

STATE MANAGED SPECIES – SOUTHERN FLOUNDER

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE SOUTHERN FLOUNDER AUGUST 2026

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

Original FMP Adoption:	February 2005	
Amendments:	Amendment 1	February 2013
	Amendment 2	August 2019
	Amendment 3	May 2022
	Amendment 4	August 2025
Revisions:	None	
Supplements:	Supplement A to the FMP	February 2011
	Supplement A to Amendment 1	August 2017
Information Updates:	None	
Schedule Changes:	None	
Comprehensive Review:	2024	

Southern Flounder (*Paralichthys lethostigma*) in North Carolina are managed under Amendment 4 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan (FMP; NCDMF 2025).

At the August 2024 North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) business meeting, the Commission passed a motion “to ask the DMF Director to ask the DEQ (Department of Environmental Quality) Secretary to modify the Annual FMP Review Schedule to amend the Southern Flounder FMP for the review of the plan to begin in 2024. The intent is to allow for more recreational access while maintaining the rebuilding requirements of the North Carolina Southern Flounder FMP Amendment 3”. The DEQ Secretary approved the schedule change in November 2024, which included the development of a focused amendment to give the MFC the opportunity to consider implementing the 50/50 sector allocation in 2025 instead of 2026 as prescribed in Amendment 3.

At its August 2025, business meeting, the MFC adopted Amendment 4 to the Southern Flounder FMP as proposed by the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) which implemented the 50/50 sector allocation in 2025. In addition, Amendment 4 carried forward the following measures from Amendment 3 in order to help achieve sustainable harvest:

- A commercial and recreational minimum size limit of 15 in total length (TL);
- A minimum mesh size of 6.0-in stretched mesh (ISM) for anchored large-mesh gill nets used in the taking of flounder;
- A minimum mesh size of 5.75-ISM for pound net escape panels;
- Reduced commercial anchored large-mesh gill-net soak times to single overnight soaks where nets may be set no sooner than 1 h before sunset and must be retrieved no later than 1 h after sunrise the next morning;
- For anchored large-mesh gill nets with a 4.0 through 6.5 ISM, maintain a maximum of 1,500 yd in Management Units A, B, and C and a maximum of 750 yd in Management Units D1, D2, and E unless more restrictive yardage is specified through adaptive management or through the sea turtle or sturgeon Incidental Take Permit (ITP);

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- Removal of all commercial gears targeting Southern Flounder from the water (e.g., commercial and recreational commercial gear license (RCGL) anchored large-mesh gill nets and gigs) or make them inoperable (flounder pound nets) in areas and during times outside of an open season with exceptions for commercial large-mesh gill-net fisheries that target American Shad (*Alosa sapidissima*), Hickory Shad (*A. mediocris*) and catfish species if these fisheries are only allowed to operate during times of the year and locations where bycatch of Southern Flounder is unlikely.
- Unlawful to use any method of retrieving live flounder from pound nets that causes injury to released fish (e.g., picks, gigs, spears, etc.);
- Unlawful for commercial fishery to possess any species of flounder harvested from the internal waters of the state during the closed Southern Flounder season;
- Combine mobile gears (gill nets, gigs, and “other” gears) into one gear category and maintain pound nets as their own separate commercial fishery;
- Divide mobile gears into two areas using the ITP boundary line for management sub-units Northern D1 and Southern D1, maintaining consistency with Amendment 2 and Amendment 3 boundary line;
- Divide the pound net fishery into three areas maintaining consistency with areas in Amendment 2 and 3;
- Maintain 72% reduction and current sub-allocation for the pound net fishery.
- Implement trip limits for pound nets, gigs, and hook and line only to maximize reopening after reaching the division closure threshold;
- Implement a single season for the recreational gig and hook-and-line fisheries to constrain them to an annual quota;
- Maintain the recreational bag limit of flounder at one fish per person per day;
- Do not allow harvest of Southern Flounder using RCGL;
- Should landings be available, allow potential for spring ocellated flounder season to occur from March 1–April 15 in ocean waters only using hook-and-line gear with one-fish ocellated only bag limit;
- Maintain the adaptive management framework based on the peer-reviewed and approved stock assessment

Management Unit

In Amendment 4 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder FMP, the management unit is defined as North Carolina internal coastal and joint fishing waters and the Atlantic Ocean 0–3 mi.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of Amendment 4 is to manage the Southern Flounder fishery to achieve a self-sustaining population that provides sustainable harvest using science-based decision-making processes (NCDMF 2025). The following objectives will be used to achieve this goal:

- Implement management strategies within North Carolina and encourage interjurisdictional management strategies that maintain/restore the Southern Flounder spawning stock with expansion of age structure of the stock and adequate abundance to prevent overfishing.
- Restore, enhance, and protect habitat and environmental quality necessary to maintain or increase growth, survival, and reproduction of the Southern Flounder population.
- Use biological, environmental, habitat, fishery, social, and economic data needed to effectively monitor and manage the Southern Flounder fishery and its ecosystem impacts.

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- Promote stewardship of the resource through increased public outreach and interjurisdictional cooperation throughout the species range regarding the status and management of the Southern Flounder fishery, including practices that minimize bycatch and discard mortality.
- Promote the restoration, enhancement, and protection of habitat and environmental quality in a manner consistent with the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

Southern Flounder is a bottom dwelling species of left eyed flounder found in the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, and estuaries from Virginia to northern Mexico (Blandon et al. 2001). This species is one of three commonly caught left eyed flounder in North Carolina; Southern Flounder, Gulf Flounder (*P. albigutta*), and Summer Flounder (*P. dentatus*). Southern Flounder supports important commercial and recreational fisheries along the U.S. south Atlantic and Gulf coasts and is particularly important to fisheries in North Carolina. Based on tagging and genetic data, and aging structures, the biological unit stock for Southern Flounder includes fish from North Carolina through the East Coast of Florida (Lee et al. 2018; Ross et al. 1982; Monaghan 1996; Schwartz 1997; Craig and Rice 2008; Anderson and Karel 2012; Midway et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2015, 2018). Evidence suggests some adult Southern Flounder return to the estuaries after spawning in the ocean, while others remain in the ocean (Watterson and Alexander 2004; Taylor et al. 2008; Loeffler et al. 2024; NCDMF, unpublished data). Tagged fish are typically recaptured south of original tagging locations and often in other states once in the ocean (Craig et al. 2015; Loeffler et al. 2019). Limited data from South Carolina and Georgia tagging programs suggest a low probability of adult movement from South Carolina or Georgia to North Carolina waters (Wenner et al. 1990; SCDNR Inshore Fisheries Section, unpublished data; Flowers et al. 2019). However, more data are needed to fully understand the movement rates of Southern Flounder across state boundaries.

With the onset of maturity in the fall, female Southern Flounder migrate to ocean waters to spawn. Spawning locations in the Atlantic Ocean remain unknown; however, pelagic larvae have been observed over the continental shelf where spawning is thought to occur (Benson 1982). Satellite tagging studies indicate a range of migratory behaviors and habitat uses ranging from inshore estuarine environments to offshore outer continental shelf habitats (Loeffler et al. 2024). Southern Flounder are capable of producing approximately three million eggs per female in multiple spawning events in a season, and spawning is thought to take place between November and April (Gunther 1945; Hettler and Barker 1993; Midway and Scharf 2012; Hollensead 2018; Watanabe et al. 2001). Larval Southern Flounder pass through inlets within 30 to 45 days of hatching and settle throughout the sounds and rivers in the winter and early spring (Burke et al. 1991; Miller et al. 1991; Daniels 2000; Glass et al. 2008; Taylor et al. 2010; Lowe et al. 2011). Not much is known about the movement of juveniles less than 8 in, but these fish may primarily remain near settlement locations. Some larger juveniles have been shown to move short distances within a water body and some studies have shown limited movements while Southern Flounder are residing within an estuary (Monaghan 1996; McClellan 2001; Craig et al. 2015). Juveniles likely spend at least 1 year in inshore waters before migrating to the ocean (McKenna and Camp 1992; Hannah and Hannah 2000; Watterson and Alexander 2004; Taylor et al. 2008).

Over half of female flounder are mature by age 2 (at approximately 16 in TL; Monaghan and Armstrong 2000; Midway and Scharf 2012). Fish collected in the ocean tend to be larger and older, with females growing larger than males. The largest female Southern Flounder observed in North Carolina was a 33-in TL and largest male was 20-in TL (Lee et al. 2018; Flowers et al. 2019; Schlick et al. 2024). The maximum observed age was 9 years for a female and 6 years for a male; Southern Flounder captured in North Carolina represent the oldest ages observed throughout the range (Lee et al. 2018; Flowers et al. 2019; Schlick et al. 2024).

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Juvenile and adult Southern Flounder typically feed by camouflaging themselves on the bottom and ambushing their prey with a quick upward lunge (Burke 1995; Arrivillaga and Baltz 1999). Southern Flounder diets switch to fish when they are between 3 and 4 in TL (Wenner et al. 1990; Fitzhugh et al. 1996; Ellis 2007). Adult Southern Flounder feed almost exclusively on other fish but will consume shrimp as well.

Stock Status

The South Atlantic Southern Flounder stock is overfished, and overfishing is occurring as of 2017, the terminal year of the 2019 coastwide stock assessment update (Flowers et al. 2019). Results indicate SSB has decreased since 2006 and recruitment, while variable, has declined. Fishing mortality (F) is less variable and decreased slightly in 2017. The model estimated a value of 0.35 for $F_{35\%}$ (F target) and a value of 0.53 for $F_{25\%}$ (F threshold). The estimate of $SSB_{35\%}$ (target) was 12.0 million lb and the estimate of $SSB_{25\%}$ (threshold) was 8.6 million lb. The female SSB that represents the minimum level of sustainability for Southern Flounder was estimated at 8.6 million lb. The stock assessment estimate of female SSB in 2017 was 2.3 million lb (Figure 1). Because the 2017 estimate of female SSB is below the threshold reference point, the stock is considered overfished. The probability that the 2017 estimate of SSB is below the threshold is 100%. The 2017, F estimate was 0.91, which is above the F threshold of 0.53, indicating that overfishing is occurring (Figure 2). The probability that the 2017 F estimate is above the threshold is 96%.

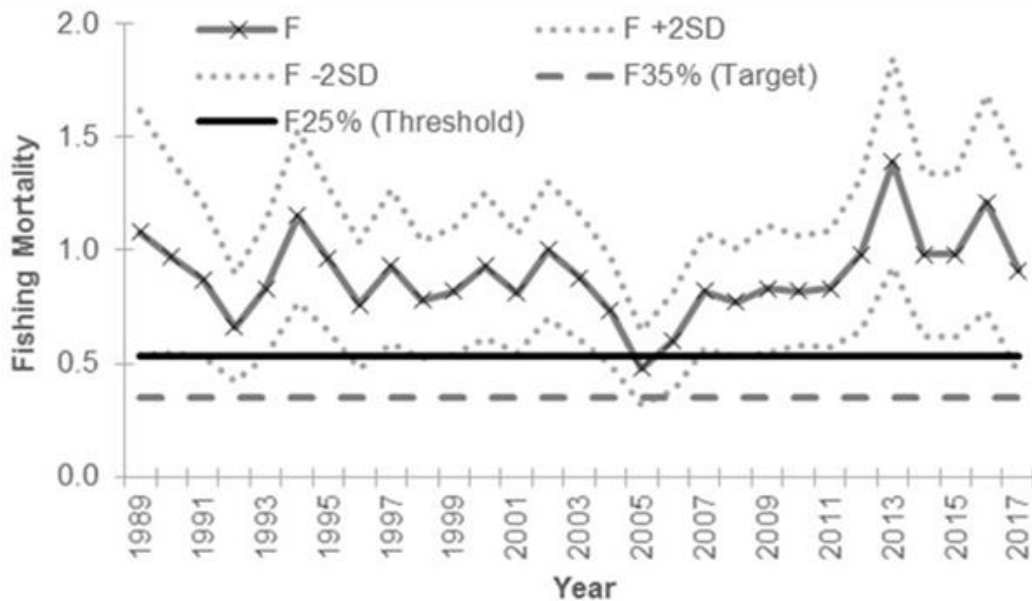


Figure 1. Estimated fishing mortality rates (numbers-weighted, ages 2–4) compared to established reference points for Southern Flounder, 1989–2017. (Source: Flowers et al. 2019)

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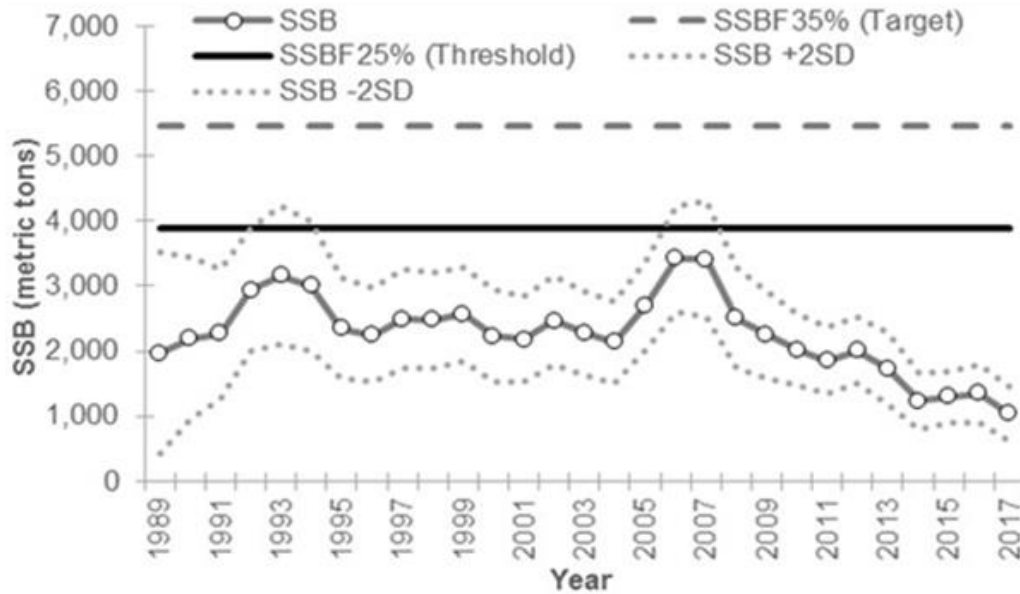


Figure 2. Estimated spawning stock biomass compared to established reference points for Southern Flounder, 1989–2017. (Source: Flowers et al. 2019)

Stock Assessment

Over the last 20 years several stock assessments have been conducted by division staff. Southern Flounder stock assessments were completed in 2005 (Grist 2004), 2009 (Takade-Heumacher and Batsavage 2009), 2014 (NCDMF 2015), with each concluding that Southern Flounder was overfished, and that overfishing was occurring. These assessments were for North Carolina only. Upon review of the 2014 assessment, external peer reviewers and the DMF determined the model could not fully account for stock mixing during spawning, nor quantify migration of Southern Flounder to and from North Carolina waters. Consequently, the assessment was not accepted for management use and stock status could not be determined.

A coastwide Southern Flounder stock assessment was developed and included data and expertise of state agency staff from North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, as well as researchers from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and Louisiana State University. In 2018, the first benchmark assessment of the coastwide Southern Flounder stock (North Carolina south to the east coast of Florida) was completed as a multi-state endeavor with a terminal year of 2015 (Lee et al. 2018). This assessment was updated in 2019 with the addition of 2 years of data such that the terminal year was 2017 (Flowers et al. 2019). The assessment, and update, used a statistical catch-at-age model run using the Age Structured Assessment Program (ASAP; Lee et al. 2018).

In December 2017, the Southern Flounder Review Panel accepted the pooled-sex run of the ASAP model presented at the Review Workshop and approved the model as a valid basis of management for at least 5 years, with the expectation that the model would be updated with data through 2017 to provide the best, most up to date estimate of stock status for management. The reviewers noted that management advice based on the 2015 terminal year would be out of date by the time it could be implemented and that expected changes to recreational catch estimates (MRIP) should be incorporated into the assessment model and management response.

During 2018, the Southern Flounder Stock Assessment Sub-Committee updated all necessary data inputs for the ASAP model. The pooled-sex model was updated with data through 2017 and incorporated the new MRIP estimates that were available (Flowers et al. 2019). Analyses that provided projections of reductions to F necessary to end overfishing and to determine what reductions would be necessary to rebuild the spawning stock biomass and end the overfished status were completed (Flowers et al. 2019). A 52%

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reduction in coastwide total removals (harvest plus dead discards), compared to 2017 total removals, was needed to rebuild Southern Flounder spawning stock biomass (SSB) to the SSB threshold and a 72% reduction in removals was needed to rebuild SSB to the SSB target.

In early 2024, the Southern Flounder Stock Assessment Sub-Committee conducted a second update to the ASAP model with data through 2022. The 2024 update continued to show declining trends in spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment since 2006; however, F decreased significantly in the last 2 years of the assessment (Schlick et al. 2024). Several trends and diagnostics from the model raised concerns, and division staff and partners from other states decided to not use the new update to inform any management changes; this update served instead as a pulse check on the coastwide stock. A new benchmark stock assessment is needed to address the concerns raised and the model configuration changed to account for the differential management practices used across the stock; until a new benchmark assessment can be completed, Southern Flounder management will be based on the 2019 coastwide assessment update.

It is important to note that the 2019 stock assessment update has some limitations on how it can now be used to inform management in North Carolina. Most importantly, the assessment is out of date with a terminal year of 2017. The coastwide assessment was also not spatially explicit to each state. Instead, the assessment model used a single coastwide commercial fleet and a single coastwide recreational fleet to account for removals. This approach prohibits rebuilding projection analysis at the state level as well as analysis on the impacts of individual state harvest reductions. A spatially explicit model was not possible because there was not sufficient movement data of flounder across the stock's range. Updating the coastwide stock assessment requires participation by partner states and representatives from the states that collaborated on the last assessment indicated they will not be able to begin work on an updated assessment until 2028. Assessments typically take about 2 years to complete and undergo peer review, meaning that an updated coastwide assessment will not be available and approved for management use until at least 2030. Even if a new coastwide assessment could be completed, it would need to be spatially explicit to the state level to allow for successful state-based management. Moreover, the next assessment would need to add sufficient movement data to quantify North Carolina's contribution to the overall spawning stock biomass that inhabits North Carolina waters.

To address issues related to limitations of the 2019 stock assessment and the challenges in updating a coastwide assessment, the division plans to conduct a North Carolina-specific stock assessment and/or other interim quantitative analyses. While these assessment and monitoring techniques cannot determine coastwide stock status (e.g., overfished), it can provide reliable information on population dynamics in North Carolina waters and F reference points that can be managed at the state level without the need for interjurisdictional cooperation. A North Carolina-specific assessment is anticipated to be completed in late 2027. The division will also use quantitative stock indicator analyses calibrated to the North Carolina-only stock assessment to adjust catch limits between stock assessments, similar to federal fisheries management practices (Huynh et al. 2020). Together, these approaches will allow the DMF to base management on the best available and most current and relevant scientific information available, and when appropriate, expand harvest opportunities for stakeholders in North Carolina.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

Commercial regulations include a 15-in-TL minimum size limit from internal waters and 14-in-TL minimum size limit from ocean waters, 6-ISM minimum mesh size for gill nets, closed season in internal waters unless opened by proclamation. The commercial fishery has operated under a quota since the fall of 2022 with two gear categories; mobile gears which are divided into two management areas using the B-D boundary line from the original turtle and sturgeon ITPs and the pound net fishery which is divided into three management areas consistent with Amendment 2. In late September 2024, the National Marine Fisheries Service issued the new turtle and sturgeon ITPs for the division which changed the B-D boundary

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line for the ITPs. However, the old line is still the dividing line between the Southern Flounder mobile gear management areas (a line in Core Sound at 34° 48.2700' N latitude which runs approximately from the Club House on Core Banks westerly to a point on the shore at Davis near Marker “1”). There are no current trip limits in internal waters, but they can be implemented for pound nets, gigs, and hook and line upon reaching a predetermined division closure threshold to reopen the fishery without exceeding the quota. There is a 100-kg trip limit in ocean waters unless the individual has a License to Land Flounder from the Atlantic Ocean; commercial ocean landings are allowed using trawl gear only. In 2025, the Northern Pound Net Management Area opened September 15, while all other gear management areas opened on October 1. The 2026 commercial season opening dates have yet to be determined, though paybacks will be required for any overage to the Total Allowable Catch (TAC).

Recreational regulations include a 15-in-TL minimum size limit, one-fish creel limit from all Joint and Coastal Fishing waters, and a closed season for Internal Coastal and ocean waters unless opened by proclamation. The recreational flounder fishery has operated under seasons to constrain the fishery to a quota since 2022. The 2026 recreational season will be September 1–14; the same as 2025.

Commercial Fishery

All commercial landings reported as caught in Internal Coastal and Joint Fishing waters are considered to be Southern Flounder by the N.C. Trip Ticket Program. Data from the fishery-dependent sampling program indicates that Southern Flounder make up less than 1% of the catch from ocean waters, while Summer Flounder and Gulf flounder account for approximately 2% or less of the flounder harvested from internal waters (NCDMF, unpublished data). Peak commercial landings occurred in 1994 and have since exhibited a downward trend (Table 1; Figure 3). Landings stabilized in 2020 after the implementation of short harvest seasons in Amendment 2 (NCDMF 2019), quota management in Amendment 3 (NCDMF 2022) and are currently capped at 266,176 lb through Amendment 4 (NCDMF 2025). In 2025, the commercial fishery landed 258,883 lb of Southern Flounder during the open season (Table 1).

Most Southern Flounder landings are from gill nets and pound nets, although gigs and other inshore gears (e.g., trawls) catch flounder in smaller numbers (Figure 3). Historically, pound nets were the dominant gear but landings from gill nets were higher from 1994 to 2013. Since 2014, gill net harvest has decreased in all areas of the state, especially in the Albemarle Sound due to widespread gill net closures to avoid catches of red drum and protected species interactions. Pound net harvest surpassed gill net harvest 2014 through 2020 (Figure 3). Gig harvest of Southern Flounder has generally increased, especially since 2010. For the first time, in 2025, gig landings were almost equal to gill net landings (Figure 4). In 2025, the gill net fishery was allowed to harvest Southern Flounder 1 day a week prior to fishery closing; no gill net harvest was allowed upon re-opening. When the 50/50 sector allocation was implemented in 2025, landings shifted from the commercial gill net fishery to the recreational sector, resulting in less quota being available to commercial gill nets compared with previous seasons under quota allocations. All other mobile gears (including gigs) could land Southern Flounder 7 days per week. Weather during the limited gill net openings was marginal and many did not fish; this had a higher impact on fishermen in the northern part of the state which rely traditionally on gill nets due to limited areas conducive to gig harvest. Harvest by other commercial gears has generally decreased and currently makes up less than 1% of commercial harvest.

Commercial harvest from 2019 to 2025 was reduced due to regulations implemented through Amendments 2 through 4 of the Southern Flounder FMP and the resulting short seasons (Table 2). In 2025, the northern and southern mobile gear management areas were open a total of 29 and 11 days, respectively. The northern pound net management area was open for 15 days, the central 27 days, and the southern 20 days. All three pound net management areas exceeded their allowed landings; however, the commercial Southern Flounder fishery overall did not exceed their total allowable landings for 2025.

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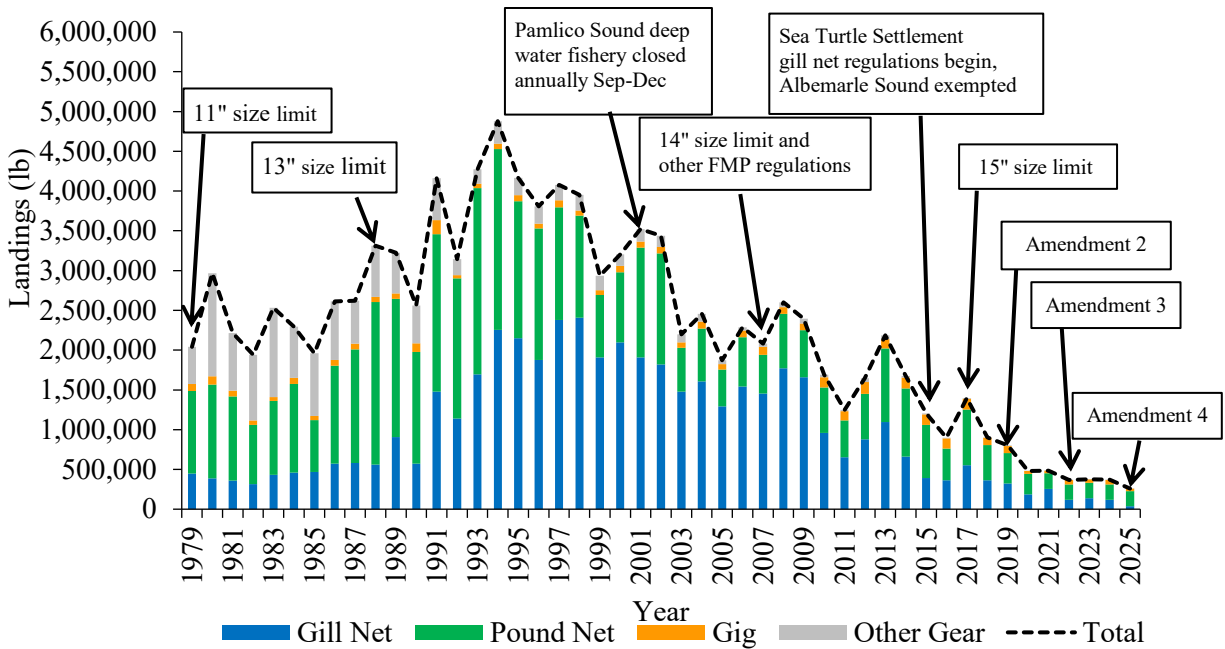


Figure 3. Total Southern Flounder commercial landings (lb) by gear (stacked bars) reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program with major fishery regulation changes, 1979–2025.

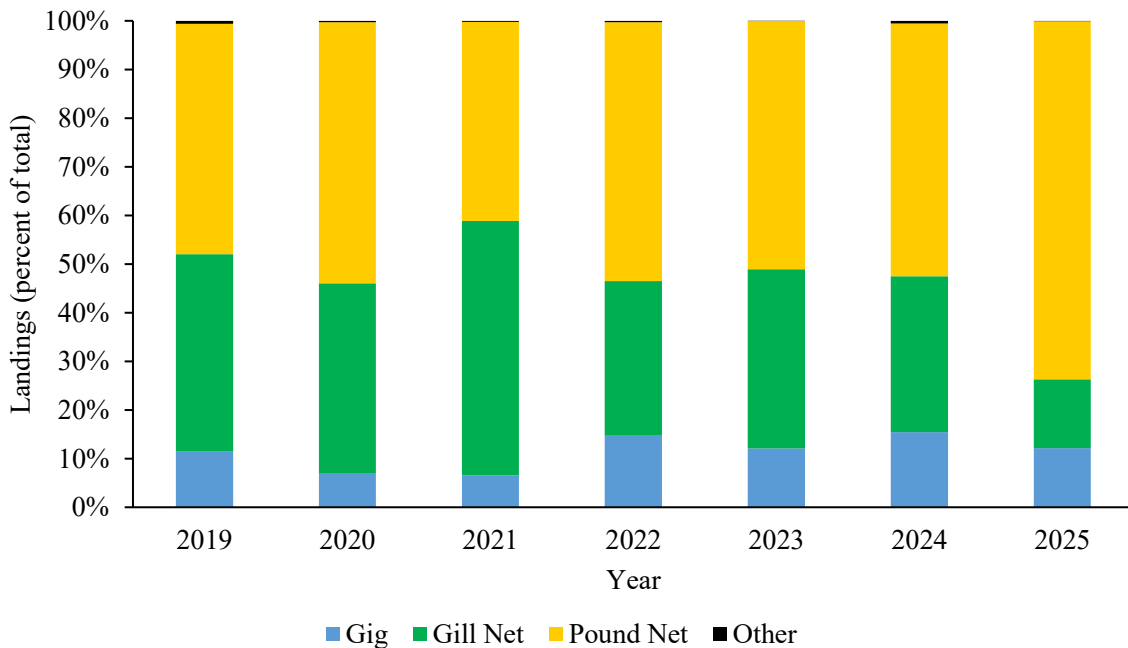


Figure 4. Southern Flounder commercial landings (lb) by gear for the commercial fishery reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program, 2019–2025. “Other Gears” includes hook and line, gig, long line, haul seines, crab pots, fyke nets, and trawls.

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Table 1. Recreational harvest (number and weight in pounds) and releases (number of fish) and commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of Southern Flounder from North Carolina, 1989–2025. Commercial landings are reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program and recreational landings through the Marine Recreational Information Program and N.C. Recreational Flounder Giggling Survey.

Year	Recreational						Commercial	Total Weight Landed
	Hook and Line			Gig			Weight Landed	
	Number Landed	Number Released	Weight Landed	Number Landed	Number Discards	Weight Landed		
1989	119,047	125,192	199,850				3,225,955	3,425,805
1990	138,106	152,895	216,960				2,560,459	2,777,419
1991	257,319	791,778	489,865				4,163,374	4,653,239
1992	115,329	433,576	219,720				3,145,020	3,364,740
1993	83,811	370,372	127,860				4,272,368	4,400,228
1994	168,237	562,915	323,869				4,878,606	5,202,475
1995	127,106	459,800	271,703				4,166,947	4,438,650
1996	173,400	449,876	339,228				3,807,009	4,146,237
1997	209,038	873,901	560,323				4,076,791	4,637,114
1998	96,124	411,939	205,569				3,952,563	4,158,132
1999	78,321	209,956	184,969				2,933,276	3,118,245
2000	326,712	942,560	607,053				3,205,789	3,812,842
2001	304,791	990,335	567,568				3,522,136	4,089,704
2002	366,671	1,415,247	789,539				3,436,751	4,226,290
2003	293,793	860,052	621,985				2,198,501	2,820,486
2004	347,492	1,537,924	827,593				2,454,585	3,282,178
2005	298,307	997,132	675,856				1,870,754	2,546,610
2006	352,942	1,287,601	761,069				2,287,823	3,048,892
2007	279,916	1,075,735	572,064				2,083,043	2,655,107
2008	349,860	2,532,079	807,867				2,602,274	3,410,141
2009	329,117	1,889,921	692,704				2,396,240	3,088,944
2010	556,812	2,835,142	1,149,899	18,079	3,051	41,582	1,689,557	2,881,038
2011	388,647	2,087,604	942,373	51,954	9,726	119,494	1,247,450	2,309,317
2012	290,035	2,434,621	701,698	46,338	2,674	106,577	1,646,137	2,454,413
2013	374,215	2,357,529	869,223	54,419	2,759	125,164	2,186,579	3,180,966
2014	209,228	1,856,280	447,337	42,306	2,715	97,304	1,673,511	2,218,152
2015	249,166	1,709,189	558,303	28,707	2,356	66,026	1,202,952	1,827,281
2016	299,273	2,178,145	695,713	29,642	3,737	68,177	899,932	1,663,822
2017	221,321	1,988,000	451,126	24,136	655	55,513	1,396,384	1,903,023
2018	217,805	1,002,753	495,289	23,243	525	53,459	903,842	1,452,590
2019*	163,045	1,353,286	387,203	20,179	1,042	46,412	800,080	1,233,695
2020*	152,244	1,678,494	398,769	11,511	90	26,475	479,905	905,150
2021*	266,421	1,940,051	560,440	11,338	926	26,077	485,024	1,071,541
2022*	70,945	2,792,144	166,102	3,422	109	7,871	366,510	540,483
2023*§	77,885	2,185,629	192,168	3,422	109	7,871	376,031	576,070
2024*§	5,713	1,798,556	9,446				370,257	379,703
2025*	91,834	1,971,124	270,598	2,893	29	6,654	258,894	536,146
Mean	228,379	1,365,928	496,187	24,773	2,034	56,977	2,249,279	2,768,564

* Years with harvest seasons in place; 2022 was the start of quota management.

§2023 gig survey estimates are not available; 2022 values were used as proxies for quota management purposes. No gig estimates are available for 2024 as no season occurred in Coastal Fishing Waters, and hook and line was the only allowable gear in Inland and Joint Fishing Waters. The N.C. Recreational Flounder Giggling Survey was reinstated in 2025.

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Trends in commercial trips have generally followed landings trends (Figure 5). Trips include the number of trip ticket records with landings reported; some trips may represent more than 1 day of fishing. The majority of trips that harvest flounder are from gill nets. Gill net trips have been variable around a decreasing trend since 2010. Pound net trips decreased until 2002, since they have been variable on a lower level. Gigging trips have been variable around an increasing trend since 2010. The number of trips for all gears targeting Southern Flounder have decreased since regulatory changes due to Amendment 2 (seasonal management) and Amendment 3 (quota management) were implemented limiting the number of days flounder could be harvested.

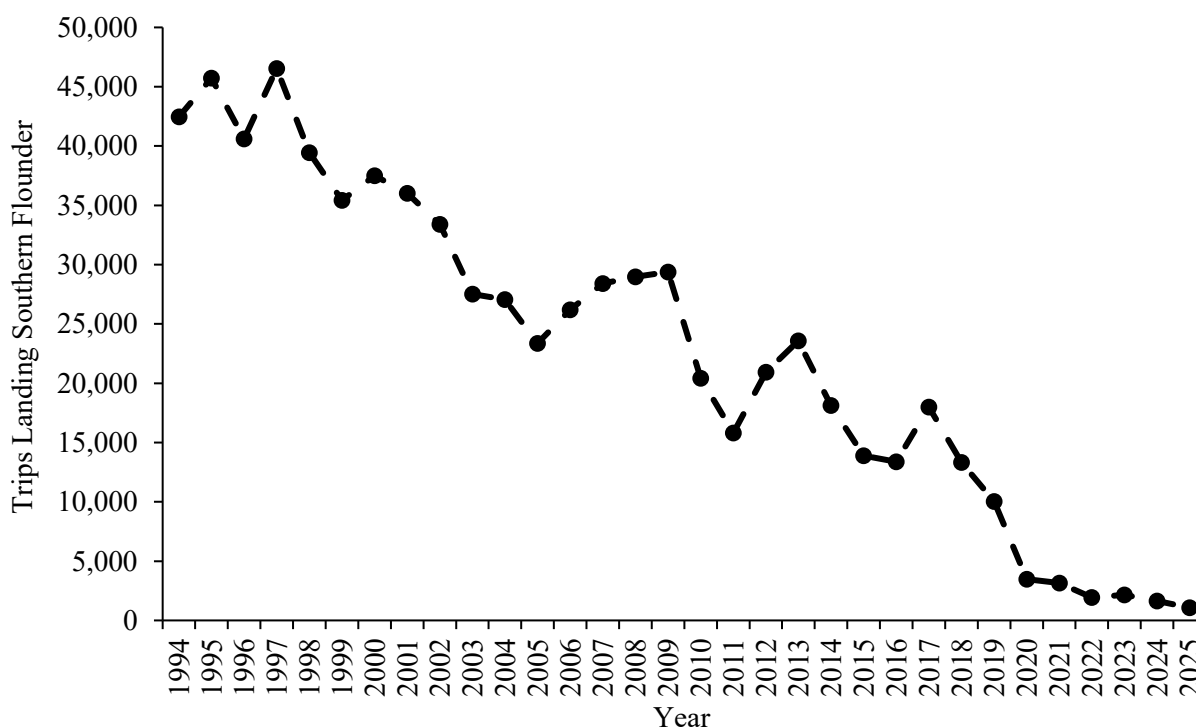


Figure 5. Southern Flounder commercial trips from the N.C. Trip Ticket Program, 1994–2025.

Recreational Fishery

Recreational harvest of Southern Flounder is mainly by hook and line and gigs, with a small amount of harvest by spearfishing or RCGL gears (prior to 2022). DMF does not have information on long-term trends of the gig fishery; MRIP rarely encounters gig fishermen. A DMF mail-based survey of gigging that began in 2010 indicates the gig harvest from 2010 to 2022 averaged 10% of the recreational harvest (with hook-and-line harvest making up the remainder). In 2023, a new licensing system was implemented, and the license database was restructured. This restructuring disrupted the division's ability to query the full license dataset to establish a sampling frame of eligible anglers for the mail surveys. As a result, we were unable to administer the mail surveys and expand potential responses and survey estimates are not available for this year. Since the mail survey estimates are used in determining if the recreational fishery exceeded their TAC, data from 2022 was used as a proxy for the unavailable 2023 data in determining the total removals for the year. In 2024, there are no gig estimates as there was not a season in coastal fishing waters where gigging typically occurs. Additionally, hook and line was the only allowed gear in Inland and Joint fishing waters where a season did occur in 2024. Recreational anglers were allowed to use all gears except for RCGL gears in Internal Coastal, Inland, and Joint fishing waters in 2025.

Hook-and-line harvest can be split into ocean and inshore harvest, with most Southern Flounder harvested inshore (Figure 6). Hook-and-line harvest peaked in 2010 (Table 1). Recreational harvest was impacted in

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2020 and 2021 due to regulations implemented through Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder FMP. In addition, the season was shortened from 45 days in 2020 to 14 consecutive days in 2021 due to excessive overages that occurred during the 2020 season. Like the commercial fishery, Amendment 3 implemented a quota for the recreational fishery through a season. The recreational season in 2022 was 30 days. In 2023, the recreational season was 14 days; due to overages in 2022; the 2023 total allowable catch (harvest plus discards) was adjusted from 170,655 to 114,315 lb. The recreational fishery exceeded its expected harvest in 2023. Due to the overage in 2023, the 2024 TAC was adjusted from 170,655 to 43,361 lb. No season occurred in coastal fishing waters as the available quota would account for anticipated dead discards that occur due to incidental catch and release. A 4-day season occurred in inland and joint fishing waters in September. The 2025 season was 14 days and was the first season at the 50% allocation (266,176 lb). In 2025 recreational anglers landed 270,598 lb of flounder and exceeded the TAL (Table 1). Over 1.9 million Southern Flounder were released by recreational anglers in 2025.

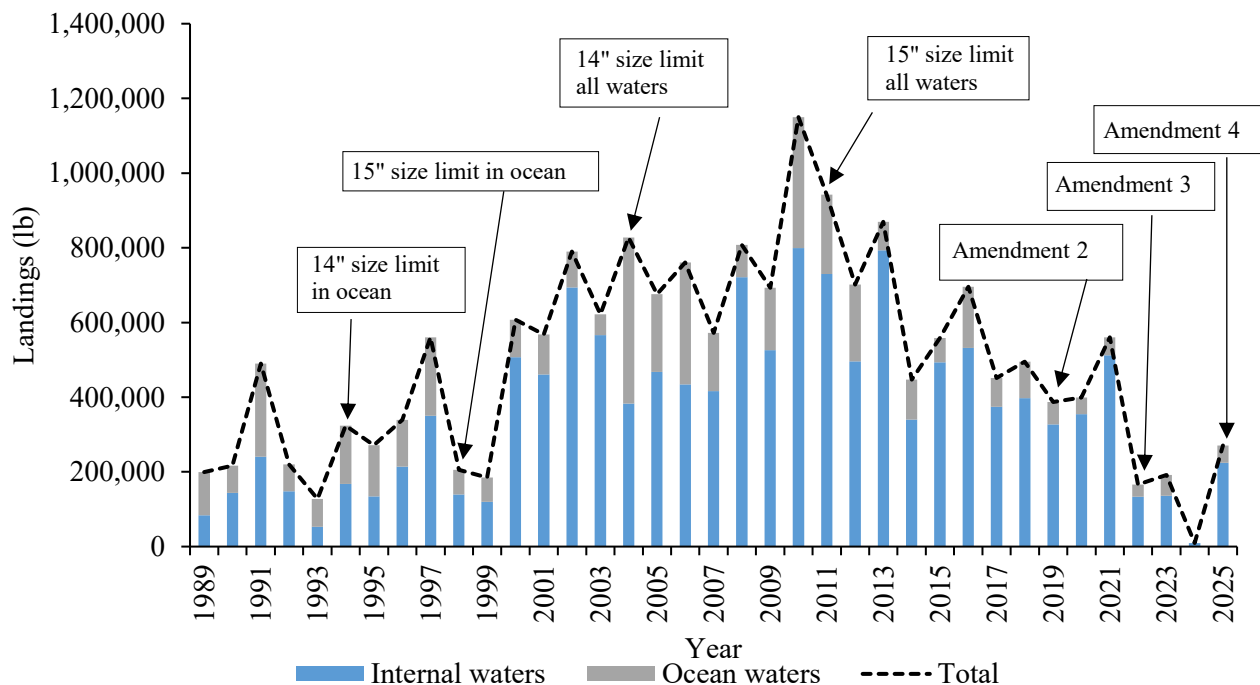


Figure 6. Southern Flounder recreational hook-and-line harvest for all internal (Internal Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters) and ocean waters reported from the Marine Recreational Information Program, and major fishery regulation changes, 1989–2025.

Trends in recreational trips are somewhat difficult to interpret because they represent all *Paralichthid* flounder species commonly caught in North Carolina (southern, summer, and gulf). This is because anglers simply report targeting ‘flounder’ rather than a particular species of flounder. Trips can be defined in several ways, but in this document all trips that harvested or released any *Paralichthid* flounder species were included. While directed trips for flounder have declined since 2014, trips landing flounder increased slightly in 2025 (Figure 7). Directed trips where recreational anglers released flounder continue to make up most of the trips and declined slightly in 2025. Recreational estimates across all years have been updated and are now based on the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) new Fishing Effort Survey-based calibrated estimates. For more information on MRIP see <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/recreational-fishing-data>.

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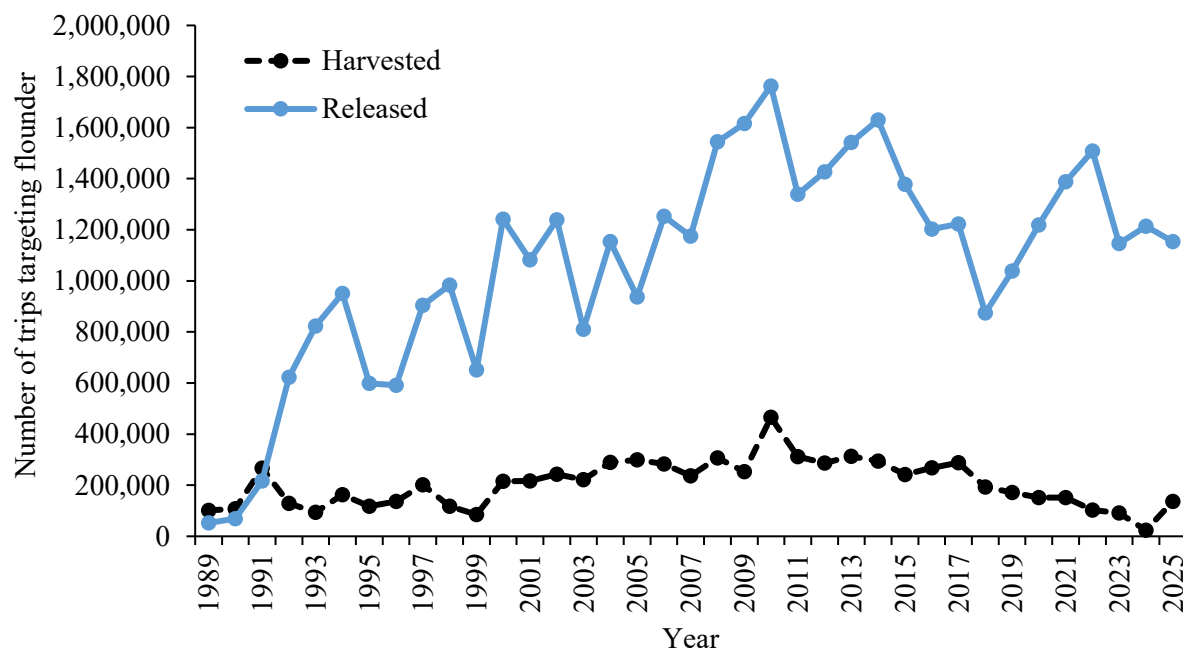


Figure 7. Recreational hook and line directed trips that harvested or released *Paralichthid* flounder species, from Marine Recreational Information Program data 1989–2025. Data from prior to 2004 were calibrated to align with estimates post-2004.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Commercial fishing activity is monitored through fishery-dependent sampling conducted by the division since 1982. Data collected in this program allows the size and age distribution of Southern Flounder to be characterized by gear and fishery. Several DMF sampling programs collect biological data on commercial and recreational fisheries that catch Southern Flounder. The primary programs that collect length and age data for harvested Southern Flounder include: 461 (gill net and seine), 476 (gig and spear), 432 (pound net), and 437 (long haul seine). Programs 466 the North Carolina Onboard Observer Program and 570 the North Carolina Shrimp Trawl Characterization Study collect length data on harvested and discarded flounder. Other commercial sampling programs focusing on fisheries that do not target Southern Flounder rarely collect biological data. The DMF sampling of the recreational fishery through the MRIP collects length data on Southern Flounder. The DMF mail-based gigging survey collects harvest data for the recreational gig fishery but does not collect length or age data. Age data from the recreational fishery are collected mainly via voluntary angler donations through the DMF Carcass Collection Program.

In 2025, 74% of Southern Flounder were harvested by pound nets, followed by gill nets (14%), gigs (12%), and “other” gear accounted for >1% (Figure 8). Other Gears” includes hook and line, gig, long line, haul seines, crab pots, fyke nets, and trawls. There were no clear trends in commercial length data from 2005 to 2025, though the mean TL increased slightly in 2024 and 2025 (Table 2). An increase in mean TL was observed due to the changes in minimum commercial size limit, increasing to 15-in TL in 2016 (Table 2; Figure 9). During 2024, a greater proportion of the total catch consisted of 17- and 18-in fish than in previous years (Figure 9). These proportions dropped in 2025; however, the proportion of fish greater than 19 in both years increased.

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Table 2. Southern Flounder length (TL, in) data from DMF commercial fishery sampling programs, 2005–2025. Data includes harvested and discarded fish.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Measured
2005	16	2	31	28,972
2006	16	5	31	39,572
2007	16	4	29	23,768
2008	16	1	28	39,302
2009	16	4	28	33,403
2010	16	5	29	27,176
2011	16	5	30	32,000
2012	16	4	30	29,865
2013	16	1	32	33,776
2014	16	1	28	26,354
2015	16	2	30	19,717
2016	17	6	27	14,712
2017	17	3	30	14,775
2018	17	2	27	8,892
2019	16	8	26	8,355
2020	17	10	28	4,163
2021	16	11	27	4,360
2022	17	7	27	4,133
2023	17	2	36	5,225
2024	18	12	28	2,464
2025	18	11	28	1,939

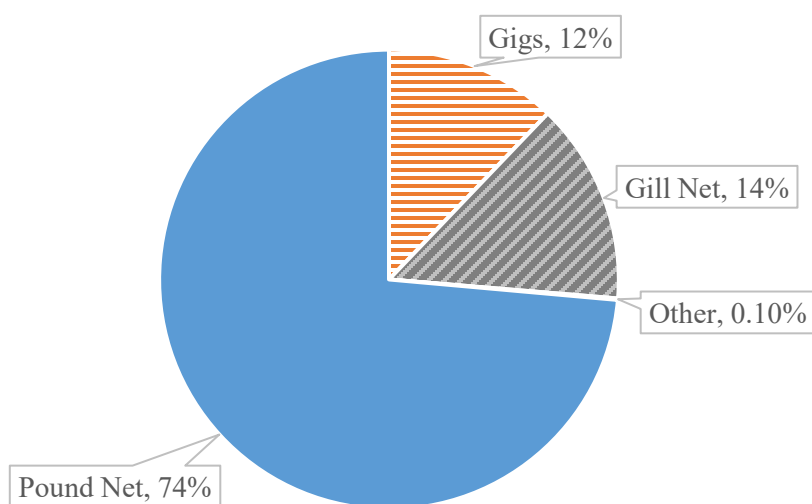


Figure 8. North Carolina commercial harvest of Southern Flounder in 2025 by gear type reported through the N.C. Trip Ticket Program. “Other Gears” includes hook and line, gig, long line, haul seines, crab pots, fyke nets, and trawls.

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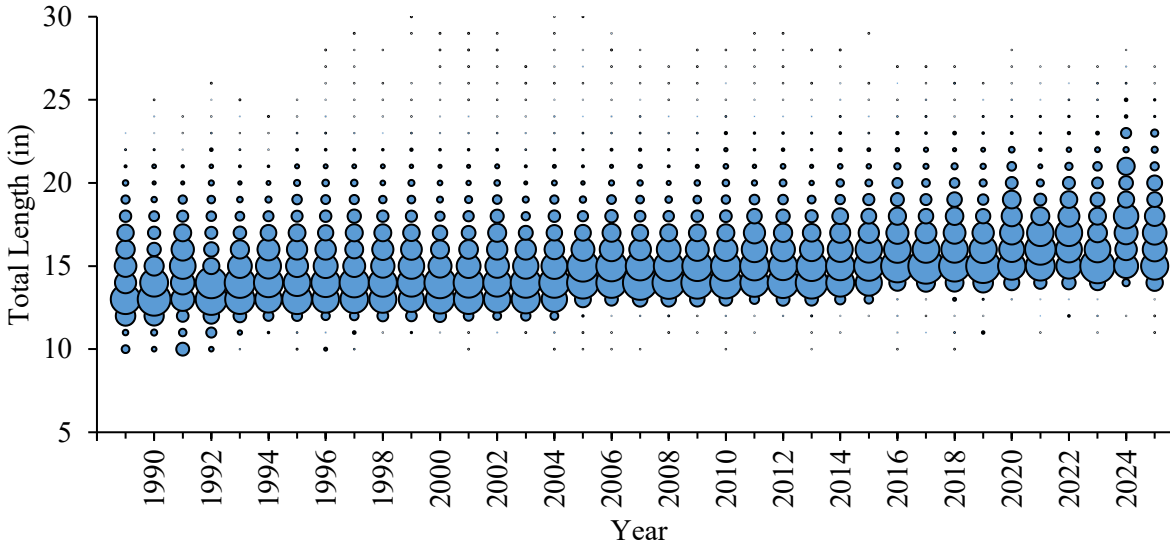


Figure 9. Commercial length frequency of Southern Flounder harvested in North Carolina reported from commercial fish house sampling, 1989–2025. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

There were no clear trends in recreational length data from 2005 to 2021 (Table 3); however, a higher proportion of fish greater than 20-in has been observed since 2022 (Figure 10). Annual mean lengths collected through age sampling programs have been consistent. In 2025, the mean length was 19 in for the first time since 2005. MRIP length frequency data show harvest of smaller fish has declined in recent years as changes to minimum size limits have occurred (Table 3; Figure 10).

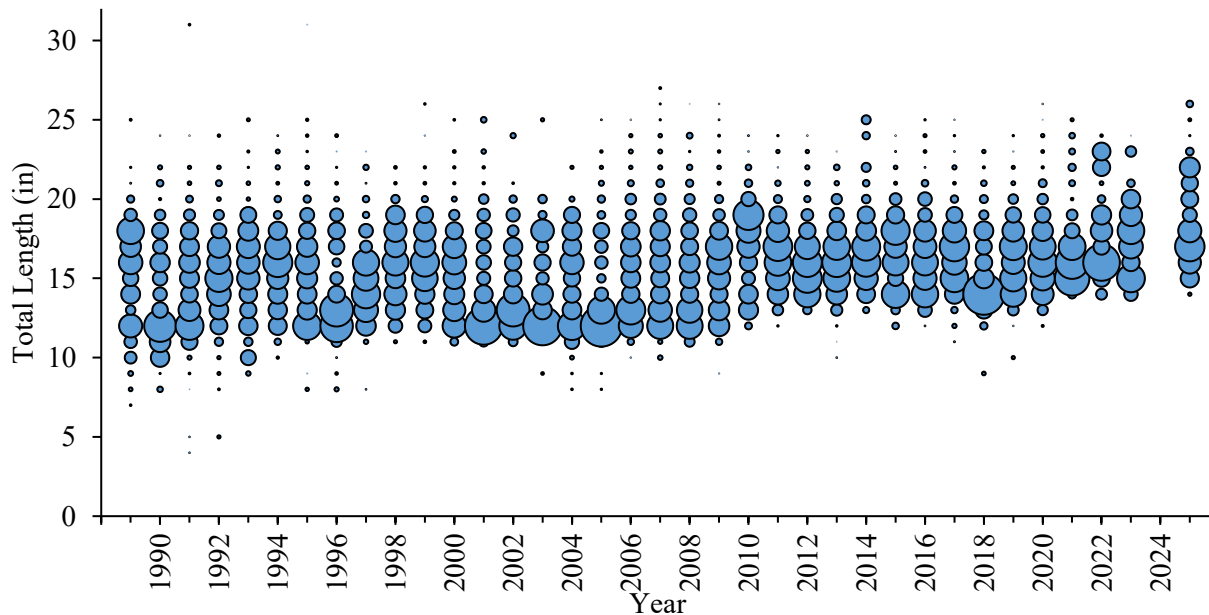


Figure 10. Recreational length frequency of Southern Flounder harvested in North Carolina reported from the Marine Recreational Information Program, 1989–2025. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length. The 2024 data is not included due to the lack of measured intercepted fish.

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Table 3. Southern Flounder length (TL, in) data from the Marine Recreational Information Program sampling in North Carolina, 2005–2025.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Measured
2005	17	13	26	202
2006	16	10	31	343
2007	17	14	24	220
2008	17	13	27	311
2009	17	12	26	306
2010	17	11	28	754
2011	17	14	26	478
2012	18	14	30	400
2013	17	13	27	390
2014	17	14	26	199
2015	17	14	24	177
2016	17	14	25	225
2017	17	14	26	215
2018	17	13	27	276
2019	18	14	24	131
2020	18	12	26	187
2021	17	15	26	168
2022	18	15	24	110
2023	18	15	24	61
2024	16			1
2025	19	15	27	132

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

Several DMF fishery-independent sampling programs collect biological data on Southern Flounder. The primary surveys that collect length data for Southern Flounder and that were evaluated as indices of abundance in recent stock assessments were programs: 120 (Estuarine Trawl Survey), 195 (Pamlico Sound Survey), 135 (Albemarle Sound Independent Gill Net Survey, and 915 (Pamlico Sound and Rivers Independent Gill Net Surveys). Program 135 was dropped from this update as the program has had significant changes in sample design that limits its catches of Southern Flounder; thus, reducing its usefulness as a data source for this species moving forward. Age data primarily is collected in Program 915, although the other three surveys do collect age data. Methodology for analyzing trends in relative abundance for each survey changed with the 2018 stock assessment when generalized linear models (GLMs) were used to calculate relative yearly relative abundance index values. These indices were not updated; thus, nominal relative abundance index values have been included in this report.

There were no clear trends in fishery-independent length data from 2005 to 2025 (Table 4). Annual mean lengths were consistent, and 2022 had the second largest mean length in the time-series. However, the number of fish measured in 2020 was the lowest of any year from 2005 to 2022. The reduced number of measurements from independent samples is reflective of the sampling impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Table 4. Southern Flounder length (TL, in) data from DMF fishery-independent sampling programs 2005–2025. Sampling was suspended in February 2020 but resumed July 2021; most lengths in 2020 were collected in the juvenile sampling programs.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Measured
2005	8	0	25	3,769
2006	9	0	23	3,560
2007	7	0	22	3,812
2008	10	0	27	4,270
2009	10	1	27	3,230
2010	9	1	23	4,168
2011	12	1	28	2,604
2012	10	1	26	4,878
2013	9	1	27	3,534
2014	9	1	25	2,339
2015	9	1	24	2,133
2016	11	2	30	1,426
2017	9	1	22	2,238
2018	9	0	24	2,123
2019	10	0	24	2,664
2020	5	1	18	595
2021	9	0	24	2,529
2022	11	0	24	3,733
2023	11	1	27	2,835
2024	10	0	26	3,161
2025	12	0	27	1,607

In 2001, the DMF initiated a fishery-independent gill net survey in Pamlico Sound (Program 915) and was expanded into the Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers in 2003. The objective of this project is to provide annual, independent, relative-abundance indices for key estuarine species. The survey employs a stratified random sampling design and utilizes multiple mesh gill nets (3.0-in to 6.5-in stretched mesh, by ½-in increments). While the survey occurs from February–December annually and consists of two depth strata [shallow (<6 ft) and deep (>3 ft)], only August and September data were used to analyze the index of abundance trends because these months had the peak catches of Southern Flounder. Sampling in this program was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and protected species interactions but resumed July 2021. The relative abundance index for Program 915 peaked in 2010 and the low point was in 2017 for the time-series analyzed and has an overall decreasing trend (Figure 11). The relative abundance index for 2021 was above the series average (3.34 Southern Flounder per set) for the first time since 2013; 2023 was also above the time series average. However, 2022 had the lowest relative abundance since 2017. In 2025, the relative abundance index was 2.39, below the time series average. The relative abundance has decreased since 2023. Survey data from the Pamlico Sound and Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers are one of five adult abundance indices used in the 2019 and 2024 stock assessments (Flowers et al. 2019; Schlick et al. 2024).

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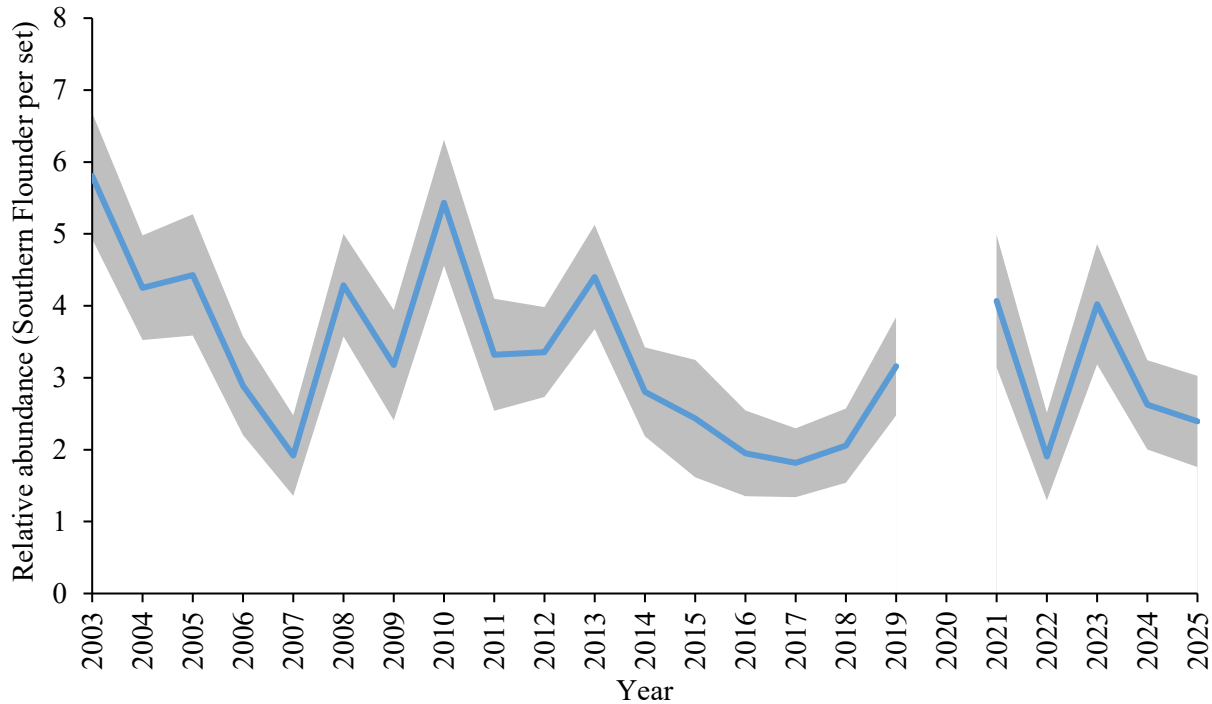


Figure 11. Annual Southern Flounder index of relative abundance from the DMF Independent Gill Net Survey (Program 915) in the Pamlico Sound and Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers, 2003–2025. Shaded area represents ± 1 SE. Sampling in this program was suspended in February 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and protected species interactions but resumed July 2021.

The Estuarine Trawl Survey (Program 120) is a fishery-independent multispecies monitoring program that has been ongoing since 1971 in the months of May and June. One of the key objectives of this program is to provide a long-term database of annual juvenile recruitment for economically important species. This survey samples fixed stations, a set of 104 core stations with additional stations as needed. The core stations are sampled from western Albemarle Sound south through the South Carolina border each year without deviation one sample for each station each month during the months of May and June. Data from this survey were used to produce a Southern Flounder JAI from 1989 to 2025. The JAI for Program 120 peaked in 1996 and the low point was in 2023 for the time-series analyzed and shows a declining but variable trend (Figure 12). The JAI has been below the time-series average (2.59 flounder per tow) for the last 10 years. The JAI in 2025 (0.49 Southern Flounder per tow) decreased 67% compared to 2024. The 2020 JAI was the second lowest in the 37-year time series; however, sampling was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the full sampling regime was not completed. Sampling typically occurs over the months of May and June. Due to the pandemic all sampling was conducted in June. The impact to the JAI due to the changes to the sampling regime are unknown. Survey data from the Estuarine Trawl Survey was one of three juvenile indices of abundance used in the 2019 and 2024 stock assessments (Flowers et al. 2019; Schlick et al. 2024). This data is also being used to develop a spatiotemporal model to evaluate the Southern Flounder stock in North Carolina between updates to the coastwide assessment.

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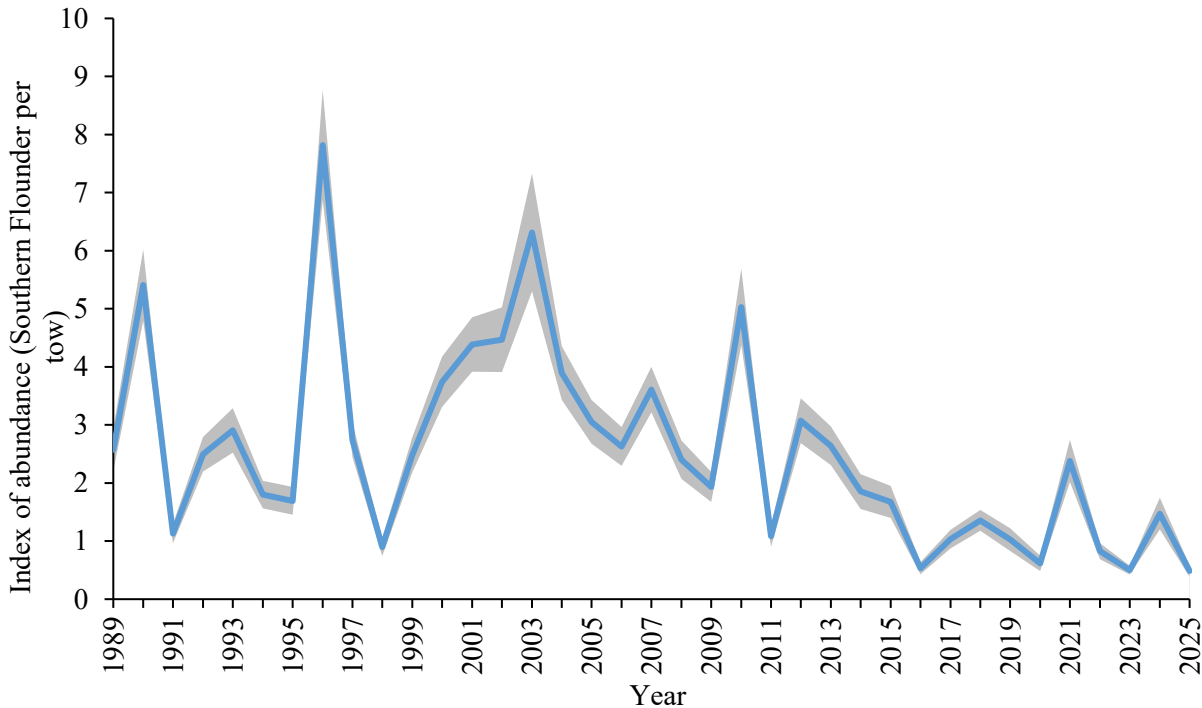


Figure 12. Annual Southern Flounder index of relative abundance from the DMF Estuarine Trawl Survey (Program 120), 1989–2025. Shaded area represents ± 1 SE. Sampling in 2020 and 2021 was impacted by due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The Pamlico Sound Survey (Program 195) conducts trawls using a random-stratified survey design in waters of Pamlico Sound and major river tributaries in June and September. Stations are randomly selected from strata based upon depth and geographic location. Randomly selected stations are optimally allocated among the strata based upon all previous sampling in order to provide the most accurate abundance estimates ($PSE < 20$). The JAI for 2020 and 2021 are incomplete as sampling was conducted only in a portion of the areas typically sampled due to the pandemic. The Pamlico Sound Trawl Survey (Program 195) was suspended indefinitely starting in 2025. DMF lost use of the research vessel, R/V Carolina Coast (used for the survey since its inception in 1987), when it was found to be structurally unsound following completion of 2024 sampling. Alternate survey designs and methods are being explored by DMF to fulfill data needs provided by this survey. No implementation date has been determined. It is important to note that the Program 195 data time series, collected by the R/V Carolina Coast and current gear, concluded with the completion of the 2024 survey (1987–2024).

Data from this survey were used to produce a Southern Flounder JAI from 1989 to 2024. The JAI for Program 195 peaked in 1996 and the low point was in 1998 for the time-series analyzed (1989–2024; Figure 13). However, annual relative abundance for six of the last 10 years has been above the time series average (2.28 Southern Flounder per tow). Data collected by Program 195 were not used as a JAI in the January 2019 stock assessment.

In order to describe the age structure of harvest and indices, Southern Flounder age structures are collected from various fishery independent (scientific surveys) and dependent (fisheries) sources throughout the year. In 2025, ages ranged from 0 to 6 years with one fish at age-12 (Table 5). The species of the age-12 fish will be verified genetically; if the genetic verification supports the visual identification, this would be the oldest Southern Flounder on record. Growth in length is rapid for the first year of life and then slows. The relationship of length and age for Southern Flounder is unpredictable because of much overlap in age for a given length (Figure 14).

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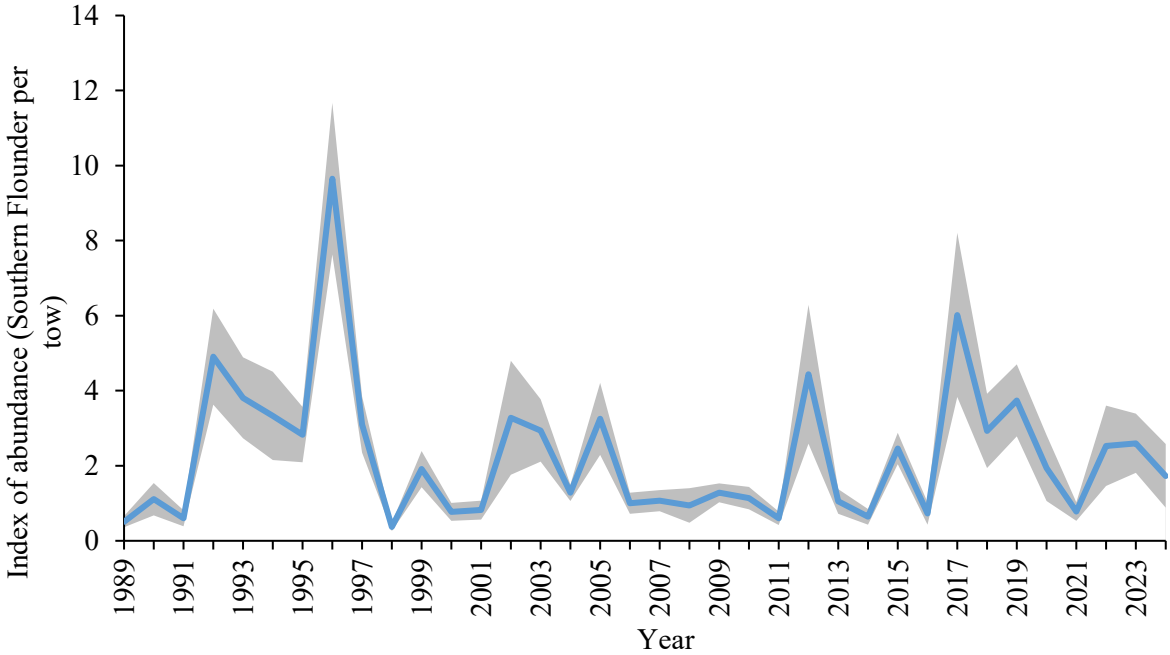


Figure 13. Annual Southern Flounder index of abundance from the DMF Pamlico Sound Survey (Program 195), 1991–2024. Shaded area represents ± 1 SE. Sampling in 2020 and 2021 was impacted by due to COVID-19 restrictions. Sampling was discontinued after 2024.

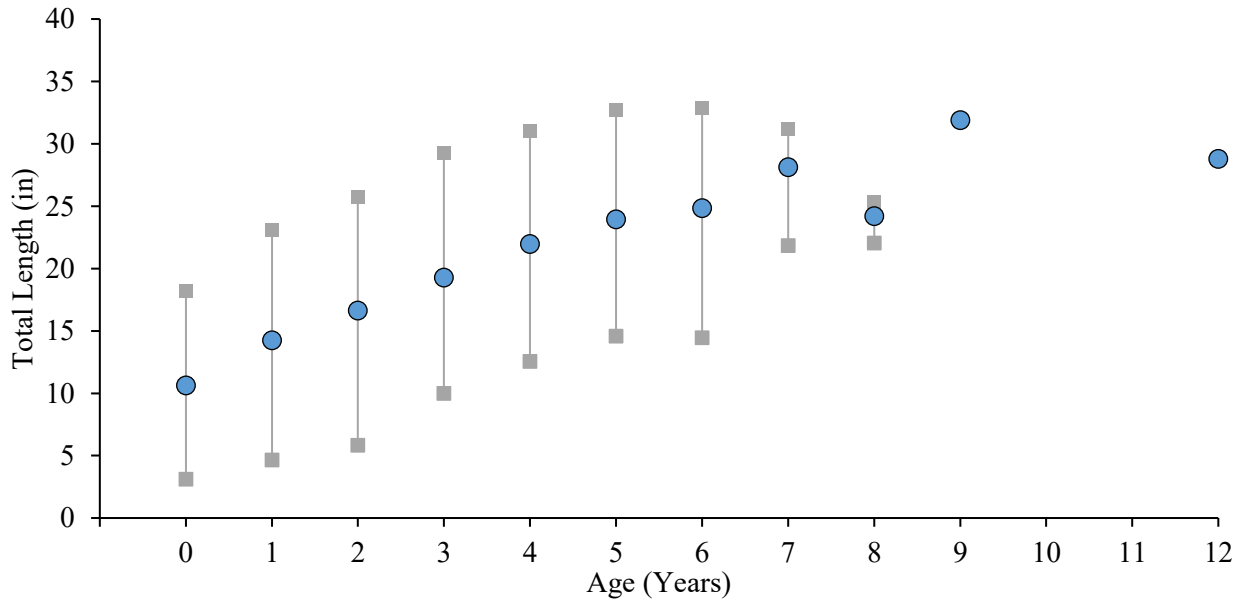


Figure 14. Southern Flounder length at age based on all age samples collected in North Carolina, 1991–2025. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the grey squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age.

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Table 5. Summary of Southern Flounder age samples collected from both fishery-dependent (commercial and recreational fisheries) and independent (surveys) sources from 1991–2025. Samples collected from partial carcasses were not included.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Aged
1991	1	0	5	584
1992	2	0	4	478
1993	1	0	4	274
1994	2	1	4	217
1995	2	1	4	296
1996	2	0	6	478
1997	1	0	5	502
1998	1	0	6	801
1999	2	0	5	513
2000	1	0	7	669
2001	2	0	7	661
2002	2	0	7	439
2003	2	0	9	294
2004	1	0	6	885
2005	2	0	7	797
2006	3	0	6	862
2007	1	0	8	740
2008	1	0	7	1,102
2009	1	0	6	491
2010	1	0	7	1,226
2011	1	0	6	905
2012	1	0	6	1,194
2013	1	0	6	965
2014	1	0	7	1,274
2015	1	0	5	822
2016	1	0	5	772
2017	1	0	7	1,178
2018	1	0	5	965
2019	1	0	6	2,119
2020	2	0	5	1,210
2021	1	0	7	1,739
2022	2	0	7	1,474
2023	1	0	7	1,362
2024	2	0	6	881
2025	2	0	12	1,459

Tagging Data

Since 2014, 9,593 Southern Flounder have been tagged (Table 6; Figure 15). Six-hundred and ninety-nine of these fish have been recaptured (Table 6; Figure 15). The average time that a Southern Flounder is at large (time between the initial tagging event (deployment) and recapture) is approximately 5 months or 140 days, though some fish have been at large for as long as 5 years. On average, Southern Flounder travel less than 27 mi between the initial tagging event and recapture, and most are caught in the same water body they are tagged; however, there are several fish that have traveled over 300 mi. Over the last 10 years, there have been several flounder that have been recaptured south of North Carolina. In 2025, 465 fish were tagged

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and 48 fish were recaptured (Table 6; Figure 16). The number of days at large (49 days), as well as the distance the flounder traveled (2 mi), were the lowest in the time series.

From 2014 to 2021, tagging of Southern Flounder was done by division staff, with the help of several universities. In 2022, a pilot program was started for Southern Flounder to incorporate volunteer taggers. Initial results from this program have been positive and the division plans to incorporate more volunteer taggers for Southern Flounder.

Table 6. Total number of Southern Flounder tagged and recaptured, 2014–2025. Recapture information includes average and maximum days at large and distance traveled.

Year Tagged	Total Fish Tagged (N)	Total Fish Recaptured (N)	Average Days At Large	Max Days At Large	Average Distance Traveled (mi)	Max Distance Traveled (mi)
2014	928	50	169	904	25	518
2015	728	109	182	1,753	21	238
2016	714	78	133	697	19	262
2017	1,457	51	188	1,038	17	108
2018	417	91	105	780	6	109
2019	720	27	226	1,377	24	157
2020	1,050	60	146	414	14	195
2021	1,101	63	110	405	16	151
2022	826	47	105	431	16	143
2023	606	48	93	389	21	406
2024	581	27	184	439	27	326
2025	465	48	49	149	2	6

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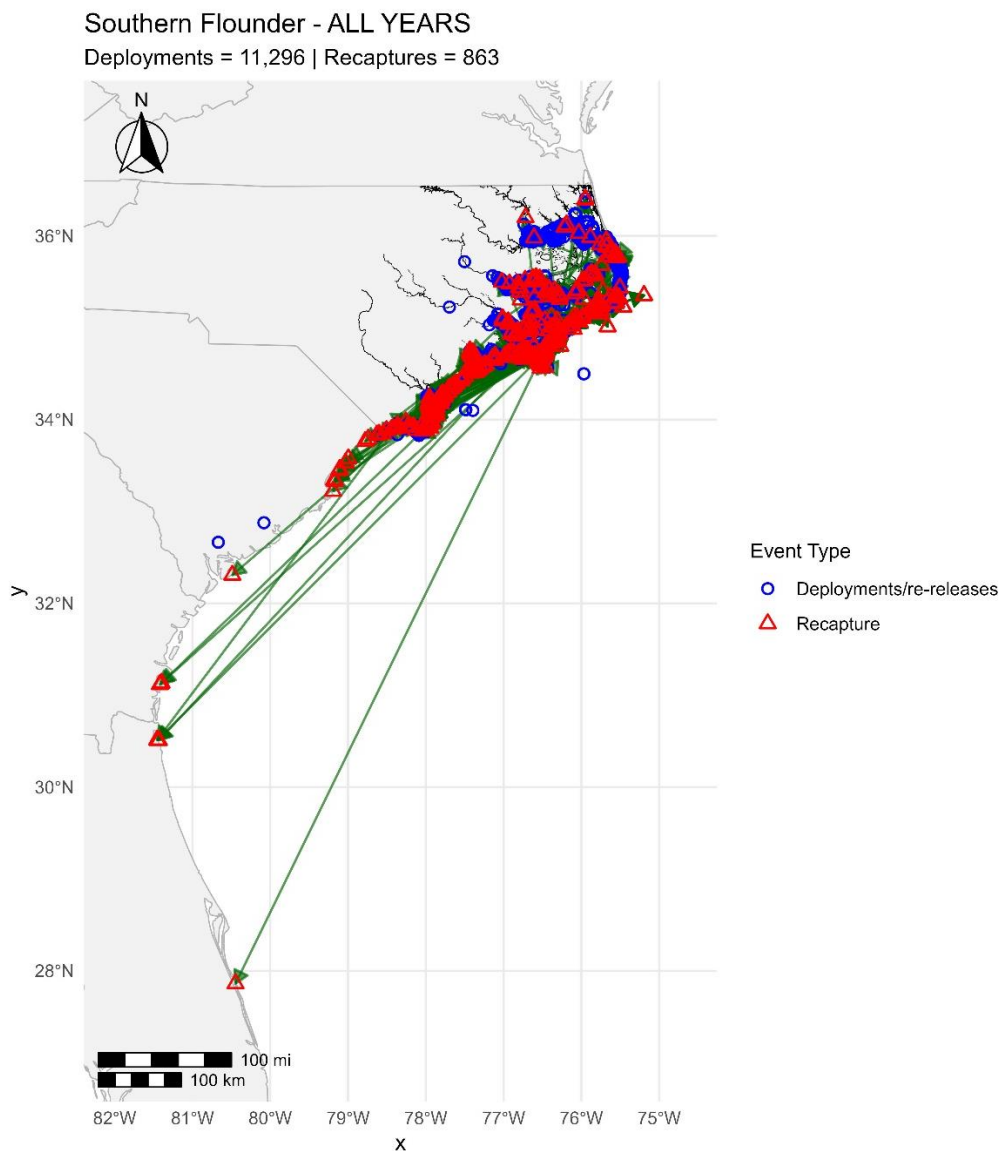


Figure 15. Deployment (re-release) and recapture locations of Southern Flounder tagging events, 2014–2025. The green arrows represent the direction of the recapture event related to the original tagging event.

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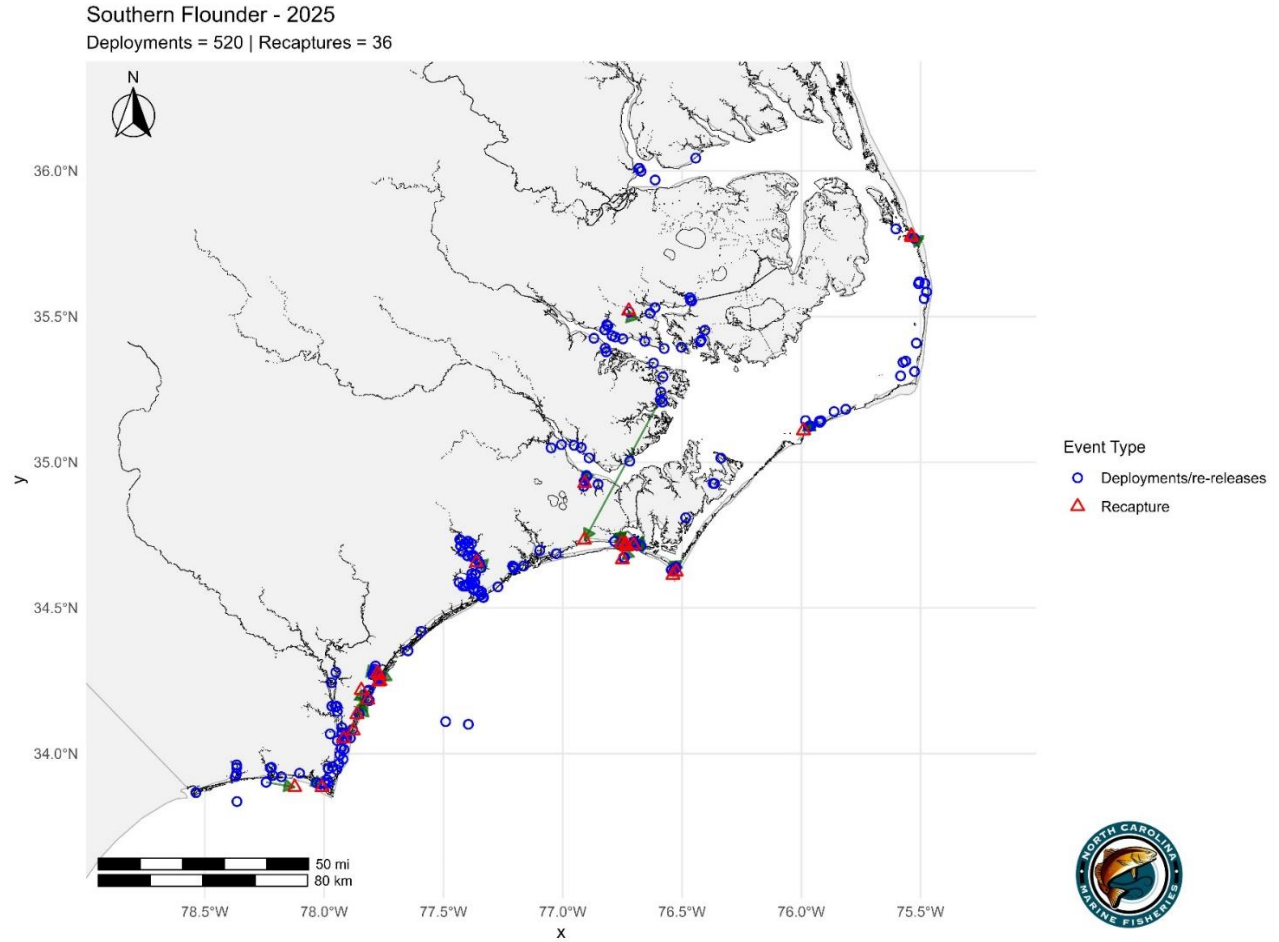


Figure 15. Deployment (re-release) and recapture locations of Southern Flounder tagging events, 2025. The green arrows represent the direction of the recapture event.

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RESEARCH NEEDS

The following research recommendations are priority for Southern Flounder. For a longer list of research recommendations see [Amendment 3](#) (NCDMF 2022).

- Conduct studies to quantify fecundity and fecundity-size/age relationships in Atlantic Southern Flounder.
- Improve estimates of the discard (B2) component (catches, lengths, and ages) for Southern Flounder from MRIP.
- Expand, improve, or add fisheries-independent surveys of the ocean component of the stock.
- Determine locations of spawning aggregations of Southern Flounder.
- Complete an age validation study using known age fish.

MANAGEMENT

Amendment 4 was adopted by the MFC in August 2025. This Amendment focused on moving the 50/50 recreational commercial allocation split 1 year early and carried forward the management strategies from Amendment 3 (Table 7).

Management strategies to meet sustainable harvest were implemented in Amendment 3 and continue through Amendment 4 to maintain 72% reductions in fishing mortality ($F = 0.18$) in the commercial and recreational fisheries to a level that ends overfishing within 2 years and allows the SSB to increase between the threshold and the target within 10 years of adoption of Amendment 2 in 2019.

To meet the reduction in fishing mortality, quotas with accountability measures were established for the commercial and recreational sectors for the first time in the North Carolina Southern Flounder Fishery as well as a reduction in the recreational bag limit from four fish per person per day to one fish per person per day and the elimination of RCGL holders from harvesting Southern Flounder (Table 7). These reductions in total removals allow for increased escapement of spawning stock and expansion of the age structure to continue rebuilding of the stock.

Table 7. Management action taken as a result of Amendments 3 and 4 to the N.C. Southern Flounder FMP.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGY	OUTCOME
Management measures limiting the number of fishing days per week and the amount of yardage allowed for large mesh gill nets in various areas of the state	Implemented through proclamation (refer to Amendment 1)
A minimum distance (area dependent) between gill net and pound net sets, per MFC Rule 15A NCAC 03J .0103 (d)	Implemented through proclamation (refer to Amendment 1)
A recreational minimum size limit of 15 in TL	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 1)
Increase minimum mesh size to harvest Southern Flounder to 6.0-ISM	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Supplement A to Amendment 1)
Increase minimum size limit for commercial fisheries to 15 in	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Supplement A to Amendment 1)

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MANAGEMENT STRATEGY	OUTCOME
Increase minimum mesh size for escape panels to 5.75-ISM	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Supplement A to Amendment 1)
Removal of all commercial gears targeting Southern Flounder from the water (e.g., commercial and RCGL anchored large mesh gill nets and gigs) or make them inoperable (flounder pound nets) in areas and during times outside of the seasons implemented. Exceptions will be allowed for commercial large mesh gill net fisheries that target American and Hickory shad and catfish species if these fisheries are only allowed to operate during times of the year and locations where bycatch of Southern Flounder is unlikely	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Making it unlawful to possess flounder in internal and ocean waters during the closed recreational season.	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Making it unlawful to possess flounder harvested from the internal waters of the state during the closed commercial season	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Making it unlawful to use any method of retrieving live flounder from pound nets that cause injury to released fish (no picks, gigs, spears, etc.)	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Reduce commercial anchored large-mesh gill net soak times to single overnight soaks where nets may be set no sooner than 1 h before sunset and must be retrieved no later than 1 h after sunrise the next morning in the Neuse, Tar/Pamlico rivers and the Albemarle Sound areas that have previously been exempt	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Reduce the maximum yardage allowed in the commercial anchored large-mesh gill net fishery by 25% for each Management Unit; allowing a maximum of 1,500-yd in Management Units A, B, and C, and a maximum of 750-yd in Management Units D and E unless more restrictive yardage is specified through adaptive management through the sea turtle or sturgeon Incidental Take Permits (ITP).	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 2)
Reduce daily bag limit for recreational harvest of Southern Flounder to one flounder per person per day	Implemented through Proclamation (Amendment 3)
Implement quota for the commercial mobile gear and pound net fisheries and define management areas	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Implement recreational (hook and line, gig) seasons to constrain them to an annual quota	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Eliminate harvest of Southern Flounder through the use of a RCGL	Implemented through Proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Implement trip limits for gigs and pound nets only to maximize reopening only after reaching division closure threshold	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)

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MANAGEMENT STRATEGY	OUTCOME
Implement a one-fish ocellated bag limit during Mar 1 through Apr 15 in ocean waters only using hook-and-line gear	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Adopt the adaptive management framework based on the peer-reviewed and approved stock assessment	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
The MFC adopted a motion to set the allocation for Amendment 3 at 70% commercial and 30% recreational at the Feb 26, 2021, business meeting	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Continue to allow anchored large-mesh gill nets to harvest Southern Flounder in the North Carolina Southern Flounder fishery	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 3)
Adopted a shift in quota allocation to 50% commercial and 50% recreational.	Implemented through proclamation (Refer to Amendment 4)

MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE AND FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN SCHEDULE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Southern Flounder stock in North Carolina continues to show mixed signs of recovery in recent years. Total removals from the population are constrained in the commercial and recreational fisheries through Amendment 4, adopted in 2025 to maintain stock rebuilding. Data from the division's fishery-independent surveys show adult abundance has remained stable over the last few years, and juvenile abundance has stabilized at a low level after two decades of decline. There has been a slight increase in the mean size and age in recent years with the oldest Southern Flounder on record in 2025 and the proportion of larger fish increasing in both the recreational and commercial sectors. Stakeholders have expressed concern with the current management framework, which includes a coastwide rebuilding approach with other states, and regulations unable to adapt to dynamic stock conditions. In response to delays in completing a coastwide benchmark stock assessment and public concern about the current management strategy, Amendment 5 is in development to provide a long-term management strategy using data for flounder in North Carolina that allows for continued recovery of the Southern Flounder stock and flexibility for providing access to the resource.

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