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August 1, 2025

MEMORANDUM

TO: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission
FROM: Jacqui Degan, Fisheries Biologist
SUBJECT: Atlantic Bonito Issue Paper

Issue

Present background information and catch characteristics to the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) to explore trends in data for Atlantic bonito (*Sarda sarda*). Review potential data trends and solicit feedback from the MFC to incorporate into the draft issue paper.

Objective

Address the MFC's request made at its May 2024 business meeting for N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) staff to develop an issue paper for Atlantic bonito management, including landings information, and proposed rule language.

Action Needed

Review and provide input on North Carolina's recreational and commercial Atlantic bonito fisheries for the purpose of developing an issue paper to determine if management is needed. This feedback will be incorporated as staff continue to draft the Atlantic Bonito Issue Paper, including rulemaking language as requested by the MFC.

Background

Atlantic bonito is a small tuna species typically found in tropical to temperate coastal waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Atlantic bonito has become a more popular and targeted fishery in recent years, especially for the recreational sector. Participants associated with the fishery have expressed concern over increases in harvest and targeted trips of the species to both state and federal fisheries managers. In May of this year, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries enacted the first-ever size and possession limits for both false albacore (little tunny) and Atlantic bonito due to significant growth in the fishery. The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries opted to adopt these precautionary management measures until a more robust science and management program is implemented. Currently, there are no rules for management in place for Atlantic bonito in any other states, but some states are considering management. Management is not currently being pursued at the Atlantic States Marine fisheries Commission (ASMFC) or federal level, though it has been discussed by the ASMFC and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAMFC).

From 2011 to 2024, North Carolina recreational landings of Atlantic bonito averaged 116,268 pounds, which accounts for 31% of coastwide (MA to FL) recreational landings and 92% of South Atlantic (NC to FL) recreational landings (Figures 1 and 2). North Carolina commercial landings during this same time averaged 12,633 pounds and accounted for 27% of coastwide commercial landings and 81% of commercial landings in the South Atlantic (Figures 3 and 4).

The stock status of the Atlantic bonito fishery is unknown, primarily because there is very little data available on which to base a stock assessment. Age and growth, sex and maturity, and tagging studies would help fill these data gaps for Atlantic bonito in the western Atlantic; however, funding to complete these studies is limited. Currently, the American Saltwater Guides Association, in collaboration with North Carolina State University and the Nature Conservancy, has initiated several studies with the aim of addressing some of the coast-wide data gaps, including stock structure and migration patterns.

At its May 2024 business meeting, the MFC requested that DMF staff develop an issue paper for Atlantic bonito management, including landings information and proposed rule language, to determine if proactive management is needed. Members of the MFC expressed their concern with the growth of North Carolina's recreational Atlantic bonito fishery in the last several years due to closed recreational fisheries and the availability of new technology that has changed how fishermen are pursuing this fish. While there is no stock assessment currently available for Atlantic bonito, management action may be needed to address the following data trends in NC:

Recreational

- Recreational landings have been trending upwards since 2011, with North Carolina landings accounting for 31% of coastwide landings (MA to FL) and 92% of South Atlantic landings from 2011 to 2024 (NC to FL, Figures 1 and 2).
- Directed recreational trips in NC have doubled since 2019, after remaining steady for the time series (Figure 5).
- Most Atlantic bonito harvested by recreational anglers from 2020–2024 were smaller than the length at first maturity of 15 inches (Figure 6).

Commercial

- North Carolina accounts for 27% of coastwide commercial landings and 81% of South Atlantic commercial landings from 2011 to 2024 (Figures 3 and 4).
- Commercial landings have remained close to the time series average of 12,633 pounds, though commercial landings in 2023 were above that average (17,876 pounds).

Additional information, including a more detailed characterization of the Atlantic bonito fishery coastwide, will be provided in a presentation at the August MFC meeting. DMF staff are actively developing the requested issue paper and proposed rule language. Input from the MFC at the August quarterly business meeting will help guide staff early in the drafting phase and prevent potential delays later in the development process.

Figures

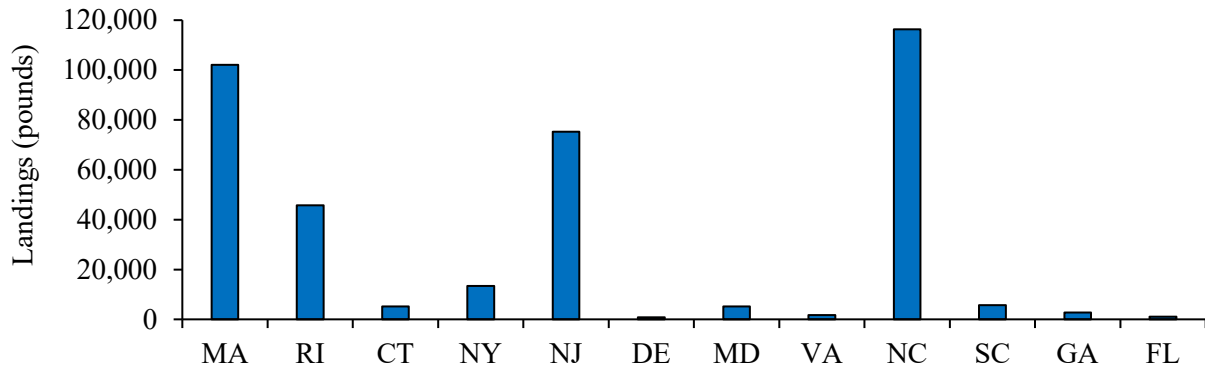


Figure 1. Average Atlantic bonito landings (pounds), MA–FL, 2011–024. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program)

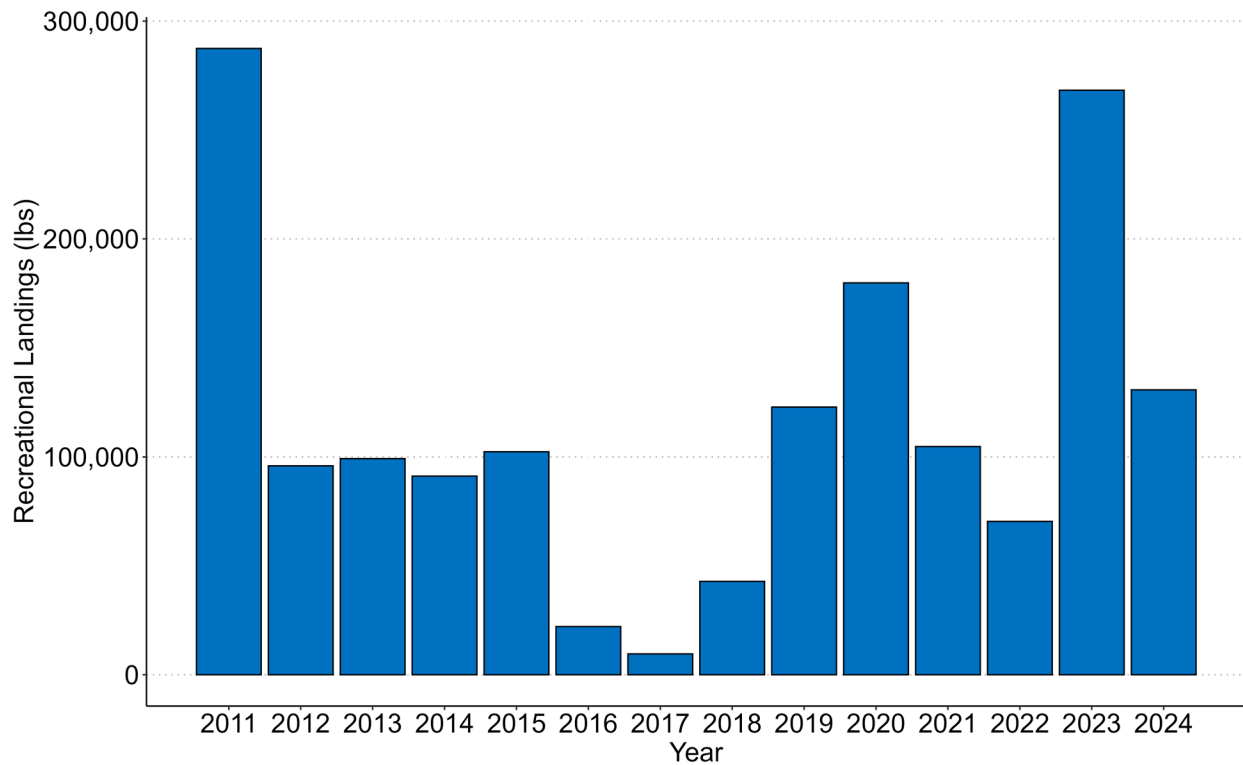


Figure 2. South Atlantic recreational landings (pounds) by state, 2011–2024. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program)

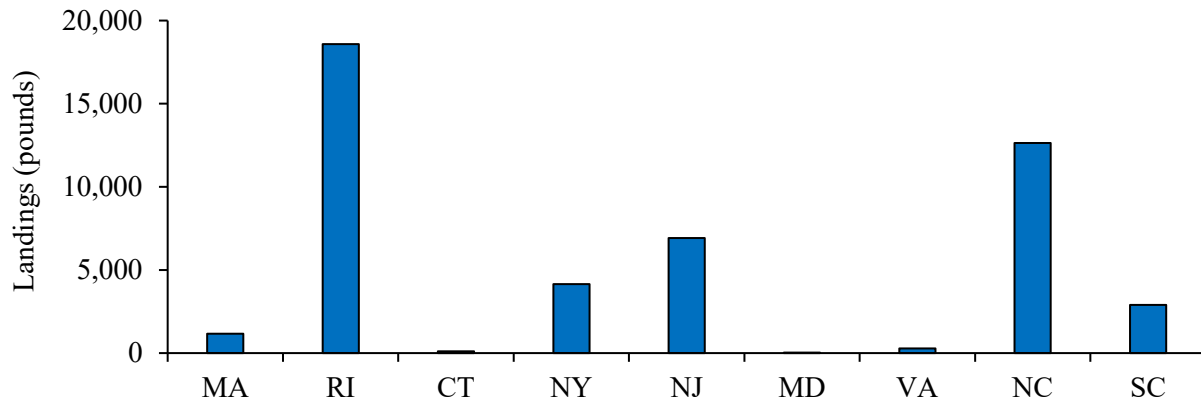


Figure 3. Average Atlantic bonito landings, MA–SC (pounds), 2011–2024. States not shown on graph did not have commercial landings. (Source: Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program and North Carolina Trip Ticket Program)

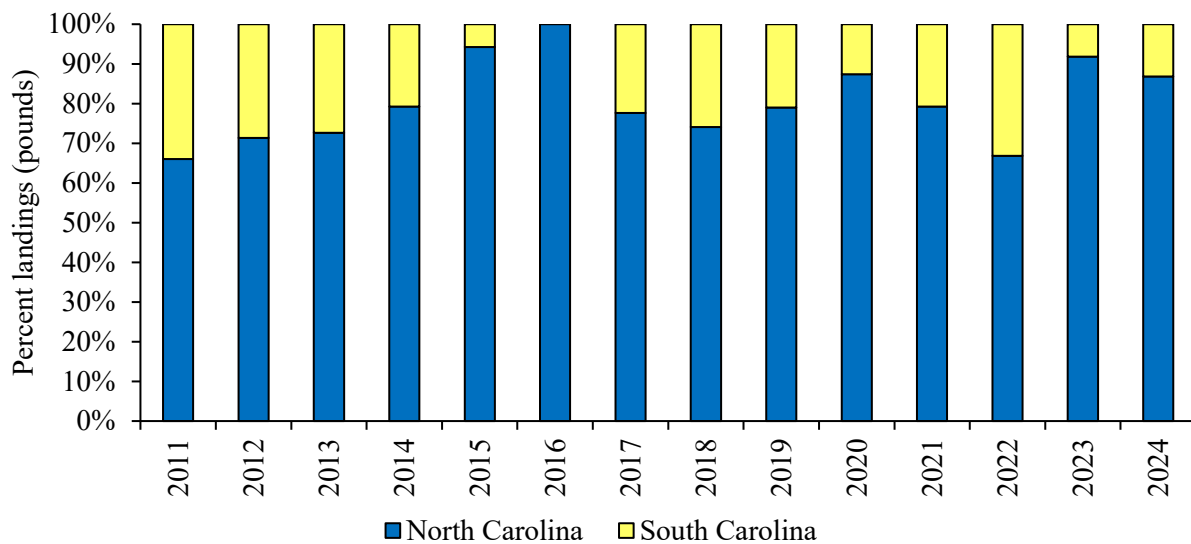


Figure 4. South Atlantic commercial landings (percent of total pounds) by state, 2011–2024. Florida and Georgia reported no landings during this time frame. (Source: Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program)

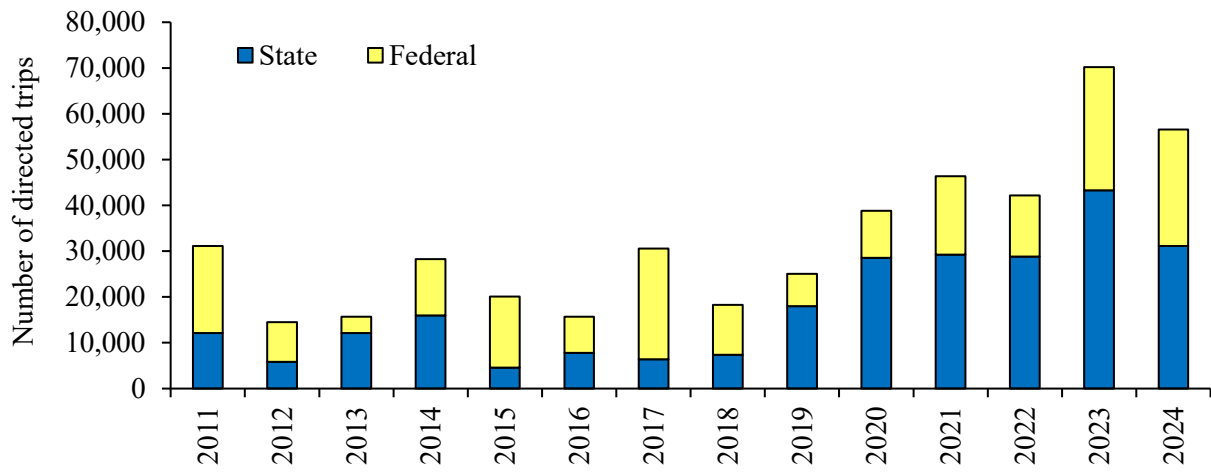


Figure 5. Directed recreational trips for Atlantic bonito in North Carolina in state (0-3 miles) and federal (>3 miles) waters, 2011-2024. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program)

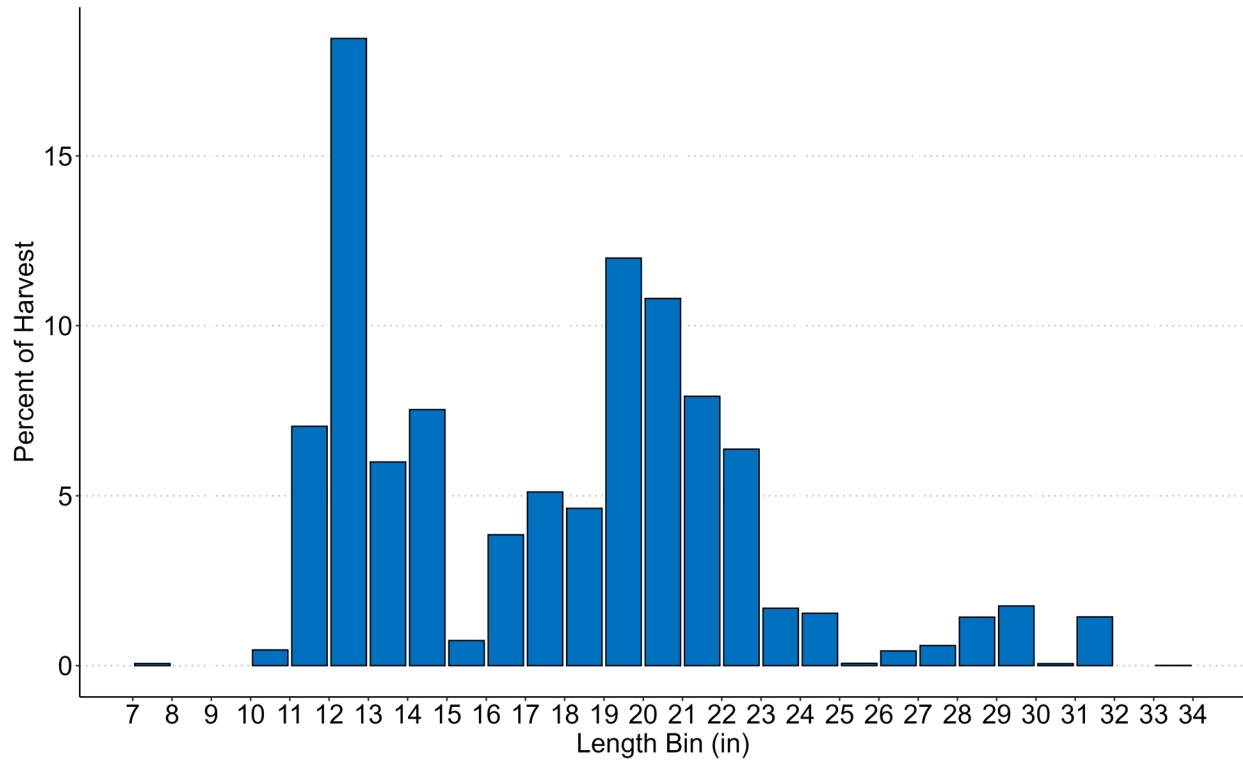


Figure 6. Percent of recreational Atlantic bonito harvest by length frequency (fork length, inches), 2011–2024. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program)