

NC Marine Fisheries Commission

False Albacore Data Update

May 2023 Business Meeting

01 False Albacore Data Update Memo



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MEMORANDUM

TO: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission

FROM: McLean Seward, Fisheries Biologist
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SUBJECT: False Albacore Growth Scenarios for Potential Management

Issue

At its February 2023 business meeting the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (NCMFC) passed a motion that staff come forward with rulemaking language with management options for false albacore starting with status quo and allowing for growth at various percentage points.

Findings

- Management of false albacore is currently not pursued at the federal level, and any caps on harvest would affect North Carolina landings only.
- Currently (2012-2021), North Carolina recreational landings are 10% of coastwide recreational landings and North Carolina commercial landings are 39% of coastwide commercial landings.
- “Status quo” in the fishery is defined as the five-year average of landings. It was chosen as the preferred timeframe because it is the median of the three averages (3-, 5- and 10-year) investigated, while including enough years to smooth the abnormally high recreational landings in 2020.
- “Various Percentage Points of Growth” in the fishery as 125%, 150%, 175%, and 200% of status quo (i.e., 100% of the 2018-2022 five-year average).
- Research and data needs for this species include age and growth, sex and maturity, tagging studies, and stock structure. All of which could be used in an assessment to determine stock status.

Action Needed

Review and provide input on how NCDMF have defined status quo and growth for North Carolina’s recreational and commercial false albacore fisheries for the purposes of developing management options. This feedback will be incorporated as staff continue to draft the False Albacore Issue Paper, including management options with rulemaking language, for false albacore, as requested by the NCMFC.

Background

False albacore is a migratory schooling species typically found in tropical to temperate waters of the Atlantic Ocean. False albacore 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. Coastwide, there are no known commercial or recreational regulations in place to manage false albacore fisheries.

Management is not currently being pursued at the federal level, though it has been discussed at recent meetings. At its December 2022 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Mackerel Cobia Committee directed Council staff to develop a fishery performance report every three years rather than initiate management of the species. Most recently, at the May 2023 Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) meeting, the Interstate Fisheries Management Policy Board voted not to pursue management of false albacore at the interstate level, but instead recommended states with an interest in false albacore management pursue it on their own.

From 2012 to 2021 North Carolina recreational landings of false albacore averaged 264,229 pounds which accounts for 10% of the coastwide recreational landings and 13% of the South Atlantic recreational landings. The average North Carolina commercial landings during this same time equaled 196,906 pounds and accounted for 39% of the coastwide commercial landings and 43% of the commercial landings in the South Atlantic.

The stock status of the false albacore 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 false albacore in the western Atlantic, however, funding to complete these studies is limited. Also, because false albacore is highly migratory any data collection efforts would require cooperative research across state, federal and continental jurisdictions. Currently, the American Saltwater Guides Association, in collaboration with Cornell University, the New England Aquarium and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries, have initiated several studies with the aim of addressing some of the coast-wide data gaps, including stock structure and migration patterns.

Status Quo & Growth Scenarios

At the request of the NCMFC, Division defined the current status quo of the false albacore fishery and proposed several scenarios to allow for growth in the fishery. While this is a coastwide-stock the landings used in the analyses below are only North Carolina recreational and commercial landings.

First, to define status quo, staff reviewed the average landings of false albacore in both sectors over different time periods (Table 1). The time-series analyzed to define status quo were: three-year (2020-2022), five-year (2018-2022), and ten-year (2013-2022; Figures 1 and 2). The five-year time series is preferred because the average landings during this time series are the median of the three time series averages analyzed and the time span was sufficient that the spike in recreational landings in 2020 was smoothed across the time series.

Next, staff defined various percentage points of growth in the fishery as 125%, 150%, 175%, and 200% of status quo (i.e., 100% of the five-year average). For the recreational sector, growth values range from 294,212 pounds at 100% (status quo) to 588,423 pounds at 200% (Table 1; Figure 3). Growth in the commercial fishery ranges from 184,059 pounds at 100% (status quo) to 368,119 at 200% (Table 1; Figure 4). These potential harvest caps on the fishery only apply to North Carolina and it is unknown how these limits will affect the overall coastal stock.

Once the status quo and various percentage points of growth are reviewed by the Commission, the issue paper for rulemaking will be drafted with management options for further consideration by the NCMFC. Implementation of any regulations would be dependent on rulemaking specific to this species, which would begin as part of the 2024-2025 rule-making cycle in May 2024.

Tables

Table 1. Growth scenarios for the North Carolina false albacore fishery based on 3-, 5-, and 10-year averages for the commercial and recreational sectors (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program and North Carolina Trip Ticket Program)

Percent of Average Landings	3-Year (2020-2022)		5-Year (2018-2022)		10-Year (2013-2022)	
	Recreational	Commercial	Recreational	Commercial	Recreational	Commercial
100% (status quo)	323,402	161,080	294,212	184,059	275,889	195,086
125%	404,253	201,350	367,765	230,074	344,862	243,858
150%	485,103	241,621	441,317	276,089	413,834	292,629
175%	565,954	281,891	514,870	322,104	482,806	341,401
200%	646,804	322,161	588,423	368,119	551,778	390,172

Figures

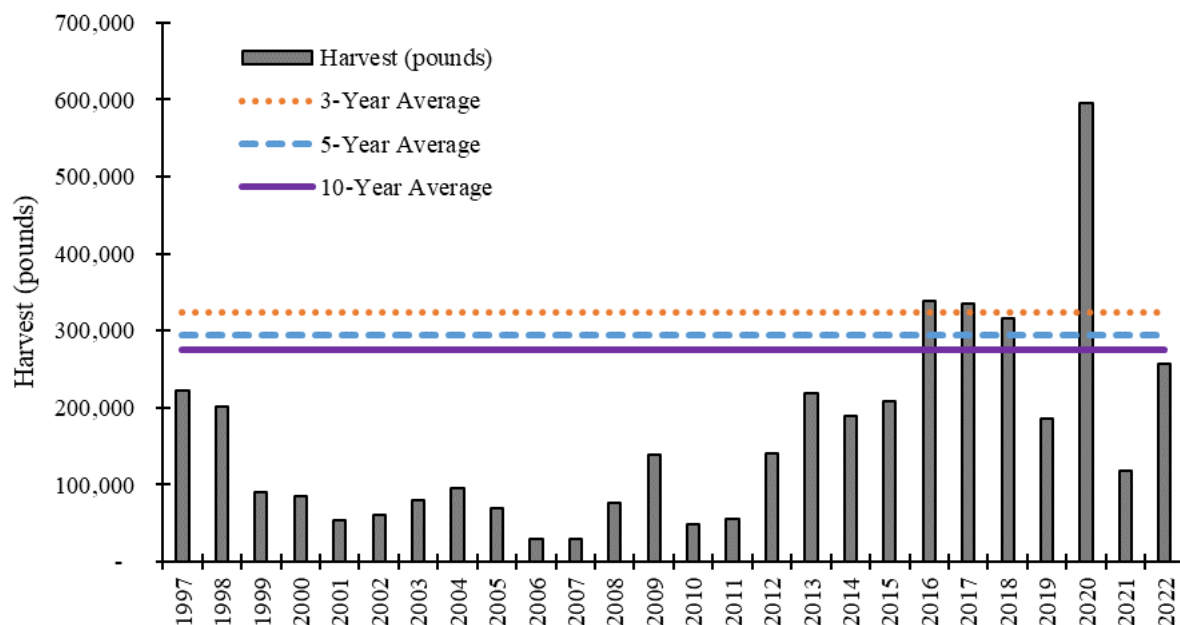


Figure 1. North Carolina recreational landings (pounds), 1997-2022. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program).

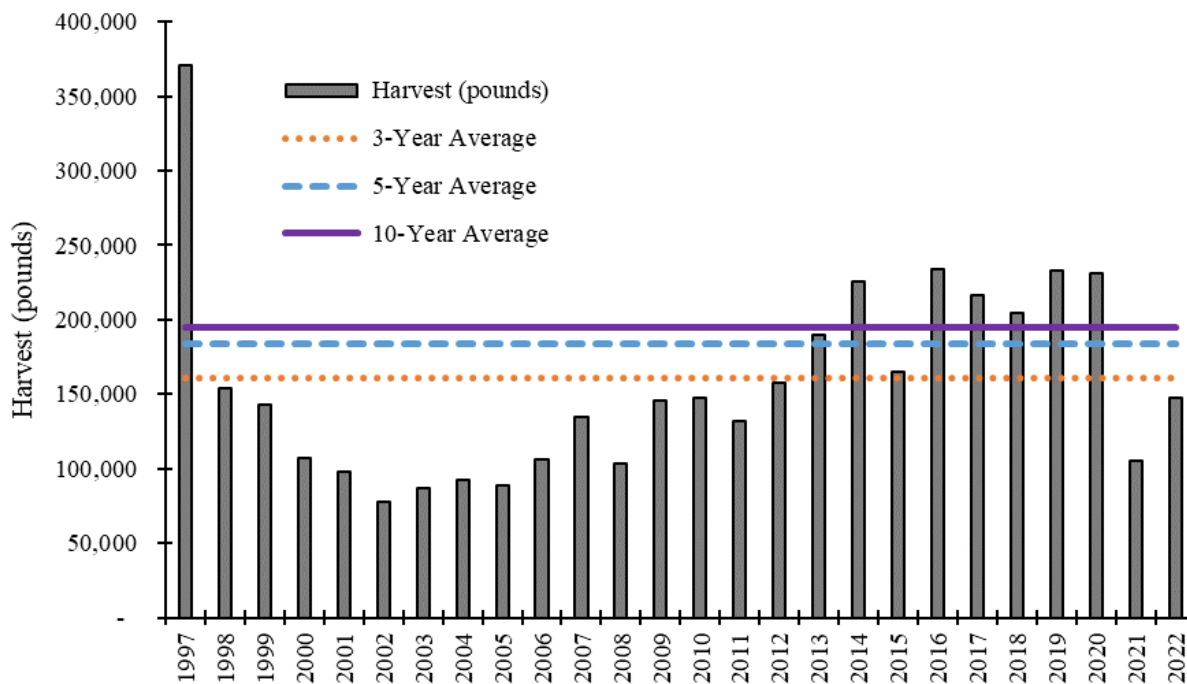


Figure 2. North Carolina commercial landings (pounds), 1997-2022. (Source: North Carolina Trip Ticket Program; Note, 2022 landings are preliminary as of 5/5/2023).

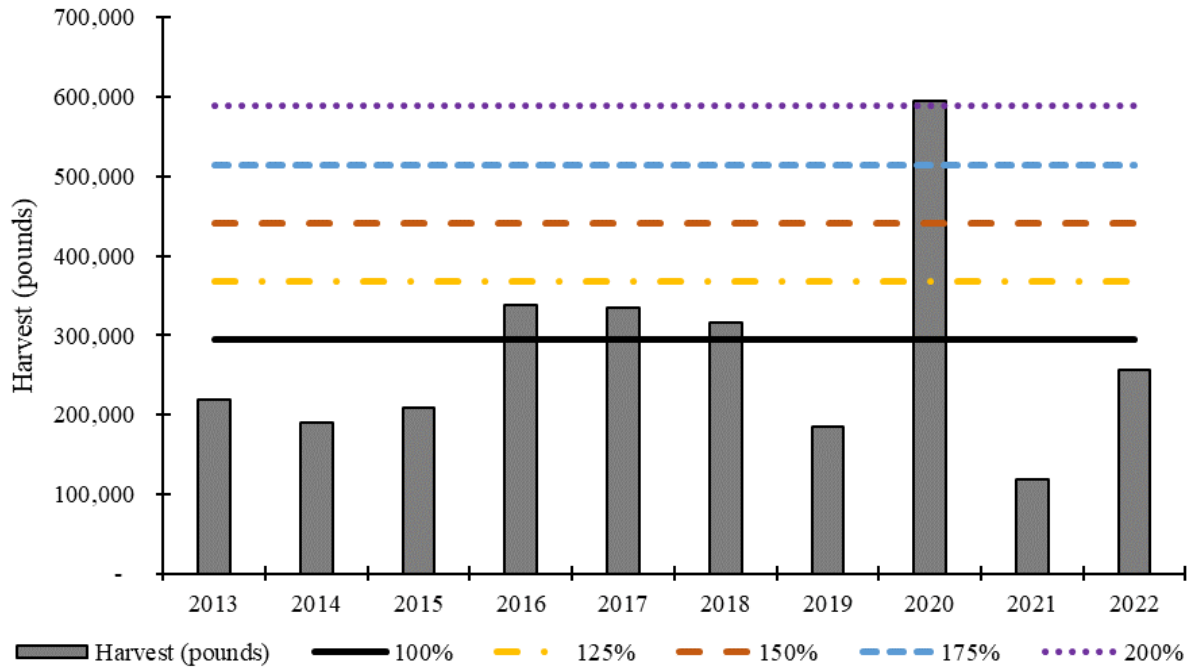


Figure 3. North Carolina recreational landings (pounds), 2013-2022 and percentages based on the 5-year average landings. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program).

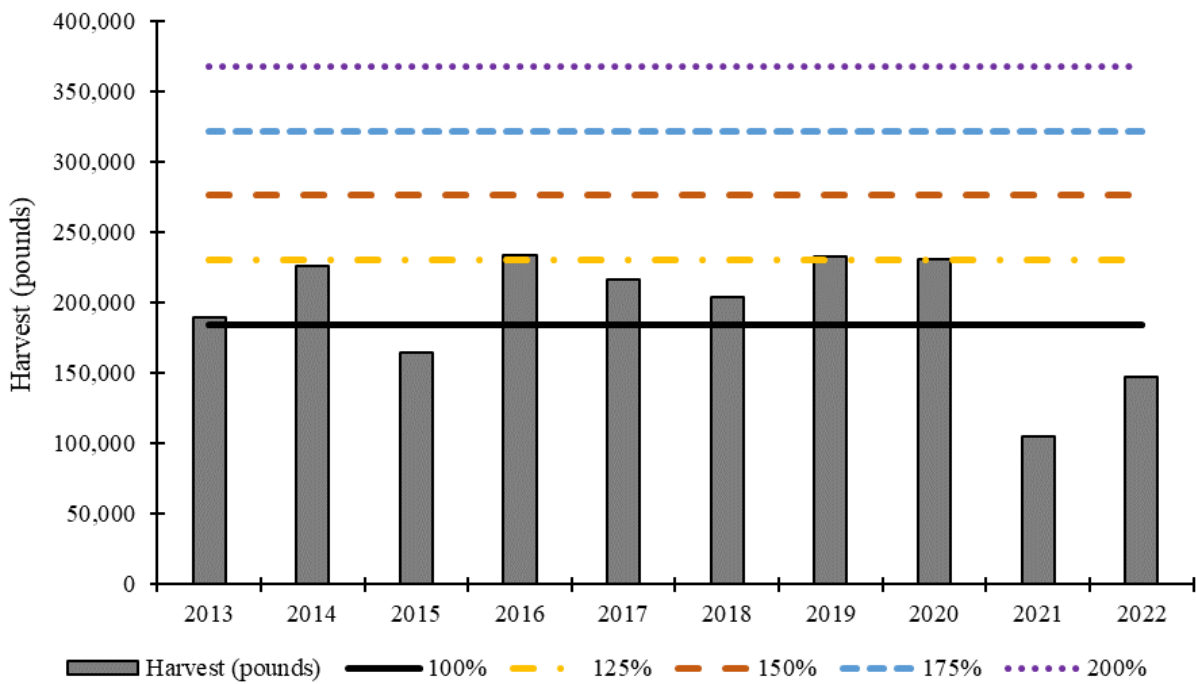


Figure 4. North Carolina commercial landings (pounds), 2013-2022 and percentages based on the 5-year average landings. (Source: North Carolina Trip Ticket Program; Note, 2022 landings are preliminary as of 5/5/2023).