (Klein-MacPhee 2002). During the winter, they are found in offshore waters between North Carolina and Florida (Goodbred and Graves 1996). Within North Carolina’s estuarine waters, Bluefish are most common from March through October. Bluefish generally school with similarly sized fish (Austin et al. 1999). They are fast growers (Wilk 1977) and opportunistic predators. Over 70 different marine species have been documented in Bluefish stomach contents including Atlantic Menhaden, Butterfish, Silversides, Spotted Seatrout, Atlantic Croaker, Spot, shrimp, lobster, squid, crabs, worms, and clams (Buckel et al. 1999; Scharf et al. 2004). The maximum documented age for Bluefish is 14 years (Robillard et al. 2009). Bluefish can exceed 39 in and 31 lb (NCDMF 2022b). Bluefish reach sexual maturity by age 2 or around a length of 13 in (Robillard et al. 2008) and spawn offshore from Massachusetts through Florida. Bluefish born each year typically fall into two distinct size classes, suggesting that there are two distinct spawning events (Lassiter 1962). However, more recent research suggests that Bluefish spawning is a single, continuous event that occurs as they migrate northward during the spring and summer, but that Bluefish spawned in the middle of this time period do not have high survivability, resulting in two distinct size groups (Smith et al. 1994; Robillard et al. 2008).

Stock Status

The 2025 management track stock assessment determined that Bluefish are not overfished and are not experiencing overfishing.

Stock Assessment

Results from the 2025 management track assessment indicate that the Atlantic Bluefish stock was not overfished and not experiencing overfishing in 2024 (NMFS, 2025). Fishing mortality (F) in 2024 was estimated to be 0.108, which is 47% of the overfishing threshold of $F = 0.232$. Although fishing mortality was below the threshold in 2024, fishing mortality exceeded the updated threshold every year from 1985 to 2019. The next management track stock assessment for Bluefish is scheduled for 2027. The next management track assessment for Bluefish is scheduled for 2027.

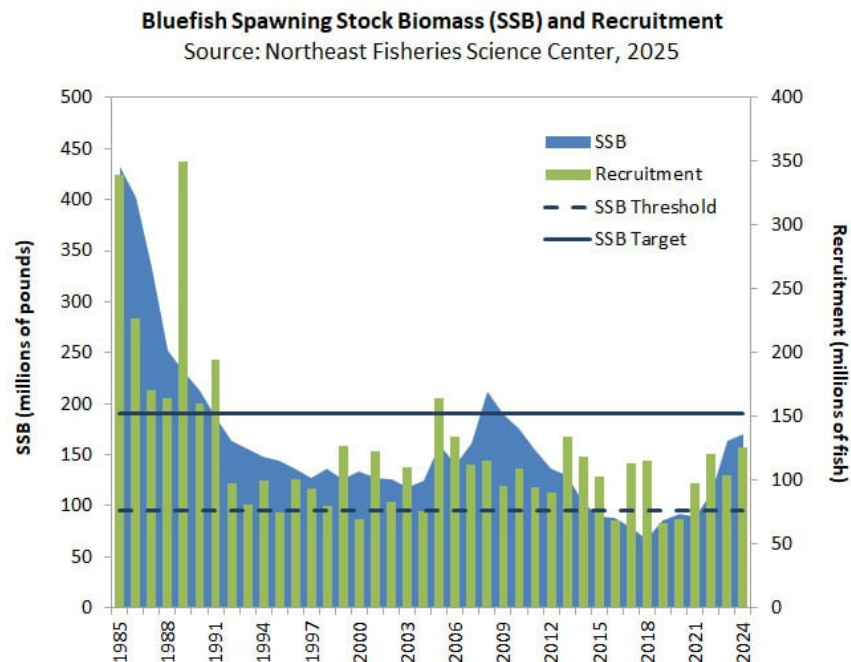


Figure 1. Bluefish spawning stock biomass and recruitment at age 0 by calendar year. The horizontal dashed black line is the SSB Threshold.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

In 2025, the private recreational bag limit was three Bluefish per-person per-day and the for-hire bag limit was five Bluefish per-person per-day. These regulations had been in effect since 2020. Commercial fishery landings are monitored and if necessary, trip limits are implemented to prevent exceeding the annual quota. The commercial fishery was opened on January 1, 2025, with no possession limit. Commercial possession limits were decreased two times during 2025: 500-lb limit on March 3, and a 300-lb limit on June 12.

Commercial Fishery

In North Carolina, Bluefish have been harvested commercially using a variety of gears. Capture methods have shifted primarily to gill nets over the last few decades. Gill nets, especially estuarine gill nets, have been the primary mode of harvest. Estuarine and ocean gill nets combined represent the largest commercial landings of Bluefish, accounting for ~93% of the harvest in 2025 (Figure 2).

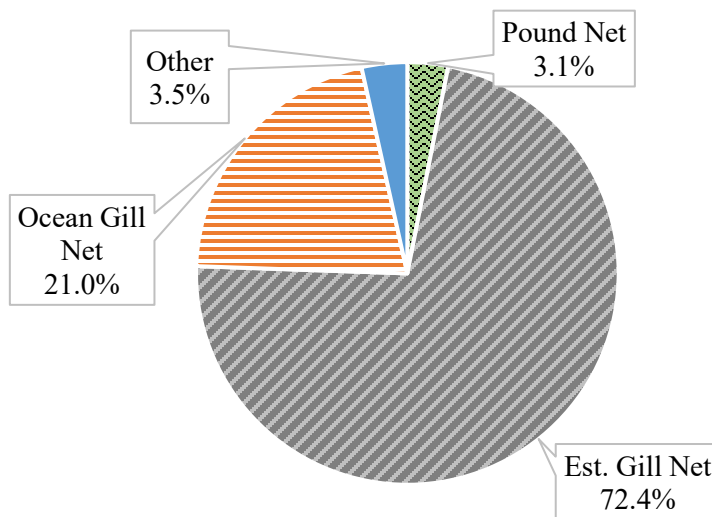


Figure 2. Commercial harvest of Bluefish in North Carolina during 2025 by gear type.

The commercial quota allocated to North Carolina for 2024 was 972,012 lb. In addition, North Carolina received a total of 500,000 lb of quota transfers from Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island totaling 1,472,012. North Carolina's 2025 commercial Bluefish landings totaled 1,305,531 lb at a dockside value of \$975,873. Bluefish commercial landings have fluctuated but have generally declined since 1985 (Figure 3).

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLUEFISH

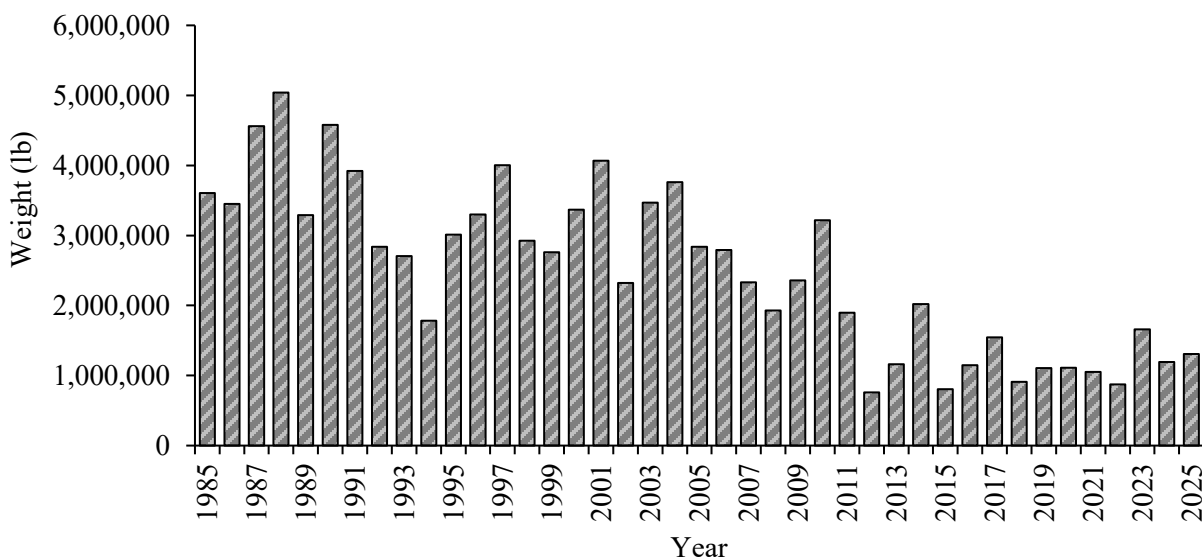


Figure 3. North Carolina commercial landings of Bluefish, 1985–2025.

There is a wide distribution of Bluefish harvested in the commercial fishery; however the majority of commercially caught Bluefish are between 13 and 18 in (Figure 4). In the last decade, Bluefish longer than 20 in were harvested less often than compared to the rest of the time series (Figure 5B) except since 2024 where there is evidence of larger Bluefish being harvested.

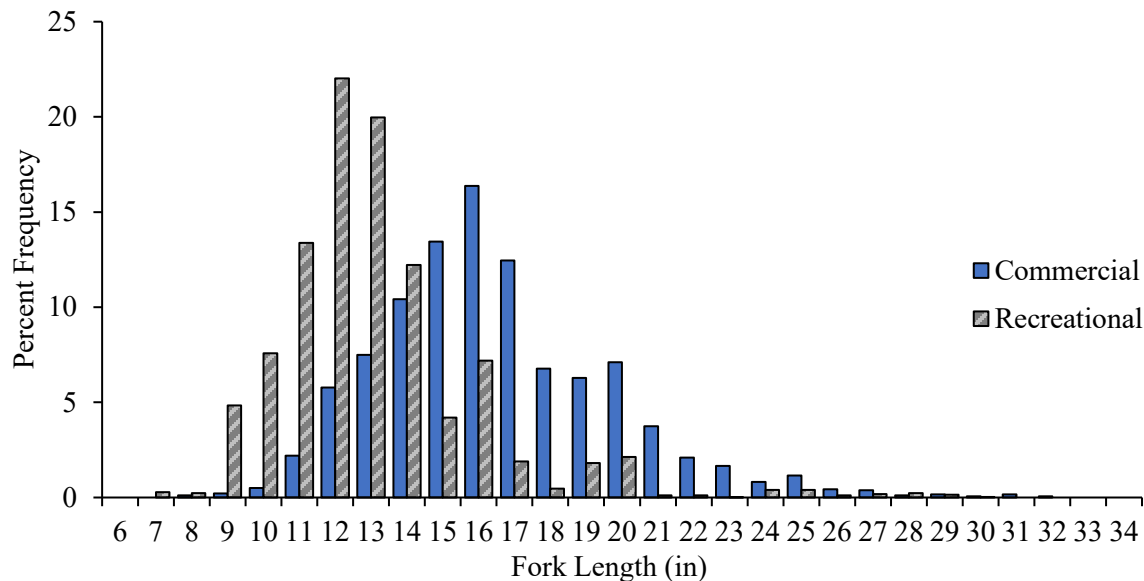


Figure 4. Percent frequency distribution of commercial and recreational length frequency distribution from Bluefish harvested in North Carolina, 2025. Note: Percent frequencies are calculated independently within each sector allowing for comparison of size distribution rather than total catch volume.

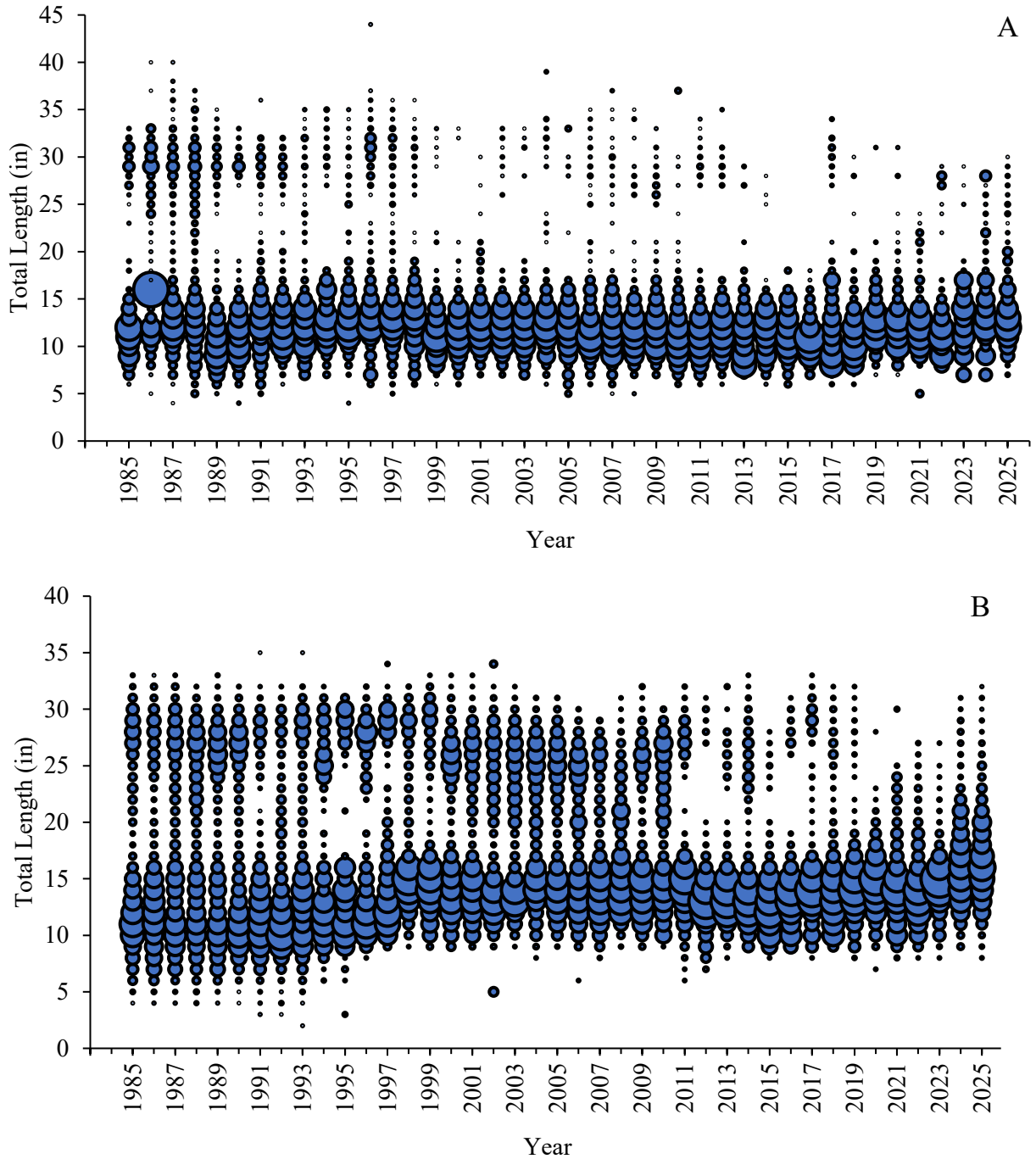


Figure 5. Recreational (A) and commercial (B) length frequency (TL, in) of Bluefish harvested from 1985–2025. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

Recreational Fishery

Bluefish are caught recreationally from shore, pier, and boat and can be targeted with lures as well as live and dead bait. Discards are a large part of the Bluefish fishery as they are not highly sought after for eating. In 2025, approximately 75% of landed fish were released (Table 1). Recreational landings of Bluefish had declined in the last decade but have increased again since 2021 (Figure 6).

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLUEFISH

Table 1. Bluefish recreational harvest and number released (Marine Recreational Information Program) and commercial harvest (North Carolina Trip Ticket Program) in North Carolina, 2016-2025.

Year	Recreational			Commercial	
	Number Landed	Number Released	Weight Landed (lb)	Weight Landed (lb)	Total Weight Landed (lb)
2016	4,489,223	6,802,960	3,356,049	1,148,643	4,504,692
2017	3,173,218	8,255,510	3,634,502	1,544,053	5,178,555
2018	3,304,587	7,912,210	2,630,685	910,262	3,540,947
2019	2,752,589	7,162,431	3,011,480	1,108,205	4,119,685
2020	2,108,296	6,557,751	2,124,224	1,112,966	3,237,190
2021	982,389	3,539,333	1,031,760	1,051,019	2,082,779
2022	1,533,911	9,336,045	1,645,410	872,042	2,517,452
2023	1,261,404	4,775,374	1,492,689	1,658,869	3,151,558
2024	1,574,579	6,390,035	2,512,747	1,193,461	3,705,928
2025	2,103,764	6,597,369	3,061,667	1,305,531	4,367,198
Mean	2,328,396	6,732,902	2,450,121	1,190,505	3,640,626

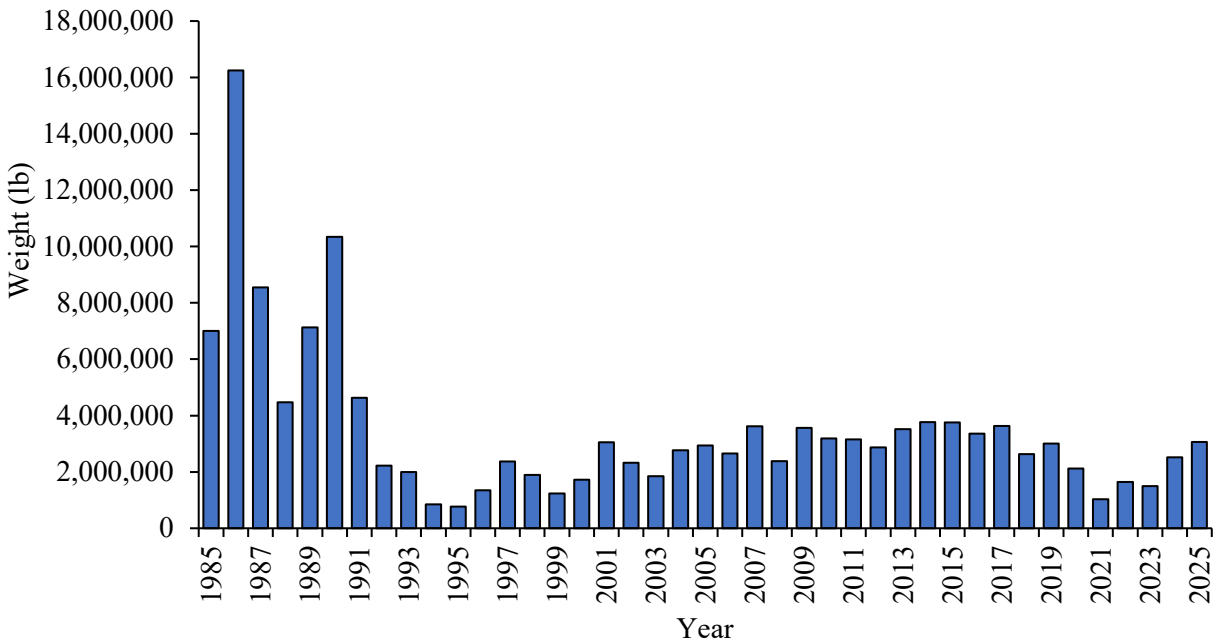


Figure 6. North Carolina recreational landings of Bluefish, 1985–2025.

In 2025, the size distribution of fish taken in the recreational fishery was smaller compared to fish harvested in the commercial fishery (Figure 4). For Bluefish exceeding 15 lb or 34 in, the NCDMF offers award citations. The number of citations awarded was highest in 1991 ($N = 187$), with fewer citations awarded in the last 20 years (Figure 7). Citations in 2025 increased dramatically ($N = 98$). Approximately 44% of the citations awarded since 2017 have been for released fish.

ASMFC AND FEDERALLY MANAGED SPECIES – BLUEFISH

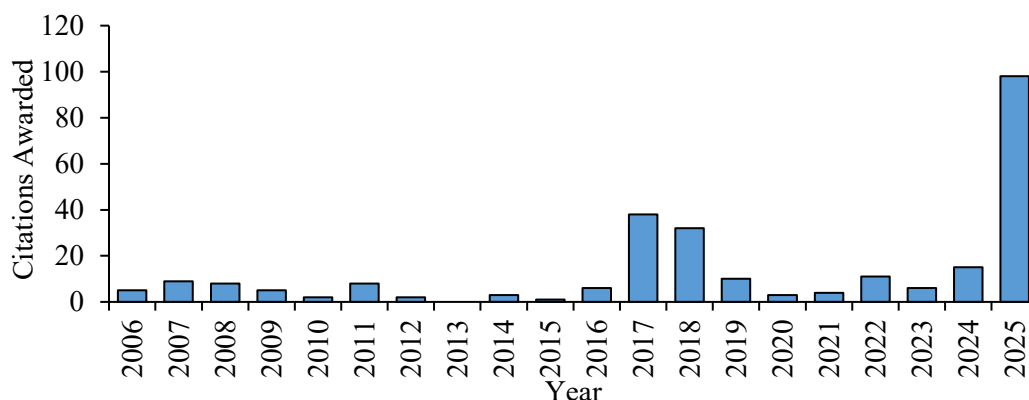


Figure 7. North Carolina recreational award citations for Bluefish, 2006–2025.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Commercial Bluefish landings from a variety of gears are sampled through the Division’s fish house sampling programs. Data collected includes location, gear type and gear-specifics, soak time, and water depth. Commercial catches are subsampled to collect biological information including fork length (FL) and aggregate weight (kg) by market grade. Trip ticket information (total weight of catch) is also recorded and reported by licensed dealers. A total of 1,760 Bluefish were measured from commercial landings in 2025 (Table 2). Mean FL was 17 in and ranged from 9 to 31 in. Mean size and size ranges have varied minimally over the last few decades. Since 2016, the mean size of Bluefish landed is 16-in FL with a mean minimum FL of 7 in and a mean maximum FL of 33 in.

The number and size of fish harvested as well as number of fish released recreationally is characterized through NOAA Fisheries’ Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). See [NOAA](#) for more information on the collection of recreational fishing data. In 2025, approximately 3 million lb of Bluefish were recreationally harvested (Table 1). The mean length of fish harvested and measured by MRIP in the recreational fishery in 2025 was 14 in and ranged from 8 to 31 in FL (Table 2). Since 1985, the annual length distribution of harvest in both the commercial and recreational fisheries has varied little with most fish harvested ranging from 7 to 30 in FL (Figure 5).

Table 2. Summary of length (FL, in) data sampled from all sources of length data (harvest and bait) from the Bluefish commercial fishery and the Bluefish recreational fishery in North Carolina, 2016–2025.

Year	Commercial				Recreational			
	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
2016	14	3	33	7,616	12	8	23	732
2017	16	7	35	5,580	13	6	35	657
2018	15	7	34	3,778	12	6	30	846
2019	15	8	33	4,812	13	8	32	910
2020	16	7	35	3,396	13	8	32	713
2021	16	8	34	4,203	13	6	26	299
2022	14	4	31	3,945	12	7	29	433
2023	15	7	29	4,701	14	7	29	413
2024	17	9	32	2,672	14	8	32	269
2025	17	9	31	1,760	14	8	31	271

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

The Division’s Pamlico Sound Independent Gill Net Survey was initiated in May 2001 and has been sampled continuously throughout 2019. Sampling in this program was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions but resumed scheduled sampling July 2021. This survey provides fishery-independent indices of relative abundance along with associated length and age data. The relative abundance index, defined as the number of Bluefish per set, provides essential data for input into the coastwide Bluefish stock assessment. The relative abundance index in 2025 was 17.6, which is more than double the time-series average of 6.3 (Figure 8). The 2025 abundance index is the highest in the time series, with the lowest being 2.8 in 2015.

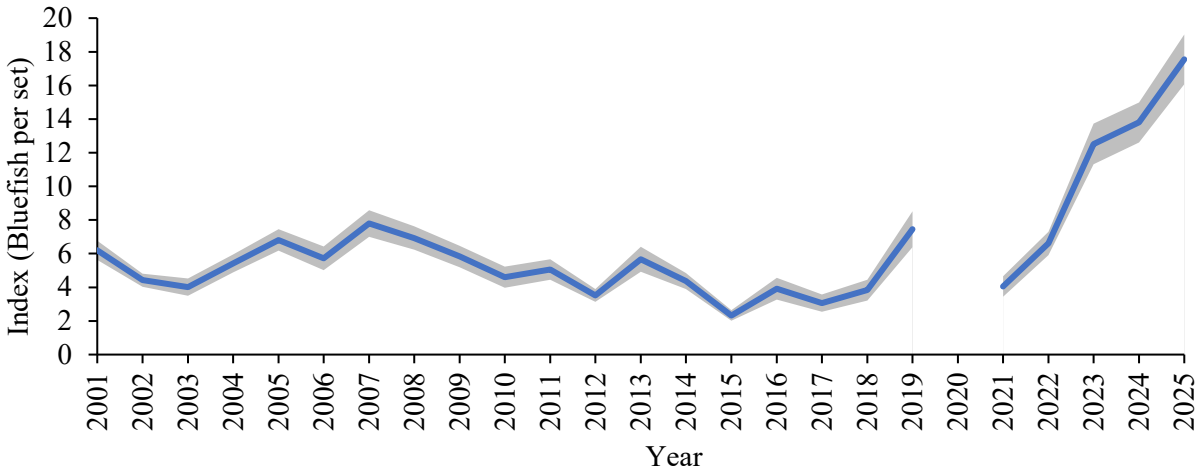


Figure 8. Relative abundance index of Bluefish, from the North Carolina Pamlico Sound Independent Gill Net Survey, 2001–2025. Shading represents the SE about the annual relative abundance index estimates.

North Carolina is subject to compliance of the biological monitoring program implemented under Addendum I to Amendment 1. To comply with these monitoring requirements, DMF must collect at least 100 ageing structures from Bluefish each year with at least 50 fish collected from January–June and 50 fish from July–December. Most age samples are collected from the Pamlico Sound Independent Gill Net Survey. Other age sample sources include commercial and recreational fisheries. In 2025, 1,204 age samples were collected (Table 3). The maximum age in 2025 was 4 years of age. Bluefish length increases with age, although the size at a given age is variable (Figure 9).

Table 3. Summary of Bluefish age samples collected in North Carolina from both dependent and independent sources, 2016–2025.

Year	Modal Age	Min. Age	Max. Age	Number of Samples
2016	1	0	11	678
2017	2	0	10	630
2018	1	0	10	669
2019	1	0	8	853
2020	2	0	12	244
2021	1	0	5	793
2022	1	0	8	1,210
2023	1	0	6	1,170
2024	2	0	8	998
2025	4	1	4	1,204

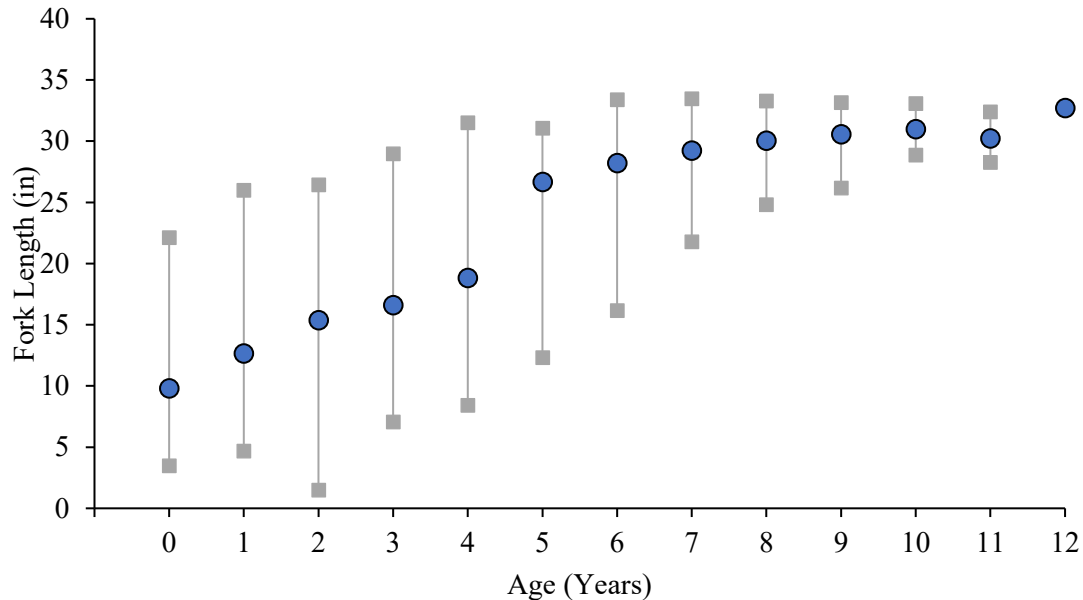


Figure 9. Bluefish length at age based on all age samples collected in North Carolina, 1985–2025. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age.

RESEARCH NEEDS

- Evaluate magnitude and length frequency of discards from the commercial and recreational fisheries, especially recreational discard lengths in the mid-Atlantic and southern regions
- Develop additional adult Bluefish indices of abundance (e.g., broad spatial and temporal scale longline survey or gill-net survey) to better characterize dynamics of older Bluefish not well sampled by fisheries-independent surveys
- Explore age- and time-varying natural mortality from, for example, predator-prey relationships; quantify effects of age- and time-varying mortality on the assessment model
- Investigate potential spatial distribution shifts of the Atlantic stock
- Initiate coastal surf zone seine study to provide more complete indices of juvenile abundance.

MANAGEMENT

Bluefish in North Carolina are jointly managed by ASMFC and MAFMC under Amendment 2 of the FMP. Amendment 2 uses annual catch limits (ACLs) for both the recreational and commercial sectors. The recreational quota is a coast-wide quota while the commercial quota is further divided into state-specific quotas. Amendment 2 allows quota transfers between states and between sectors. Additionally, daily limits are used to manage recreational harvest, and trip limits can be implemented for commercial fishermen if needed to prevent exceeding North Carolina’s commercial quota.

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