

# SCOPING DOCUMENT

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### KINGFISHES FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Scoping Period: September 1 – September 30, 2026



## **The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries seeks your input on Kingfishes (Sea Mullet) Management**



SCAN TO  
SUBMIT ONLINE  
COMMENTS

North Carolina Department of Environmental  
Quality  
North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries  
3441 Arendell Street  
P.O. Box 769  
Morehead City, NC 28557



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## KINGFISHES LEADS

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**SCAN TO VIEW KINGFISHES  
SCOPING INFORMATION AND  
PRESENTATION**

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Important terms to know as you review this scoping document:

**Three species of Kingfishes occur in North Carolina waters:** Southern, Gulf and Northern. The term **Kingfish** is used when referring to a specific species, such as Southern Kingfish, while **Kingfishes** or **Kingfishes stock complex** refers to the three species collectively. Kingfishes are relatively small, fast-growing, coastal species that mature around age 1 or 2 (about 8 ¼ inches). In North Carolina the maximum observed age is 7 with most fish ranging from 0 to 4 years of age. Most fish caught are generally less than 14 inches long. All three species are managed collectively under the **Kingfishes Fishery Management Plan (FMP)**.

**The Kingfishes have several regional names including** sea mullet, king whiting, king croaker, sea mink, roundhead, hard head, whiting, hake, Carolina whiting, and Virginia Mullet.

**Stock** – Population of fish that live in same geographic area and mix enough to spawn when mature.

**Stock Assessment** - Biological and statistical information on a fish population to determine changes in stock abundance over time. Determines stock status.

**Overfishing** – Removing too many fish each year.

**Overfished** – Population is too small.

**Fishery Management Plan (FMP)** – Document that guides management of a fishery to ensure long-term sustainability.

- Management strategies and management measures enacted under an FMP are done through **Amendments**, **Supplements**, or **Revisions** dependent on the issue being addressed. Management can be implemented to address changes in stock status, new scientific information, or changing stakeholder needs.
- An **Information Update** incorporates changes in factual and background data that do not alter management strategies or management measures and does not introduce or address new management issues.

**Management Strategy** – Adopted to help reach the goal and objectives of the plan. They are the sum of all the management measures selected to achieve the biological, ecological, economic, and social objectives of the fishery.

**Management Measure** – The actions implemented to help control the fishery as stipulated in the management strategies.

**Adaptive Management** – A structured decision-making process when uncertainty exists, with the objective of reducing uncertainty through time with monitoring. Provides flexibility to incorporate new information and accommodate alternative and/or additional actions.

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## The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) wants your input on review of the Kingfishes FMP

### PURPOSE OF SCOPING

The scheduled 5-year review of the Kingfishes FMP began in 2025. Upon [reviewing internal and external data](#), the **DMF has not identified any concerning trends in the Kingfishes stock based on available information**, but acknowledges data are limited.

The scoping period provides the public with an opportunity to provide input about stock and fishery issues and the potential need for management changes.

This document provides background information about Kingfishes management and identifies potential issues and management strategies to be addressed. Scoping is the first and best opportunity to make suggestions about what management strategies should or should not be considered during review of the Kingfishes FMP.

**Specific management options have not been developed.** After reviewing public comments received during the scoping process, the DMF will recommend whether to pursue an **Information Update**, where no management changes are made, or an **Amendment**, where management changes are proposed for adoption by the Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC).

Questions about the Kingfishes fisheries and stock are provided at the end of this document for the public to consider; in general: “What do “viable” Kingfishes fisheries look like to you? What aspects of the Kingfishes fisheries are most important to you? Do you have concerns about the status of the Kingfishes stock? Would you make any changes to Kingfishes management?”

The suggested questions in this document are **NOT** intended to limit the scope of ideas or comments but may provide guidance to organize your thoughts. **The DMF wants to hear about your experiences in the Kingfishes fisheries and how YOU would approach management.**

### WHAT IS SCOPING?

Scoping is the first stage of the FMP process. Scoping serves to:

1. Provide notice to the public that a formal review of the FMP is underway.
2. Inform the public of the stock status, when available.
3. Solicit input on relevant management strategies and issues to be addressed.
4. Recruit FMP Advisory Committee (AC) members to assist the DMF in drafting the plan.

### SCOPING PERIOD

September 1, 2026 – September 30, 2026

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## SCOPING MEETINGS

DMF will hold two scoping meetings (dates, times, and locations in table below), one of which will also provide the opportunity for online participation. At each scoping meeting, DMF staff will be available to provide information, answer questions, and solicit feedback about Kingfishes science, data collection, and management in North Carolina. There will be a presentation followed by a formal comment session. Following the comment session, DMF staff will be available for participants to further discuss issues and attendees are encouraged to communicate and share ideas with DMF staff.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Thursday September 3, 2026</b><br/>6 p.m. to 8 p.m.<br/>DMF Central District Office<br/>5285 Highway 70 West<br/>Morehead City, NC 28557</p> <p>The meeting will also be streamed online<br/>A listening station will be available at the<br/>Manteo Field Office<br/>1021 Driftwood Drive<br/>Manteo, NC 27954</p> | <p><b>Thursday September 17, 2026</b><br/>6 p.m. to 8 p.m.<br/>Wilmington Regional Office<br/>127 Cardinal Drive Extension<br/>Wilmington, NC 28405</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## HOW TO COMMENT

During the comment period, the public may provide comments in person at the public scoping meetings or in writing. Written comments may also be submitted online or through U.S. Mail. All written comments must be received or postmarked by 11:59 pm on Wednesday September 30, 2026. You may submit written comments through one of the following methods:

1. Online at: [Kingfishes Scoping Comments](#)
2. U.S. Mail to:

N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries  
Kingfishes Scoping  
P.O. Box 769  
Morehead City, N.C. 28557

All comments, regardless of submission method, will be considered by the DMF during FMP review.

## CURRENT MANAGEMENT

Kingfishes in North Carolina are managed under the [Kingfishes Fishery Management Plan](#). The FMP developed management strategies to ensure long-term sustainable harvest for the recreational and commercial Kingfishes fisheries in North Carolina. The plan established the use of annual trend analysis and triggers to monitor the viability of the stock and identify potential management concerns. Results are presented to the MFC as part of the annual FMP Review. Activation of any two triggers two years in a row warrants further evaluation of the data and potential management action.

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The FMP did not implement any management measures to directly limit the recreational or commercial harvest of Kingfishes. The only rule that directly refers to Kingfish is 15A NCAC 03J .0202(5) which states it shall be unlawful to possess finfish incidental to shrimp or crab trawl operations from December 1 through March 31 unless the weight of the combined catch of shrimp and crabs exceeds the weight of finfish, except an additional 300 pounds of Kingfish (*Menticirrhus* spp.) may be taken south of Bogue Inlet. Otherwise, **there are currently no size, bag, or trip limits for Kingfishes and there is no closed season.**

**Information Updates** to the FMP were completed in [2015](#) and [2020](#). In 2015, the best available data and techniques used for the trend analysis and triggers were refined and modified to better assess population trends. In 2020, the annual FMP Review served as the comprehensive 5-year FMP review.

## STOCK STATUS

As part of this comprehensive FMP review, [available data were explored](#) to examine the [possibility of conducting a stock assessment](#) for the Kingfishes stock complex in N.C. waters. However, because the Kingfishes stock complex is transboundary and consists of multiple species with their own unique biological characteristics, the stock assessment was not successful and could not estimate **stock status** relative to whether the **stock** is **overfished** or **overfishing** is occurring.

However, to further investigate the relative health of the Kingfishes stock complex when they are in N.C. waters, recreational and commercial landings data, fishery-independent indices, and age and length composition data were explored. Upon reviewing the data, the [DMF concluded](#):

- Data for Kingfishes are limited, but
- The available data is informative of the Kingfishes stock complex
- **There is no immediate concern for the Kingfishes stock complex**

Results of the data review and the scoping period will inform how the FMP review will proceed.

## RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

Most recreational harvest of Kingfishes come from the nearshore ocean and anglers fishing from structures like piers, jetties, or bridges but also from surf fishing. A smaller number are captured from vessels in the ocean and in estuarine waters. Recreational harvest is seasonal with most fish harvested during the spring and fall, and the lowest harvest during the summer. Harvest was generally low in the 1980s but has been increasing since the early 2000s (Figure 1). Since 2009, recreational fisheries have harvested around 2.0 million pounds per year or more with some variability across years. Around 6.0 million pounds harvested in 2021 and over 3.0 million pounds harvested in 2022.

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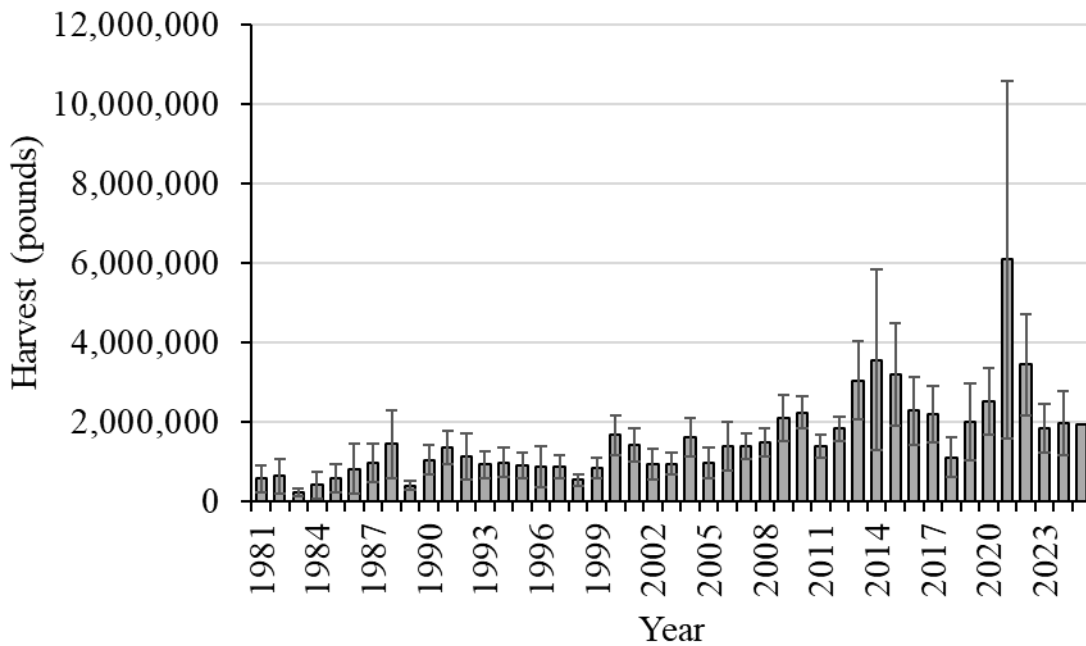


Figure 1. Estimated pounds of Kingfishes harvested in the North Carolina recreational fishery by year, 1981–2025. The lines through each bar indicate the 95% confidence interval for the harvest estimate. Data Source: Marine Recreational Information Program.

## COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

Most commercial landings occur south of Cape Hatteras in nearshore (less than three nautical miles) ocean waters. Kingfishes are predominantly landed in the spring and fall corresponding with seasonal inshore and offshore movement. Most commercial landings come from ocean gill nets with lesser amounts landed from trawls, estuarine gill nets, and long haul seines.

Commercial landings ranged from roughly 200,000 pounds to 1.2 million pounds per year from 1981 through 2025 (Figure 2). The number of commercial trips (Figure 3) landing Kingfishes and the number of participants (Figure 4) in the commercial Kingfishes fisheries have declined since 1994.

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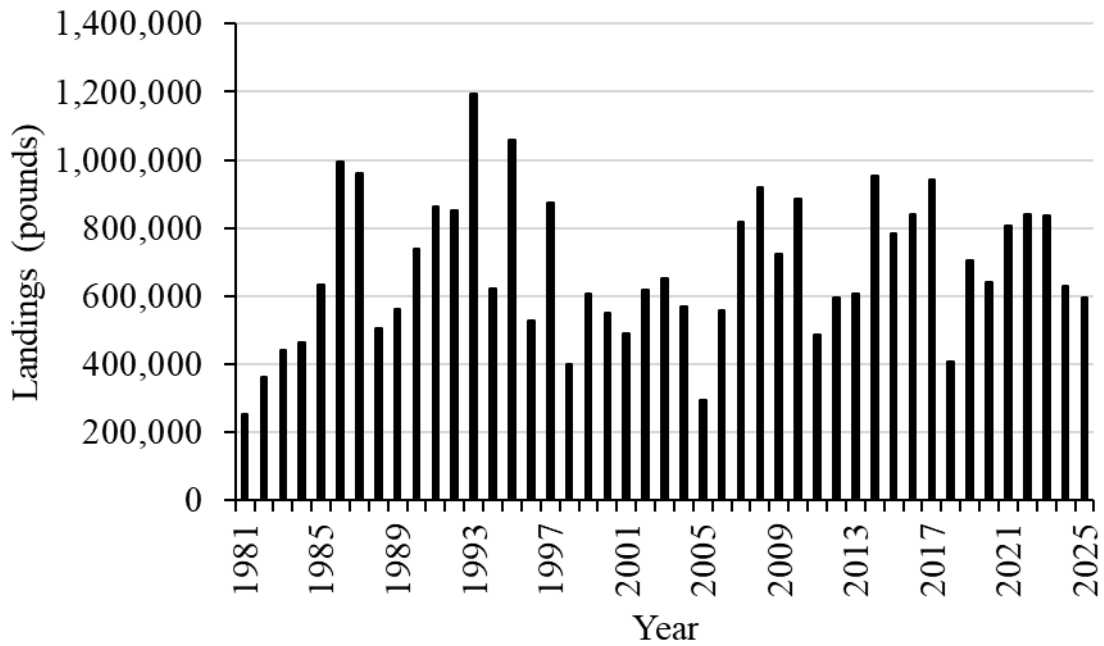


Figure 2. Pounds of Kingfishes harvested in the North Carolina commercial fishery by year, 1981–2025. Data Source: N.C. Trip Ticket Program.

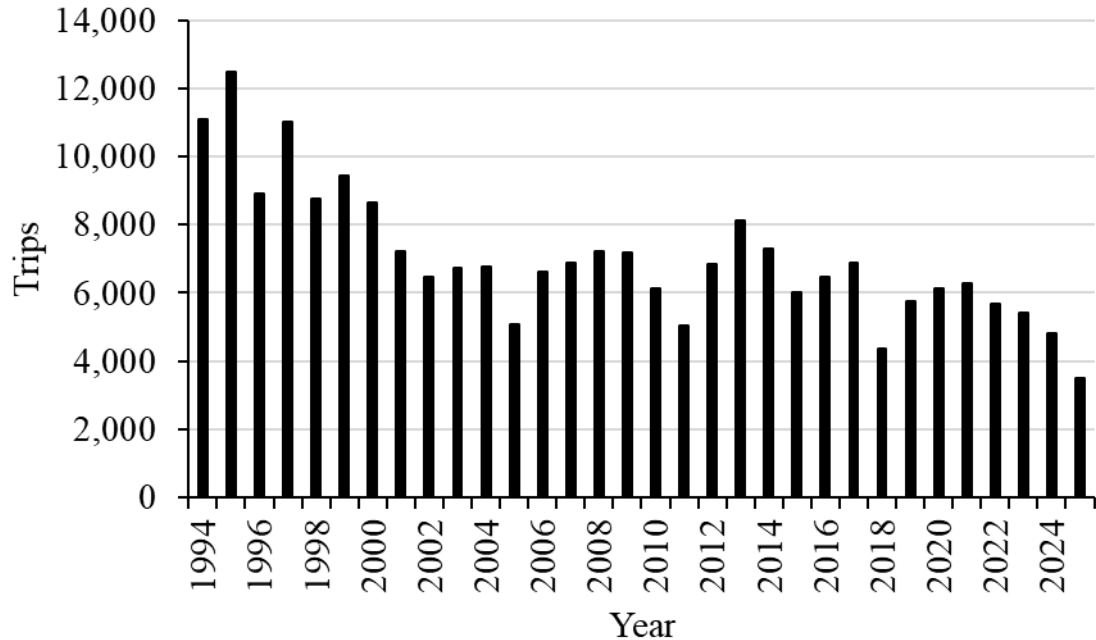


Figure 3. Number of commercial fishing trips landing Kingfishes in North Carolina by year, 1994–2025. Data Source: N.C. Trip Ticket Program.



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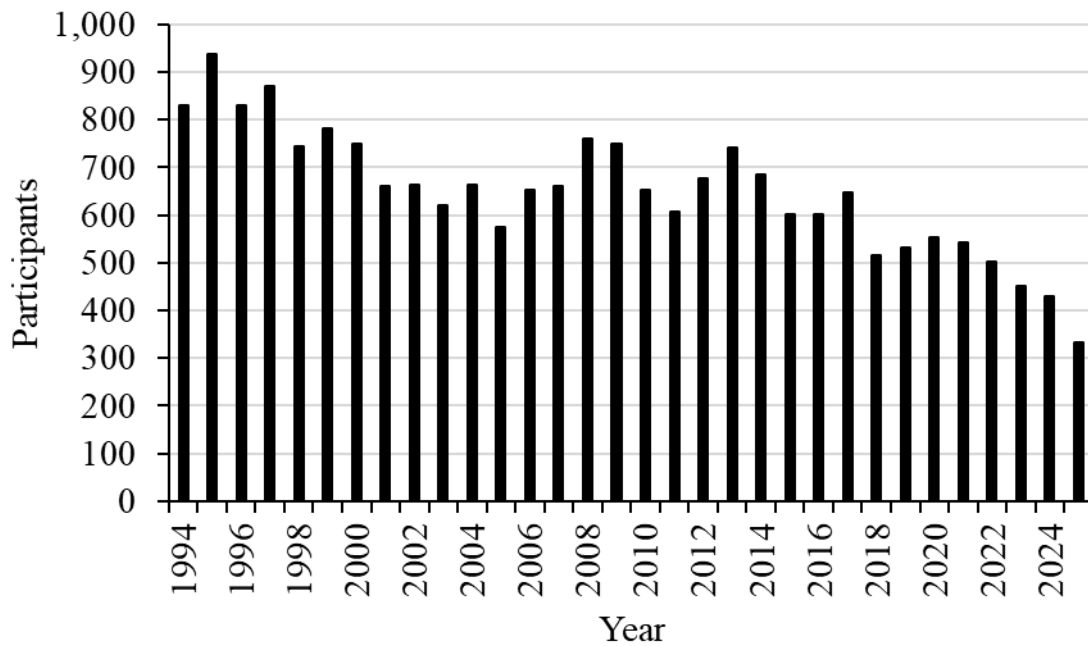


Figure 4. Number of commercial fishery participants reporting Kingfishes landings, 1994–2025. Data Source: N.C. Trip Ticket Program.

## STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION

The DMF is in the early exploratory stages of FMP development. **Specific management options have not been developed, and nothing has been proposed.**

After reviewing public comments received during the scoping process, the DMF will recommend whether to pursue an **Information Update**, as was done in 2015 and 2020 when no management changes are made, or an **Amendment**, where management changes are proposed for adoption by the MFC.

Prior to determining how to proceed with the current FMP review, the DMF is looking for public input regarding perceptions of the Kingfishes stock and fisheries.

### Proactive Management

While the DMF has not identified immediate concern for the Kingfishes stock complex based on available data, because there are no management measures in place to directly limit harvest of Kingfishes, shifts in effort that substantially increase harvest could cause concern. Proactive management that maintains the Kingfishes stock complex at the current level could be considered during this FMP review. This could involve adopting “guardrail” management based on current fishery characteristics and Kingfishes life history such as minimum size limits (consistent with the length at which Kingfishes are able to spawn), or bag/trip limits.

### Monitoring Framework

The current framework monitors the Kingfishes stock complex annually using triggers. This framework is not specific as to what conditions or data trends might indicate the need for

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additional management. In addition, review of the triggers in 2025 concluded most were set too conservatively, survey changes have limited their effectiveness, or survey changes have eliminated the ability to use specific triggers moving forward. **At a minimum this FMP review will update the current triggers through an Information Update to include the most informative data to represent the status of the Kingfishes stock complex**, like what was done in 2015.

The 2026 FMP review could re-evaluate the response to triggers being exceeded through an amendment. The response could be made prescriptive, where triggers being exceeded would result in specific management changes being implemented (e.g., size or bag limits, etc.).

## Small Mesh Gill Nets

At their August 2021 business meeting, the MFC passed a motion to not initiate rulemaking on small mesh gill nets (< 5 inches stretched mesh) but refer the issue through the FMP process for each species. The DMF is interested in public input about fishing practices in the commercial gill net fishery and ideas about how to best manage the Kingfishes small mesh gill net fishery. The DMF is also interested in how implementation of potential management (e.g., minimum size limit, minimum mesh size, or trip limits) would impact fishing operations.

## Questions for the Public

The questions below are provided for the public to consider when thinking about the Kingfishes fisheries; in general: “What aspects of the Kingfishes fisheries are most important to you? Would you make any changes to Kingfishes management to improve your experience in the fisheries?”

The suggested questions in this document are **NOT** intended to limit the scope of ideas or comments but may provide guidance to organize your thoughts.

- **What do “viable” Kingfishes fisheries mean to you?**
- **How do you view the future of the Kingfishes fisheries?**
- **As regulations have limited harvest of other fish, do you fish for Kingfishes more often?**
- **What aspects of the Kingfishes fisheries are important to you? For example, do you fish for Kingfishes because they are easily accessible? Do you fish for Kingfishes to keep a lot of fish? Do you prefer keeping larger Kingfishes or do you like keeping all sizes?**
- **How often do you fish for Kingfishes? Where, when, and how do you fish for Kingfishes?**
- **What time of year is targeting Kingfishes most important to you?**
- **In the recreational fishery, how often do you practice catch and release of Kingfishes? What size Kingfishes do you prefer to keep? Do you ever use Kingfishes as bait?**
- **In the commercial fishery, what challenges do you face to operate sustainably and effectively? Have your fishing methods changed to harvest Kingfishes? How have they changed?**