

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
KING MACKEREL
MAY 2026**

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

FMP Documentation:	Original FMP Adoption	February 1983
	Amendment 1	September 1985
	Amendment 2	June 1987
	Amendment 3	August 1989
	Amendment 5	August 1990
	Amendment 6	December 1992
	Amendment 7	November 1994
	Amendment 8	March 1998
	Amendment 9	April 2000
	Amendment 10	July 2000
	Amendment 11	December 1999
	Amendment 12	October 1999
	Amendment 13	August 2002
	Amendment 14	July 2002
	Amendment 15	August 2005
	Amendment 17	June 2006
	Amendment 18	January 2012
	Amendment 19	July 2010
	Framework Amendment	2013
	Amendment 20A	August 2014
	Amendment 20B	March 2015
	Amendment 22	January 2014
	Amendment 23	August 2014
	Amendment 26	July 2016
	Framework Amendment 5	August 2017
	Framework Amendment 6	2018
	Amendment 34	March 2023
Comprehensive Review:	2020	

The original Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils' fishery management plan (FMP) for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources (mackerels and Cobia) was approved in 1983 (SAFMC 1983). This plan treated King Mackerel as one U.S. stock and allocations were established for recreational and commercial fisheries, and the commercial allocation was divided between net and hook-and-line gears. The plan also established procedures for the Secretary of Commerce to act by regulatory amendment to resolve possible future conflicts in the fishery, such as establishing fishing zones and local quotas for each gear or user group. Numerous amendments have been implemented since the first FMP.

Amendment 1 provided a framework for pre-season adjustment of total allowable catch (TAC), revised King Mackerel maximum sustainable yield (MSY) downward, recognized separate Atlantic and Gulf migratory groups of King Mackerel, and established fishing permits and bag limits for King Mackerel (SAFMC 1985). Commercial allocations among gear users were eliminated.

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Amendment 2 set the TAC to below the upper range of acceptable biological catch (ABC). It also required charter boat permits and prohibits the use of purse seines on overfished stocks (SAFMC 1987).

Amendment 3 prohibited drift gill nets for coastal pelagic and purse seines and run-around gill nets for the overfished groups of mackerels (SAFMC 1989). The habitat section of the FMP was updated, and vessel safety considerations were included in the plan. A new objective to minimize waste and bycatch in the fishery was added to the plan.

Amendment 5 extended the management area for the Atlantic groups of mackerels through the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils' (MAFMC) jurisdiction. It revised problems in the fishery and plan objectives to reflect updated stock conditions and management needs, revised the definition of "overfishing" to spawning stock biomass per recruit (SSBR) to prevent recruitment overfishing, provided that the SAFMC will be responsible for pre-season adjustments of TACs and bag limits for the Atlantic migratory groups of mackerels, redefined recreational bag limits as daily limits, created a provision specifying that the bag limit catch of mackerel may be sold, provided guidelines for corporate commercial vessel permits, and included a definition of "conflict", including those between user groups, gear types, or jurisdictions, to provide guidance to the Secretary (SAFMC 1990).

Amendment 6 identified additional problems and an objective for the fishery that provided for rebuilding overfished stocks of mackerels within specific periods, provided for biennial assessments and adjustments, provided for more seasonal adjustment actions, including size limits, vessel trip limits, closed seasons or areas, and gear restrictions (SAFMC 1992). It also changed commercial permit requirements to allow qualification in one of the three preceding years, discontinued the reversion of the bag limit to zero when the recreational quota is filled, modified the recreational fishing year to the calendar year and changed the minimum size limit for King Mackerel to 20 in fork length (FL).

Amendment 7 equally divided the Gulf commercial allocation in the Eastern Zone at the Dade-Monroe County line in Florida (SAFMC 1994). The sub-allocation for the area from Monroe County through Western Florida was equally divided between commercial hook and line and net gear users.

Amendment 8 identified additional problems of localized reductions in abundance and market disruptions in the fishery, specified allowable gear, established a moratorium on new commercial King Mackerel permits and provided for transferability of permits during the moratorium, and allowed retention of up to five damaged King Mackerel on vessels with commercial trip limits (these fish cannot be sold, but do not count against the trip limit) (SAFMC 1998). It also revised the seasonal framework procedures to: (a) delete a procedure for subdividing the Gulf migratory group of King Mackerel, (b) request the stock assessment panel provide additional information on spawning potential ratios and mixing of King Mackerel migratory groups, (c) provide for consideration of public comment, (d) redefine overfishing and allow for adjustment by framework procedure, (e) allow setting zero bag limits, and (f) allow gear regulation including prohibition (SAFMC 1998).

Amendment 9 modified the percentage of the commercial allocation of TAC for the Florida east coast (North Area) and Florida west coast (South/West Area) of the Eastern Zone to 46.15% North and 53.85% South/West (previously, this allocation was split 50% to each zone; SAFMC 2000). Amendment 9 further allowed possession of cut-off (damaged) King Mackerel that comply with the minimum size limits and the trip limits in the Gulf, Mid-Atlantic, or South Atlantic exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (sale of such cut-off fish is allowed and is in addition to the existing allowance for possession and retention of a maximum of five cut-off (damaged) King Mackerel that are not subject to the size limits or trip limits, but that cannot be sold or purchased, nor counted against the trip limit).

Amendment 10 designated Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and EFH-Habitat Areas of Particular Concern for Coastal Migratory Pelagics (SAFMC 1998a).

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Amendment 11 amended the FMP as required to make definitions of MSY, optimal yield (OY), overfishing and overfished consistent with National Standard Guidelines; identified and defined fishing communities and addressed by catch management measures (SAFMC 1999b).

Amendment 12 extended the commercial King Mackerel permit moratorium from October 15, 2000, to October 15, 2005, or until replaced with a license limitation, limited access, and/or individual fishing quota or individual transferable quota system (ITQ), whichever occurs earlier (SAFMC 1999).

Amendment 13 established two marine reserves in the EEZ of the Gulf of Mexico near the Dry Tortugas, Florida known as Tortugas North and Tortugas South, in which fishing for coastal migratory pelagic species is prohibited (SAFMC 2002a). This action complemented previous actions taken under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

Amendment 14 established a 3-year moratorium on the issuance of for-hire (charter vessel and head boat) permits for coastal migratory pelagic species in the Gulf of Mexico unless sooner replaced by a comprehensive effort limitation system (SAFMC 2002b). This resulted in separate for-hire permits for the Gulf and South Atlantic. The control date for eligibility was established as March 29, 2001. The amendment also included other provisions for eligibility, application, appeals, and transferability of permits.

Amendment 15 established an indefinite commercial limited access program for King Mackerel in the EEZ under the jurisdiction of the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Mid-Atlantic fishery management councils (SAFMC 2005). This amendment also changed the fishing year to March 1 through February 28 (29 on leap year) for Atlantic group King and Spanish mackerels.

Amendment 17 (SAFMC 2006) established a permanent limited entry system for Gulf of Mexico Coastal Migratory Pelagics for-hire (charter and head boat) permits, building on the moratorium established under Amendment 14 (SAFMC 2002b).

Amendment 18 established annual catch limits (ACL), annual catch targets (ACT) and accountability measures (AM) for King Mackerel (SAFMC 2012) as required under the 2006 Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act (SAFMC 2012).

Amendment 19 updated existing EFH and HAPC designations for South Atlantic species and prohibited the use of certain gear types within Deepwater Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (SAFMC 2010).

Amendment 20A prohibited the sale of King Mackerel caught under the bag limit unless the fish are caught as part of a state-permitted tournament and the proceeds from the sale are donated to charity (SAFMC 2013a). In addition, the rule removes the income qualification requirement for King Mackerel commercial vessel permits.

Amendment 20B eliminated the 500-lb trip limit that is effective when 75% of the respective quotas are landed for King Mackerel in the Florida west coast Northern and Southern Subzones; allows transit of commercial vessels with King Mackerel through areas closed to King Mackerel fishing, if gear is appropriately stowed; and creates Northern and Southern Zones for Atlantic migratory group King Mackerel, each with separate quotas (SAFMC 2014a). Each zone will close when the respective quota is met or expected to be met. The dividing line between the zones is at the North Carolina and South Carolina state line.

Amendment 22 modified head boat reporting regulations to require weekly electronic reporting of all South Atlantic Council managed species (SAFMC 2013b).

Amendment 23 (SAFMC 2013c) required dealers to possess a federal Gulf and South Atlantic universal dealer permit to purchase King and Spanish mackerel and required weekly electronic dealer reporting. It also required federally permitted King and Spanish mackerel fishermen to sell only to a federally permitted dealer.

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The 2013 Framework Action (effective 2014) modified commercial King Mackerel trip limits in the Florida East Coast subzone to optimize utilization of the resource (SAFMAC 2014b).

Framework Amendment 5 removed the restriction on fishing for and retaining recreational bag limits of king mackerel on a vessel with a federal commercial permit for King Mackerel when the vessel is undergoing a recreational trip when commercial harvest of King Mackerel in that zone is closed.

Amendment 26 updates the Atlantic King Mackerel annual catch limits and adjusts the mixing zone based on the results of the 2014 stock assessment (SAFMC 2016). The amendment allows limited retention and sale of Atlantic migratory group King Mackerel incidentally caught in the small coastal shark gill net fishery.

Framework Amendment 6 (effective 2018) modifies the commercial trip limit for Atlantic migratory group King Mackerel in the exclusive economic zone from the North Carolina/South Carolina line to the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line (Atlantic Southern Zone) (SAFMC 2018).

Amendment 34 (effective June 2023) updates catch limits for the Atlantic migratory group King Mackerel and revises management measures for Atlantic migratory group King Mackerel and Atlantic migratory group Spanish Mackerel (SAFMC 2023). The amendment also increases the recreational bag and possession limit for Atlantic King Mackerel in federal waters off the east coast of Florida from two to three fish per person and allows the recreational sector to keep cut-off (damaged) Atlantic King Mackerel and Atlantic Spanish mackerel caught under the recreational bag limit that comply with the minimum size limits.

A complete history of the FMP, most recent stock assessment data, amendments, and framework can be viewed at safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/SA_FisheryDataKingMackerel/.

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 MAFMC, SAFMC, or the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission 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 (Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission 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 management unit is defined as King Mackerel within U.S. waters of the South Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. Current management defines two migratory units: Gulf Migratory Group and Atlantic Migratory Group.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of the FMP for Coastal Migratory Pelagics resources was to institute management measures necessary to prevent exceeding maximum sustainable yield (MSY), establish a mandatory statistical reporting system for monitoring catch, and to minimize gear and user conflicts (SAFMC 1983). Amendment 12 to the Gulf and South Atlantic fishery management councils’ FMP for Coastal Migratory Pelagics lists eight plan objectives:

- The primary objective of the FMP is to stabilize yield at MSY, allow recovery of overfished populations, and maintain population levels sufficient to ensure adequate recruitment.
- To provide a flexible management system for the resource which minimizes regulatory delay while retaining substantial Council and public input in management decisions and which can rapidly adapt to changes in resource abundance, new scientific information, and changes in user groups or by areas.

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- To provide necessary information for effective management and establish a mandatory reporting system.
- To minimize gear and user group conflicts.
- To distribute the TAC of Atlantic migratory group Spanish Mackerel between recreational and commercial user groups based on the catches that occurred during the early to mid-1970s, which is prior to the development of the deep-water run-around gill net fishery and when the resource was not overfished.
- To minimize waste and bycatch in the fishery.
- To provide appropriate management to address specific migratory groups of King Mackerel.
- To optimize the social and economic benefits of the coastal migratory pelagic fisheries.

MACKEREL PORT MEETINGS

SAFMC organized stakeholder meetings between April 2024 and January 2025 and brought together commercial and recreational fishermen to evaluate the current goals and objectives of the FMP and identify opportunities to maximize economic and social benefits while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Spanish and King Mackerel stocks. Discussions also addressed equitable management, underserved communities, interjurisdictional cooperation, and the resilience of fishing communities under changing environmental conditions. SAFMC conducted a total of 16 in person meetings and six webinar meetings across eight states, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York.

In North Carolina, meetings were conducted in Wilmington, Morehead City, Hatteras, and Manteo, with a combined attendance of 156 participants. Stakeholder attendance in North Carolina comprised 59% of all stakeholder attendance across the entire meeting series (256 total participants). The two northern meetings were attended primarily by commercial fishermen, while the two southern meetings were dominated by recreational anglers. Several consistent themes emerged from these discussions, but a full report can be viewed at https://safmc.net/documents/mc_a3b_mpm_finalreport-pdf/.

- Stakeholders expressed concern that beach renourishment projects, dredging activities, and offshore wind development may be degrading water quality.
- There was broad support for implementing logbook requirements across all fishing sectors, including recreational and for-hire fishermen, to improve the accuracy of catch and effort data.
- Many participants believed that the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) does not provide sufficiently accurate estimates of recreational catch and fishing effort.
- Overall, stakeholders were satisfied with the current size and bag limits for King Mackerel.
- Recreational fishing effort was viewed as being driven more by external factors—such as fuel prices, weather, fishing conditions, and trip costs—than by existing regulations.
- King Mackerel remains an important species for the for-hire fleet because they are readily available and commonly harvested in federal waters, although participants noted that recreational participation peaked during the 1990s.
- Stakeholders emphasized the economic importance of King Mackerel to fish houses in northern North Carolina, where much of the catch is subsequently shipped to markets farther north.
- Concerns were also raised regarding tournament-caught fish being sold through fish houses. Participants noted that these fish count against the commercial quota, may not be subject to the same handling and food safety standards as commercially harvested fish, and can temporarily flood the market, reducing the price per pound received by commercial fishermen.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

King Mackerel (*Scomberomorus cavalla*) are fast-swimming coastal pelagic predatory fish, that inhabit nearshore and offshore waters of the western Atlantic. Along the U.S. South Atlantic coast, they form a migratory stock ranging seasonally from North Carolina to southeast Florida. Migratory movements are strongly influenced by sea temperature and prey abundance, and they generally prefer water warmer than about 68°F (20°C). During winter, adults often concentrate along the outer shelf and Gulf Stream margin, while in summer and fall they move closer to shore, including beaches, reefs, and inlet areas.

King Mackerel are relatively fast-growing and can exceed 5.5 ft in length and 100 lb, although most recreationally caught fish are much smaller. Spawning occurs offshore primarily from late spring through fall, May–October, where females release buoyant eggs in open water. Females grow larger than males and produce from tens of thousands to several million eggs annually. Maturity in females occurs starting around 4 years old while male reach maturity around 2 years of age.

Ecologically, King Mackerel are important mid-to-upper trophic predators that feed mainly on schooling forage fish such as menhaden, mullet, sardines, thread herring, anchovies, and squid (Manooch 1984). In turn, juveniles are preyed upon by larger fishes, sharks, tunas, and marine mammals. Their seasonal abundance and strong fighting ability make them an important recreational and commercial fishes in the southeastern United States.

Stock Status

In 2020, the Atlantic King Mackerel stock was assessed and peer reviewed through the Southeast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR 2020). The results of the assessment indicated the stock size, and the rate of removals are sustainable and predicts King Mackerel are not overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. The status of the stock remained unchanged during the update of Amendment 34 in 2023.

Stock Assessment

An integrated stock assessment approach, Stock Synthesis 3, was used to assess the stock (SEDAR 2014) in a benchmark assessment (SEDAR 2014). The SEDAR 38 assessment was updated in 2020 (SEDAR 2020). The assessment model was constructed using fishery-independent data from the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program Trawl Survey for the Atlantic, and fishery-dependent information collected from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey, head boat and logbook surveys, as well as North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Trip Ticket landings information. The Stock Synthesis approach integrated fishery and life history indices into a statistical catch-at-age model to produce observed catch, size and age composition, and Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) indices. Total biomass and spawning stock biomass estimates have increased steadily since 2013. All fishery indicators (fleet CPUEs and scientific survey) showed positive trends since SEDAR 38. Stock Synthesis estimated an above average age-0 recruitment from 2013 to 2016, contrasting the below average recruitments from 2008 to 2012 that were first detected during SEDAR 38. Two particularly high recruitment years were estimated for 2015 and 2016, supported by the juvenile survey observations in 2016 (SEAMAP trawl survey), as well as fleet length compositions. Observations by stakeholders may help validate the model predictions, given the distinct change in signal from 5 years of low recruitment up to SEDAR 38 to 4 years of high recruitment. The fish would have entered the fisheries beginning in the 2015 fishing year, with relatively high abundance beginning in 2017 fishing year, particularly of fish between 24 and 36 in FL.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

The DMF complements the management measures of the Coastal Migratory Pelagic FMP through rule (NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0512) and proclamation authority (NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0512). Current regulations include a recreational bag limit of three fish per person per day and 24-in FL minimum size limit (commercial and recreational). Recreational anglers may possess cut-off or damaged King Mackerel that are caught under the recreational bag limit and comply with the minimum size limits. Sale of King Mackerel caught under the recreational bag limit are prohibited unless the fish are caught as part of a state-permitted tournament and the proceeds from the sale are donated to charity. Commercial regulations limit trips to 3,500 lb and require a federal vessel permit for commercial, charter, and head boats from March 1 to February 28 each year.

Commercial Fishery

In 2025, commercial landings were 323,617 lb (Table 1; Figure 1) and 94% of the King Mackerel harvest was taken by hook and line while the remaining 6% was harvested in gill nets (Table 2; Figure 2). The commercial fishery has declined since 2005; the 2025 landings reached an all-time low for the time series at 323,617-lb, 36.05% lower than the 505,977-lb 10-year average (2016–2025).

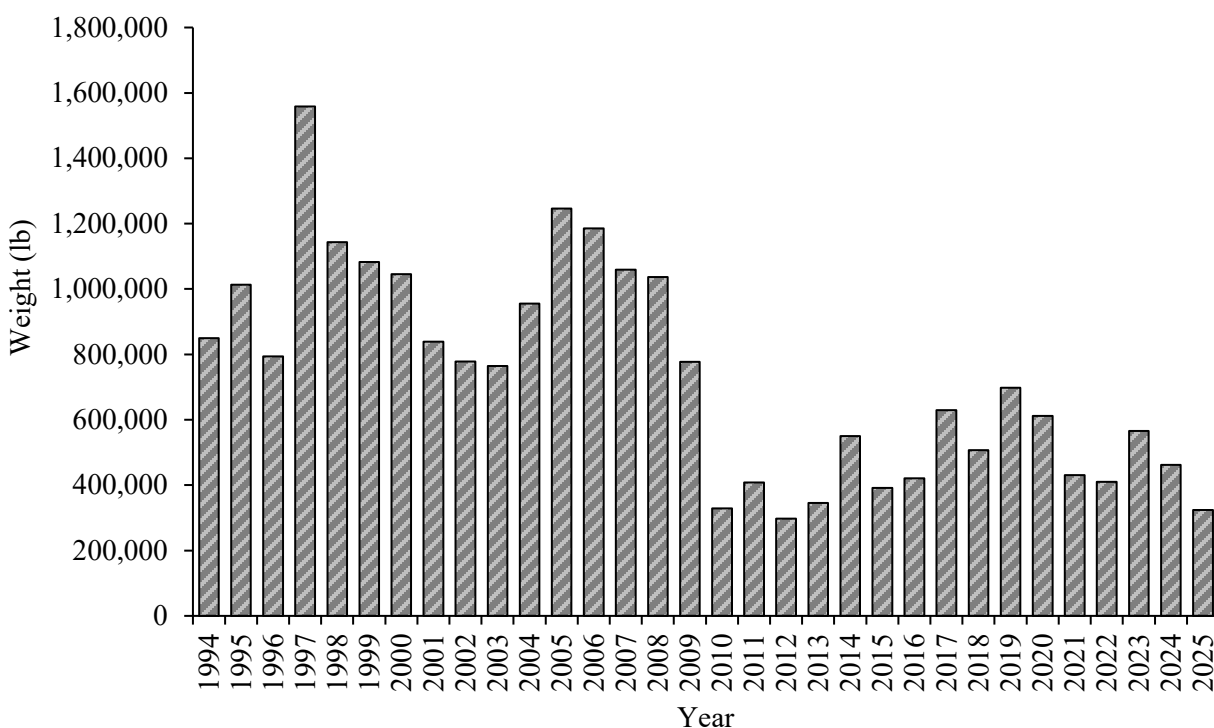


Figure 1. Annual commercial landings for King Mackerel in North Carolina, 1994–2025.

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Table 1. Recreational harvest and releases and commercial harvest of King Mackerel from North Carolina, 1994–2025.

Year	Recreational			Commercial	Total Weight Landed (lb)
	Number Harvested	Number Released	Weight Landed (lb)	Weight Landed (lb)	
1994	177,608	5,792	1,709,740	849,909	2,559,649
1995	135,796	7,544	1,240,901	1,013,319	2,254,220
1996	119,418	15,465	1,097,226	793,467	1,890,693
1997	206,601	57,739	1,797,936	1,558,439	3,356,375
1998	112,383	9,155	1,163,739	1,143,342	2,307,081
1999	104,483	120,296	1,034,465	1,082,693	2,117,158
2000	196,979	26,009	2,250,512	1,045,554	3,296,066
2001	145,290	12,381	2,046,022	839,107	2,885,129
2002	104,631	20,811	1,242,058	778,427	2,020,485
2003	153,339	33,774	1,388,145	764,831	2,152,976
2004	191,584	184,384	2,276,035	955,002	3,231,037
2005	175,070	101,507	1,349,536	1,246,088	2,595,624
2006	177,369	45,568	1,805,814	1,185,534	2,991,348
2007	339,278	53,549	3,099,801	1,059,107	4,158,908
2008	164,719	41,283	1,379,450	1,036,852	2,416,302
2009	168,558	23,639	1,822,673	777,585	2,600,258
2010	58,311	9,734	580,505	328,806	909,311
2011	31,589	851	367,896	408,162	776,058
2012	55,529	6,385	613,903	297,423	911,326
2013	48,000	8,868	521,153	345,177	866,330
2014	72,288	35,075	1,213,096	549,981	1,763,077
2015	95,705	16,877	1,168,255	391,751	1,560,006
2016	108,151	43,909	963,139	420,869	1,384,008
2017	110,339	94,655	1,261,775	629,703	1,891,478
2018	102,675	75,614	1,018,459	506,933	1,525,392
2019	184,962	115,350	1,446,939	698,252	2,145,191
2020	146,423	70,879	1,376,229	611,476	1,987,705
2021	58,174	24,069	563,082	430,868	993,950
2022	38,512	12,996	375,164	409,941	785,105
2023	79,987	74,061	1,130,711	565,814	1,696,525
2024	58,954	12,224	730,700	462,299	1,192,999
2025	18,781	14,812	190,614	323,617	514,231
Mean	123,717	42,977	1,257,052	734,698	2,039,412

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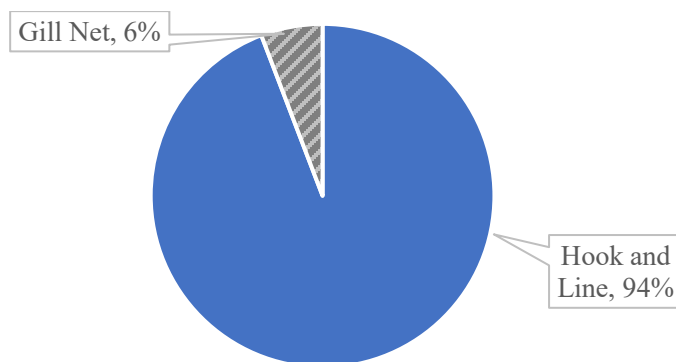


Figure 2. King Mackerel commercial harvest in 2025 by gear type.

Table 2. North Carolina commercial harvest of King Mackerel with landings in pounds by gear type, 1994–2025.

Year	Gear Type			Total
	Hook and Line	Gill Net	Other	
1994	781,384	61,648	6,877	849,909
1995	952,422	58,104	2,793	1,013,319
1996	737,673	53,211	2,584	793,467
1997	1,386,948	167,973	3,518	1,558,439
1998	1,075,940	65,460	1,942	1,143,342
1999	1,042,466	40,148	79	1,082,693
2000	938,631	105,504	1,420	1,045,554
2001	790,862	47,517	727	839,107
2002	693,105	81,933	3,388	778,427
2003	736,432	26,168	2,231	764,831
2004	829,056	125,826	120	955,002
2005	1,012,580	232,681	828	1,246,088
2006	1,010,448	174,573	514	1,185,534
2007	883,249	175,570	288	1,059,107
2008	820,936	215,793	123	1,036,852
2009	667,902	109,347	337	777,585
2010	235,956	92,739	111	328,806
2011	357,353	50,748	60	408,162
2012	248,959	48,444	20	297,423
2013	311,321	33,856	0	345,177
2014	460,472	88,557	952	549,981
2015	324,011	67,629	111	391,751
2016	336,891	83,794	184	420,869
2017	557,327	72,284	93	629,703
2018	443,996	62,814	123	506,933
2019	616,148	81,944	160	698,252
2020	518,768	92,509	199	611,476
2021	368,767	61,987	113	430,868
2022	344,501	64,344	1,096	409,941
2023	508,376	57,150	288	565,814
2024	427,899	33,629	770	462,299
2025	304,793	18,780	44	323,617

Recreational Fishery

Recreational landings of King Mackerel are estimated by the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). 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>. Recreational anglers target King Mackerel by trolling spoons and live bait both inshore and offshore. Anglers catch King Mackerel between August and October once the water temperature has begun to cool from the summer heat. Anglers harvested 190,614 lb of King Mackerel in 2025 an all-time low for the time series, and 74% lower than 2024 harvest. Landings in 2025 were 79% lower than the 10-year average of 905,681 (2016-2025) which decreased by 97,764-lb compared to the previous 10-year average (2016-2024) (Table 1 and Figure 3). In 2025, North Carolina recorded its lowest number of MRIP samples, with only 32 King Mackerel measured. The low interaction rate could help explain the decrease in projected recreational landings.

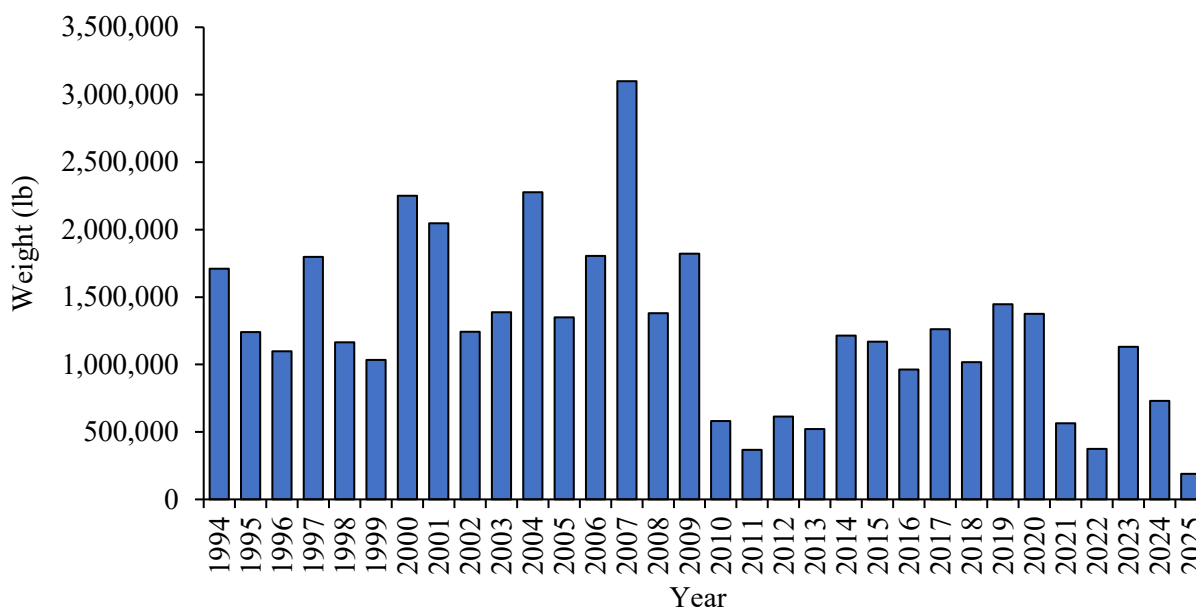


Figure 3. Annual recreational landings for King Mackerel in North Carolina, 1994–2025.

The DMF offers award citations (certificates) for exceptional catches of King Mackerel. King Mackerel greater than 30 lb or 54 in total length are eligible. In 2025, 74 citations were awarded, four of which were released alive (Figure 4). It is important to note that the number of citations awarded does not reflect effort or landings information as the program is voluntary for anglers.

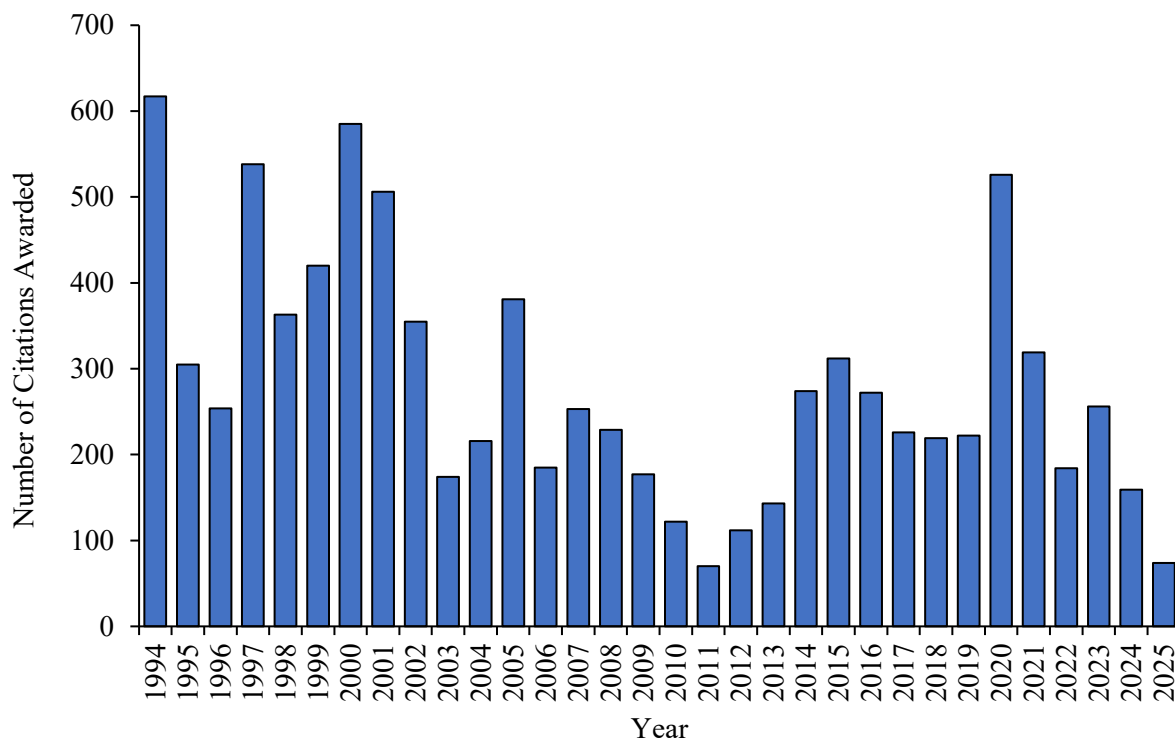


Figure 4. North Carolina Saltwater Fishing Tournament citations awarded for King Mackerel, 1994–2025. Citations are awarded for King Mackerel >30 lb or 54 in total length.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Length-frequency information for the commercial King Mackerel fishery in North Carolina is collected through DMF fish house sampling programs. Length measurements from commercial fish house sampling conducted by DMF staff are then extrapolated to these programs (Figures 5 and 6). In 2025, 119 King Mackerel were measured, with a mean length of 31.6 in FL (Table 3).

Age structures (otoliths) are collected from both the commercial and recreational fisheries, as well as from King Mackerel fishing tournaments statewide. These samples are sent to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center in Panama City, Florida for processing and age determination (Table 4). Length and weight data for the recreational fishery are collected through MRIP dockside sampling (Table 5; Figures 6 and 7). Multiple King Mackerel tournaments exist across the state each year but division staff only sample two of the largest around the Wilmington area, the Got Em' On and the US Open. Weather postponed the US Open from the second weekend in October to the last; staff noted decreases in the number of King Mackerel brought to the scales and overall smaller weights and lengths of fish weighed in.

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Table 3. King Mackerel length (FL, in) data from commercial fish house samples, 1997–2025.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1994	34.2	24.0	57.1	169
1995	34.2	22.0	49.2	177
1996	31.2	21.7	43.3	341
1997	29.0	18.3	47.2	149
1998	30.0	20.9	42.3	239
1999	30.1	16.3	50.4	742
2000	29.9	16.7	48.8	1,120
2001	31.6	20.3	48.0	726
2002	33.3	24.8	46.5	198
2003	28.6	21.3	44.1	279
2004	30.9	22.0	43.7	498
2005	28.6	19.7	47.2	519
2006	29.9	21.5	49.4	354
2007	29.0	22.6	48.0	342
2008	27.6	22.2	49.8	1,671
2009	28.3	15.1	55.3	1,424
2010	33.8	23.2	52.6	185
2011	32.9	23.4	75.9	730
2012	32.1	23.1	53.0	326
2013	34.1	24.1	45.5	83
2014	29.5	18.1	47.6	547
2015	32.7	14.7	46.9	242
2016	29.7	23.0	54.3	274
2017	28.2	13.6	53.3	1057
2018	29.0	22.6	43.3	424
2019	29.1	16.0	49.8	1,287
2020	32.3	15.7	51.1	817
2021	29.1	17.2	47.2	886
2022	32.8	25.0	60.2	525
2023	33.6	20.4	51.7	248
2024	34.2	23.0	52.1	386
2025	31.6	24.3	60.0	119

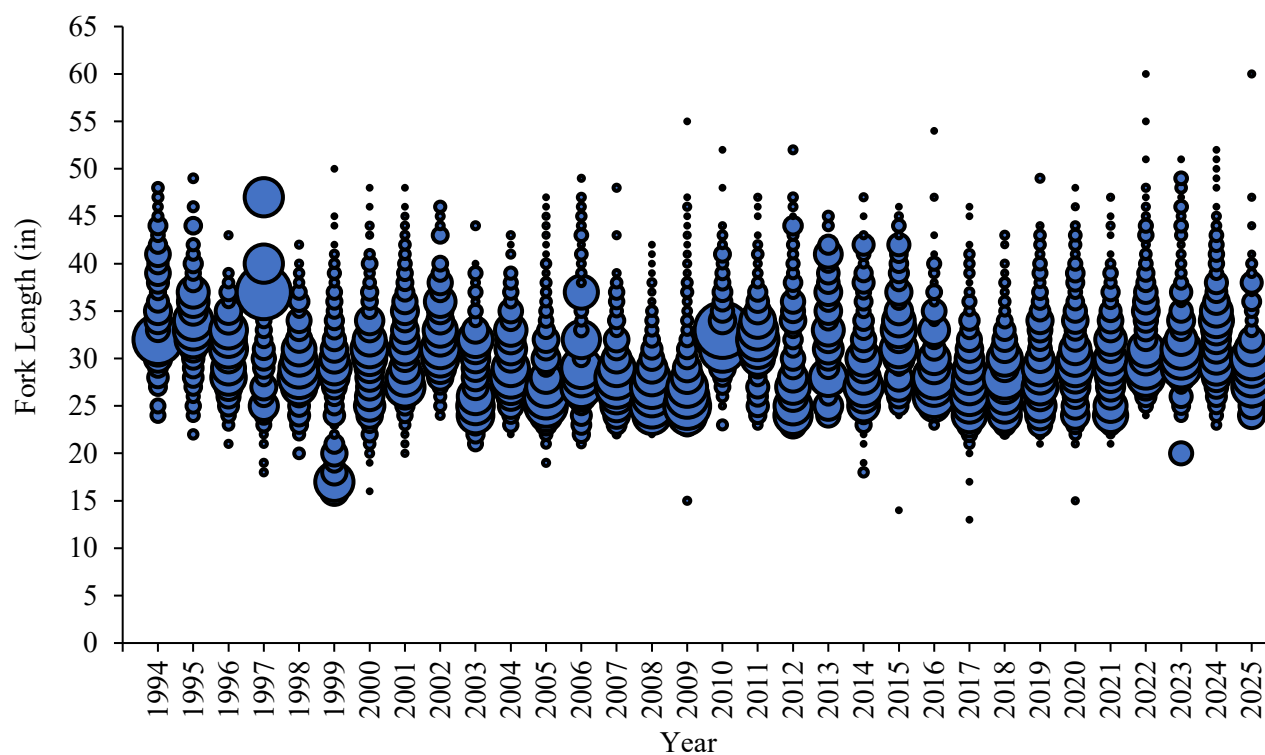


Figure 5. Commercial length frequency of King Mackerel, 1994–2025. Bubbles represent 1-in length bins, and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

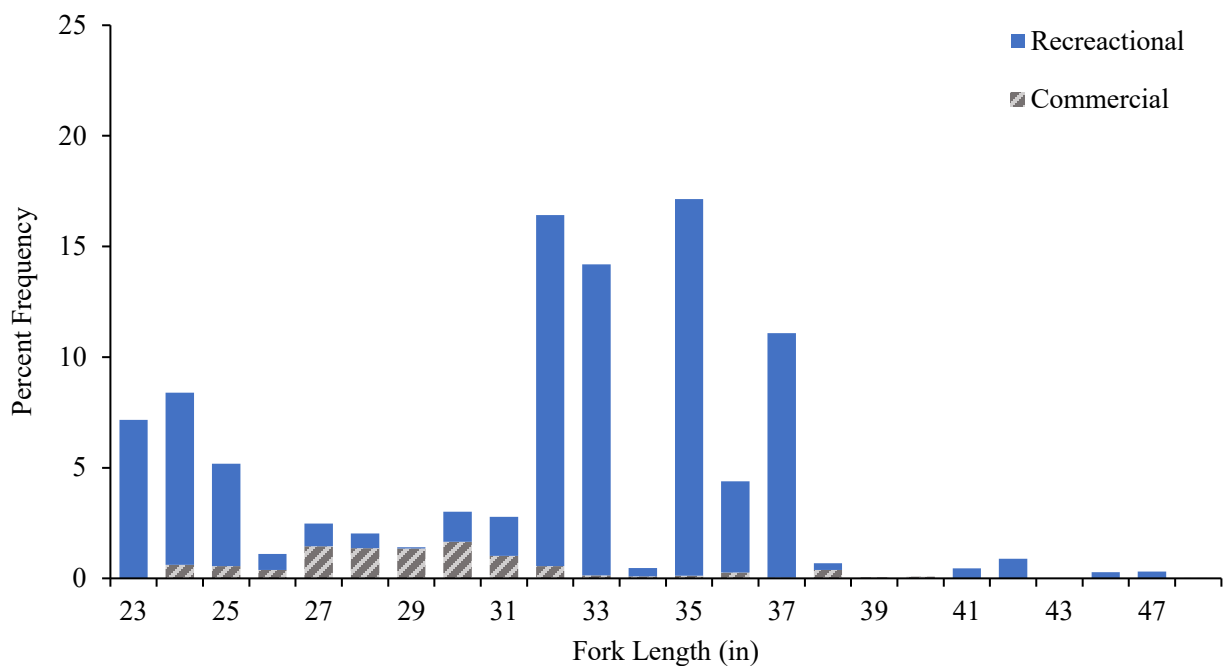


Figure 6. Commercial and recreational length frequency distribution from King Mackerel harvested in 2025.

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Table 4. Mean, minimum, and maximum lengths (FL, in) and total number sampled of King Mackerel from fishery-dependent (commercial and recreational) sources collected by DMF for ageing by the NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center, 1997–2025.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1997	35.4	12.6	54.1	363
1998	37.6	21.7	60.2	458
1999	37.4	14.8	57.1	477
2000	38.7	24.3	56.1	541
2001	38	25.8	55.7	547
2002	38.2	23.8	54.9	476
2003	37	23.3	57.3	488
2004	38	13.1	56.7	467
2005	37.3	19.6	55.1	444
2006	37.7	17	54.1	435
2007	37.9	19.2	54.7	507
2008	34.3	23.4	53.7	450
2009	36	24.2	55.1	415
2010	37.9	23.2	57.2	386
2011	37.4	23.4	57	429
2012	37.6	23.1	55.9	597
2013	40.2	24.1	56.3	413
2014	40.1	24.9	59.1	388
2015	39.3	25.4	54.4	446
2016	36.6	13.3	57.7	482
2017	35	15.4	56.3	662
2018	36.3	11	54.3	568
2019	35.5	17.5	56.3	695
2020	36.2	19.5	56.5	520
2021	36.9	15.9	57.1	549
2022	39.1	21.7	57.3	483
2023	40.2	13.4	55.2	260
2024	38.5	19.2	53.1	259
2025	38	16.1	52.6	164

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Table 5. King Mackerel length (FL, in) fishery-dependent recreational sampling by MRIP in North Carolina, 1981–2025.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
1981	38.5	25.0	46.0	47
1982	33.9	15.7	44.1	90
1983	30.1	5.7	36.0	33
1984	31.1	12.2	44.3	71
1985	32.9	22.0	42.5	67
1986	33.1	19.7	48.9	257
1987	31.4	12.6	55.9	1,041
1988	13.5	14.2	58.5	646
1989	33.8	12.2	53.9	765
1990	31.3	12.2	59.5	1,169
1991	31.8	10.1	57.9	1,057
1992	31.1	14.6	57.9	1,037
1993	32.3	12.8	58.3	772
1994	32.2	20.1	65.4	829
1995	31.2	14.6	53.5	959
1996	31.3	20.1	56.0	670
1997	30.5	12.6	54.6	1,814
1998	32.4	13.9	57.8	1,062
1999	32.9	18.3	50.2	452
2000	33.7	19.3	69.6	831
2001	37.0	22.4	59.1	800
2002	34.6	22.7	54.2	218
2003	32.8	20.2	55.0	268
2004	32.2	13.2	55.5	247
2005	29.6	21.7	53.3	277
2006	32.0	19.2	59.2	269
2007	31.1	21.3	49.3	320
2008	30.1	20.6	47.9	317
2009	32.7	21.0	46.9	168
2010	32.5	25.0	50.0	83
2011	34.1	28.0	51.0	36
2012	32.9	23.5	51.0	74
2013	32.6	23.5	54.8	38
2014	38.7	23.9	53.1	106
2015	33.3	22.2	52.9	93
2016	30.4	12.2	60.0	213
2017	31.9	13.4	48.9	278
2018	30.3	14.6	60.4	365
2019	29.7	10.2	49.8	369
2020	31.6	10.4	54.4	363
2021	31.7	17.8	48.4	306
2022	31.8	17.1	50.6	128
2023	35.6	17.1	59.5	144
2024	34.9	22.1	51.2	49
2025	33.7	23	47	32

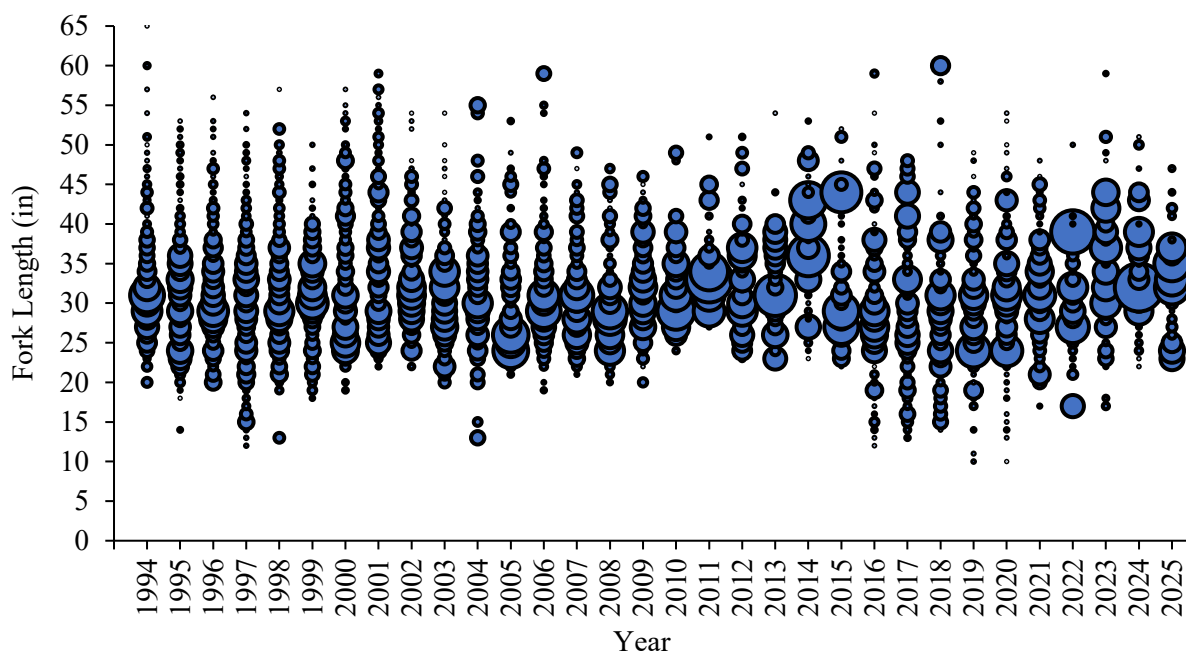


Figure 7. Recreational length frequency (FL, in) of King Mackerel, 1994–2025. Bubbles represent 1 in length bins, and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

Currently, DMF does not have any fishery-independent sampling programs that target or catch King Mackerel in great numbers.

RESEARCH NEEDS

From SEDAR 38 (2014) and SEDAR 38 Update (2020):

- Develop a survey to obtain reliable age and size composition data and relative abundance of adult fish. This could be done using gill nets or handlines. The review panel recommends that the design of a scientific survey be peer reviewed.
- Determine most appropriate methods to deal with changing selectivity in fisheries over time, particularly changing selectivity related to management actions or targeting of specific cohorts. The review panel suggests that historical mark-recapture data be used to compare size composition of recaptures for different fishing gears to evaluate selectivity for historic periods.
- More accurately characterize juvenile growth by increasing samples of age-0 and age-1 fish. Further investigate two-phase growth models including different breakpoints and different growth models to better model size and age. Consider if there is temporal (annual and seasonal) variability in growth rates. Results of this analysis in terms of the best model will need to be implementable in Stock Synthesis to continue with the integrated modeling approach.
- Consider conducting an extensive tagging program to: a) better understand migration patterns; b) provide additional and individual growth rate information; c) better understand fishery selectivity; d) provide fishery exploitation rates; and e) provide information about natural mortality rates.
- Evaluation of alternative age references, or age-specific time series, for the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) fishery-independent survey was recommended by the data providers and noted by the analyst for future assessments. An analysis of the effect of excluding

sublegal fish size observations on the assessment should be undertaken. Information on the age-composition of discarded fish from all fleets is needed to validate the assumption of exclusively age-0 discards. The conditional age-at-length data had a significant influence on recent recruitment estimates.

MANAGEMENT

King Mackerel is included in the North Carolina IJ FMP, which defers SAFMCs management plan compliance requirements. Current management measures were established under recent Amendments 20A (SAFMC 2013a), 20B (SMAFC 2014b), and 26 (SAFMC 2016) to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics FMP. Amendment 20A prohibits the sale of all recreational bag-limit-caught King Mackerel, except those harvested during a state-permitted tournament. Amendment 20B establishes separate commercial quotas of Atlantic King Mackerel for a Northern Zone (north of North Carolina and South Carolina state line) and Southern Zone (south of North Carolina and South Carolina state line). The SAFMC completed Amendment 26 (SAFMC 2016) to update the Atlantic King Mackerel annual catch limits and adjust the mixing zone based on the results of the 2014 stock assessment, and to provide an incidental catch allowance of Atlantic King Mackerel in the small coastal shark gillnet fishery. Current management strategies for King Mackerel in South Atlantic waters are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission management strategies for King Mackerel.

Management Strategy	Implementation Status
Prohibits Purse Gill Nets when taking King or Spanish mackerel	Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0512
24-in FL minimum size limit. Three fish recreational creel limit. Commercial Vessel Permit requirements. Commercial trip limit of 3,500 lb of King, Spanish, or aggregate. Charter vessels or head boats with Commercial Vessel Permit must comply with possession limits when fishing with more than three persons Unlawful for vessels with both a valid Federal Commercial Directed Shark Permit and a valid Federal King Mackerel Permit, when engaged in directed shark fishing with gill nets south of Cape Lookout, to possess and sell more than three King Mackerel per crew member.	Proclamation FF-238-2022

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