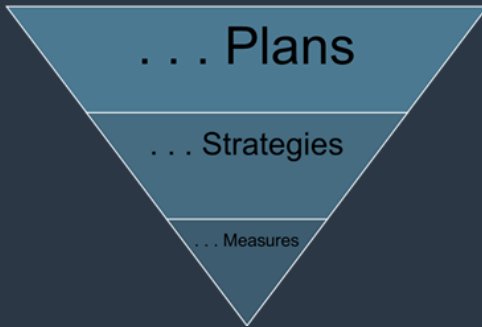


Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan

Scoping Document

Fishery Management



Management **PLANS** set specific management goals for a fishery.

Management **STRATEGIES** are techniques to achieve the set management goals.

Management **MEASURES** are the actions to achieve the management strategies.



March 2023

What is Scoping?

Scoping is the first stage of the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Fishery Management Plan (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 stakeholder input on relevant management strategies and issues that may need addressed.
- (4) Recruit potential FMP advisory committee (AC) members to assist the DMF in drafting the plan.

Scoping is the best opportunity to provide input for consideration during FMP development.

This document provides an overview of the initial management strategies and issues identified by the DMF, as well as background information on the fisheries and stock. Management strategies developed in Amendment 2 will be dependent on statutory requirements, available data, research needs, and the consequences of management.

The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries seeks your input on management strategies for Spotted Seatrout Management Plan



Spotted Seatrout Scoping Period

March 13 - March 24, 2023

Scoping Meetings

DMF staff will provide information about the N.C. Spotted Seatrout FMP Amendment 1. Following the presentation, the public will have an opportunity to give comment and speak directly with DMF staff.

Four in-person meetings will be held across the state with one meeting being available virtually. Links to scoping information, including webinar information and reference documents, can be found through the [Spotted Seatrout Amendment 1 Information Page](#).

Tuesday, March 14

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

McKimmon Conference and Training Center
1101 Gorman St.
Raleigh, NC 27606

This meeting is available virtually [here](#)

Thursday, March 16

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

NC Cooperative Extension, Currituck County Center
120 Community Way #120
Barco, NC 27917

Tuesday, March 21

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

New Bern-Craven County Public Library
400 Johnson St.
New Bern, NC 28560

Thursday, March 23

6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Cape Fear Community College
Room 470, Union Station
502 N. Front St.
Wilmington, NC 28401



Can't attend but want to submit comments?

Written comments can be submitted by online form or U.S. mail. Comments must be received by March 24, 2023.

To comment by online form:



To comment by U.S. mail:

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

*FMP Process Questions?
Contact the FMP
Coordinator*

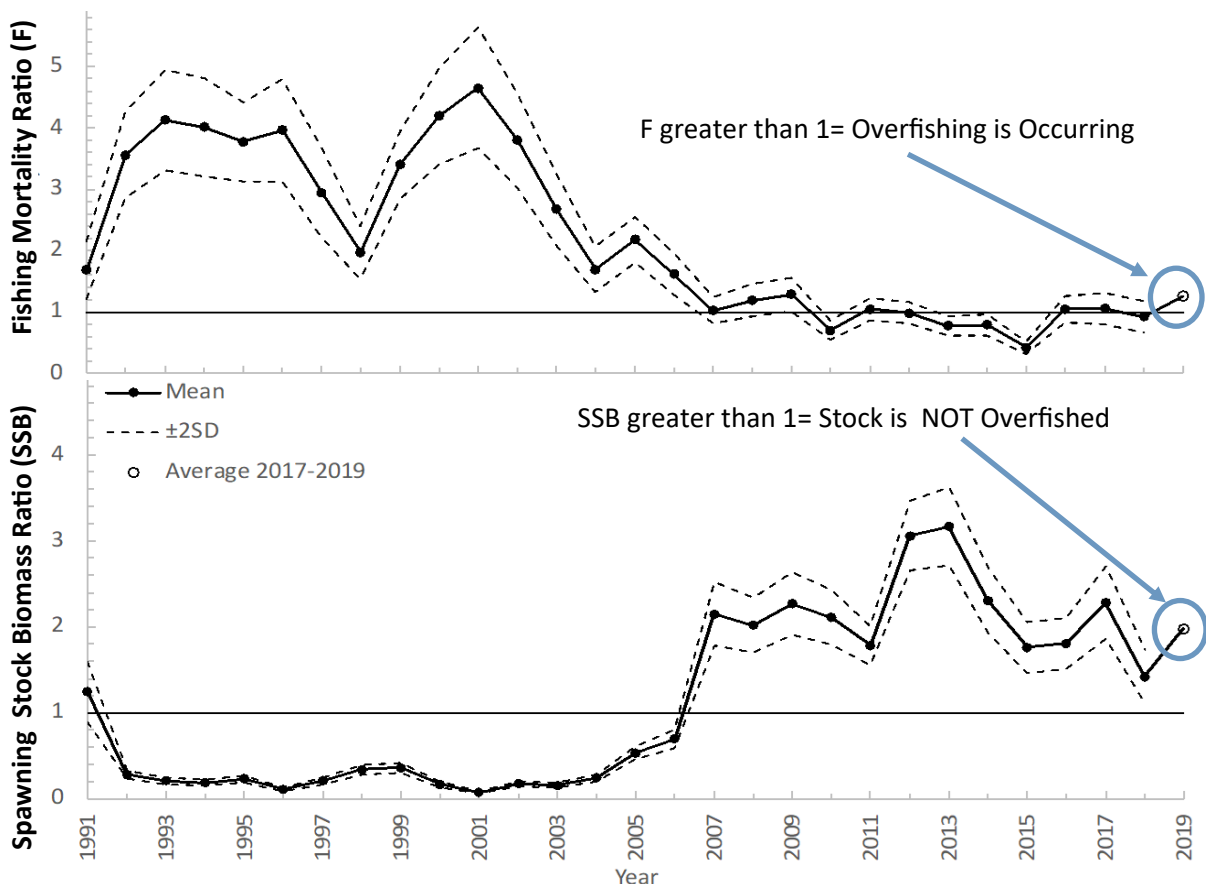
Corrin Flora
Corrin.Flora@ncdenr.gov
252-808-8014

CURRENT MANAGEMENT: FMP AMENDMENT 1

Spotted seatrout is one of the most popular fish in North Carolina. Many recreational and commercial fishers target spotted seatrout, especially during the winter months. Spotted seatrout are also vulnerable to extreme winter temperatures. The Division has been successfully managing the fishery through a 14" minimum size limit, a 4 fish recreational bag limit, a 75 fish commercial trip limit, and by implementing season closures during years with extensive cold stun events. The spotted seatrout population is healthy, however, there is a lot of fishing pressure. This pressure has been especially evident in recent years. Therefore, conservation action is needed to avoid population declines. The Division seeks recommendations from stakeholders on conservation measures to protect the spotted seatrout stock in North Carolina.

2022 STOCK ASSESSMENT

The 2022 benchmark stock assessment indicates the North Carolina and Virginia spotted seatrout stock is not overfished but overfishing is occurring. This means the population size is currently large enough to sustain itself, but fish are being removed from the population at an unsustainable rate. If the rate of removal is not reduced, the stock will become overfished. A significant improvement that was achieved for this stock assessment was that it was able to capture the signal from cold-stun events. This was a major concern from both the 2009 and 2015 NCDMF stock assessments and has been one of the major improvements for this assessment. Due to the large uncertainty in the terminal year (2019) estimates in this assessment, an average of the estimates over the most recent three years (2017–2019) was used to determine the stock status. Thus, the estimated Fishing Mortality ratio for the terminal year is greater than one (1.3), suggesting the stock is currently experiencing overfishing. The stock has centered around the overfishing threshold from 2007 through 2019. The estimated Spawning Stock Biomass ratio for the terminal year is greater than one (2.0), suggesting the stock is not currently overfished and the stock has not been overfished since 2007.



AMENDMENT 1 MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO EXPLORE

Sustainable Harvest Management

The North Carolina Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 requires implementing management to end overfishing within two years. Based on the stock assessment, total removals need to be reduced between 14.6- 39.6%. A 14.6% reduction in total removals would reduce fishing mortality to the threshold and a 39.6% reduction would reach the target. The Division asks for public input about how the spotted seatrout resource is used by stakeholders and considerations to account for in the fishery when making management recommendations. Possible management measures to achieve sustainable harvest include but are not limited to:

- ◆ Season closure
- ◆ Trip limits
- ◆ Bag limits
- ◆ Size limits (e.g., minimum, maximum, or slot limits)
- ◆ Adaptive management

Needed Stakeholder Input

- Do you target spotted seatrout?
- How often do you fish for spotted seatrout?
- What months do you fish for spotted seatrout?
- Where do you fish for spotted seatrout?
- Do you have additional ideas for management to end overfishing of the spotted seatrout stock?

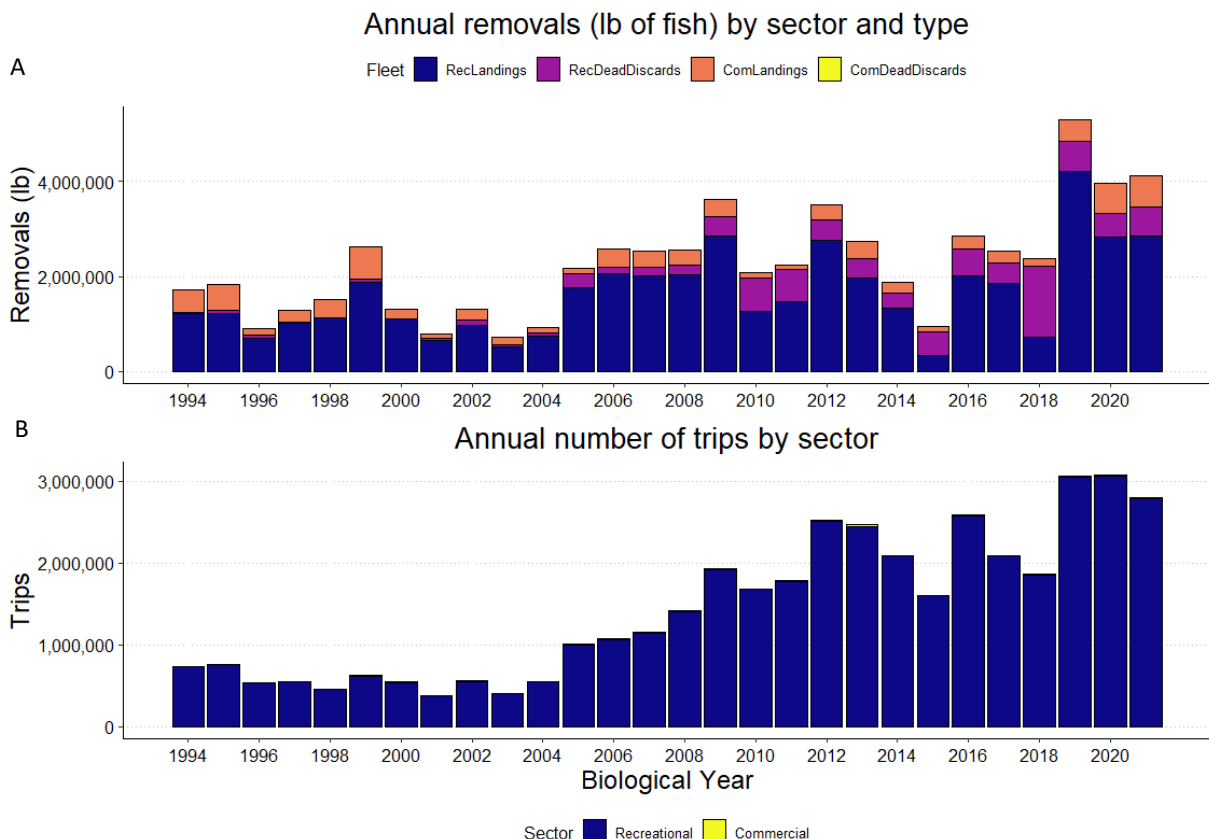


Figure 1. A) Annual removals in pounds by sector (commercial or recreational) and type (landings or dead discards) B) Annual trips by sector (recreational or commercial) from biological year. Biological year is March through February of the following year.

Management to Reduce Recreational Release Mortality

Spotted seatrout is one of the most recreationally targeted species in North Carolina. In North Carolina, most removals of spotted seatrout come from the recreational fishery. In recent years, recreational dead discards have become a larger percentage of total removals, increasing from 13.0% in 1991-2009 to 38.6% in 2010-2019. Recreational dead discards are the fish that are released and later die due to the fishing interaction. Factors that can affect the likelihood of survival include type of hook used, where the fish was hooked, fish handling, time out of water, water temperature, and salinity. Based on multiple studies assessing post-release mortality of spotted seatrout, 10% of released fish are estimated to die after being released.

In [February 2021](#), the Division presented the MFC an issue paper reviewing research on circle hook effectiveness and potential rule changes. The MFC unanimously passed a motion to consider circle hook requirements on a species-by-species basis through the FMP process.

The Division is interested in public input about fishing practices in the recreational fishery and ideas about how to reduce recreational release mortality.



Needed Stakeholder Input

- How often do you practice catch and release of spotted seatrout?
- How often do you keep spotted seatrout?
- What sized spotted seatrout do you prefer to keep?
- When you reach your bag limit, do you continue targeting spotted seatrout or do you shift focus to other species?
- Do you fish with artificial baits or natural/live bait?
 - What types of artificial baits do you use?
 - When fishing with natural/live bait, what type of hooks do you use?
- Do you take any measures to ensure the greatest chance of survival of released spotted seatrout? If so, what measures do you take?

Management for the Small Mesh Gill Net Fishery

In 2021, the Division presented an issue paper to the MFC reviewing rules and available data for the small mesh gill net fishery and developed potential options for rulemaking. The issue paper characterized the estuarine small mesh gill net fisheries in North Carolina and included options aimed at simplifying small mesh gill net regulations, reducing bycatch, and reducing conflict between stakeholders. The MFC passed a motion to not initiate rulemaking but instead refer the issue through the FMP process for each species, and any issues or rules coming out of the species-specific FMP to be addressed at that time.

Small mesh gill nets (<5 inches stretched mesh) are the predominant commercial gear used to harvest spotted seatrout in North Carolina and most are landed in estuarine waters. The beach seine and the long haul fishery were traditionally significant contributors to commercial landings but have decreased in prevalence in recent years. Spotted seatrout are caught in both anchored and actively fished (runaround) gill nets, although runaround methods have been accounting for an increasing percentage of commercial landings since 1991.

Because most trips do not catch their 75 fish daily limit and the mesh size used selects for fish greater than 14", there are few spotted seatrout discards in the gill net fishery. Although overall discard numbers are low, the likelihood of survival for these discards are affected by a variety of factors including time in the net, mesh size used, how the fish was handled, how long the fish was out of the water, water temperature, and salinity. Based on multiple studies assessing post-release mortality of spotted seatrout, 30% of released fish are estimated to die after being released. However, regulatory discards could become more significant if size or trip limits are changed.

The Division is interested in public input about fishing practices in the commercial gill net fishery and ideas about how to effectively manage the spotted seatrout small mesh gill net fishery. The Division is also interested to hear how implementation of potential management measures would impact fishing operations.

Annual commercial landings and trips by gear type



Figure 2. Proportion of annual commercial landings by gear used from biological year 1993 through 2021. Biological year is March through February of the following year.

Needed Stakeholder Input

- What gears and methods do you use to commercially harvest spotted seatrout?
- How would potential management changes (season closure, trip limits, size limits/slot limit) effect your commercial fishing operation (e.g., more discards or gear changes)?
- Hook and line is a legal gear for commercial harvest, but the trip limit is currently the recreational bag limit (4 fish). With restrictions on gill net use, would hook and line be an effective way to commercially target spotted seatrout if the commercial hook and line limit was set to the commercial limit other gears may land?

Management to Protect Spawning Stock Biomass

Results of the stock assessment indicate overfishing is occurring, but SSB remains high. Maintaining high SSB is important for the resiliency of the stock because older, larger fish spawn more frequently and produce more eggs. Therefore, it may be particularly valuable to protect larger spotted seatrout and ensure that 100% of females reach maturity before recruitment to the fishery.

In 2011, the Division enacted adaptive management as a tool to protect the stock in the event of a cold stun. The Spotted Seatrout FMP adaptive management allows the Director to temporarily prohibit harvest of spotted seatrout based on data-driven triggers. Cold stuns occur because spotted seatrout are unable to tolerate low water temperatures. North Carolina spotted seatrout are susceptible to large scale mortality events during the winter months. Other potential management measures to protect spawning stock biomass include area closures, season closures, and temporary slot limits. These measures could be added to the adaptive management strategy for cold stuns described above and implemented either when the fishery reopens or if certain conditions are met.

The Division is interested in public input about the current adaptive management strategy for cold stuns and other ideas for protecting spawning stock biomass.

Needed Stakeholder Input

- What time of year is targeting spotted seatrout most important to you?
- Should management be considered to protect spotted seatrout during peak spawning season and/or during winter aggregations?
- Should the implementation of a slot limit or “trophy” limit (i.e., one fish allowed over maximum size) be considered?
- Should the Division consider measures other than a seasonal closure for the cold stun protocol?

Spotted Seatrout Questions?

Stock Assessment Report and Fishery Management Plan

The complete 2022 Stock Assessment for Spotted Seatrout is available on the [DMF website](#).



Spotted Seatrout Biologists

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