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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission

**FROM:** Jeff Dobbs, Fishery Management Plan Coordinator  
Anne Markwith, Southern Flounder FMP Co-Lead  
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**SUBJECT:** Development of Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan Amendment 5

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### Issue

Review Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendment 5 goal and objectives, initial list of issues to be addressed, and public comment received during the scoping period.

### Supporting Documents

- [Public comments submitted online for Amendment 5 to the Southern Flounder FMP scoping period](#)
- [Amendment 5 Scoping Document](#)

### Action

Provide input on management options to explore in the drafting of the Southern Flounder FMP Amendment 5.

### Background

The purpose of Amendment 5 is to comprehensively address the August 2024 North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) motion “to ask the DMF Director to ask the DEQ 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”. While Amendment 4 includes the option to shift sector allocation to 50/50 (i.e., parity) one year earlier than prescribed in Amendment 3 (2025 instead of 2026), this change is not a long-term solution for addressing recreational access. Broad topics to be addressed in Amendment 5 include recreational access, strategies to address the effects of lower commercial sector quota on management, and changes to the adaptive management.

## **Goal and Objectives**

The goal of Amendment 5 is to manage Southern Flounder (*Paralichthys lethostigma*) to achieve a self-sustaining population that provides opportunities for sustainable harvest using science-based decision-making processes. The following objectives will be used to achieve this goal.

- Implement management strategies within North Carolina that maintain/restore the Southern Flounder population with adequate abundance to prevent overfishing while balancing access to the resource.
- Monitor and manage the Southern Flounder fishery in a manner that utilizes biological, socioeconomic, fishery, habitat, and environmental data.
- Promote outreach and interjurisdictional cooperation regarding the status and management of Southern Flounder in the South Atlantic, including practices that minimize bycatch and discard mortality.
- Ensure efforts to maintain or increase growth, survival, and reproduction of the Southern Flounder stock are consistent with the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan regarding critical habitat and environmental quality.

## **Public Comment**

The Amendment 5 scoping period was open March 1–March 31, 2025. During this period the Division received 93 online comments and conducted four scoping meetings which were attended by 39 members of the public. These meetings took place in Raleigh, Manteo, Morehead City, and Wilmington.

## ***Scoping Meetings***

Public feedback at the scoping meetings varied, but several topics had broad support. The public strongly supported moving to single species management to improve access to all flounder species. Most felt that anglers could learn to identify the different species if it meant increased fishing opportunities. The public expressed their desire to have a season for the two ocellated species in the ocean, prior to the fall Southern Flounder season. The Division repeatedly heard comments that full year closures needed to be prevented at all costs. There was some concern about effectiveness of multi-state management as many stakeholders believed our management partners were not doing their part to reduce harvest and rebuild the stock. Several commercial fishermen expressed the need to maintain access for all segments of the commercial fishery, including set gill net, and an interest in re-evaluating commercial sub-sector allocations and seasons to better align with current participation and market conditions. There was also some support for moving gigs to a commercial only gear type and replacing the fall set gill net season with a summer runaround season.

## ***Online Comments***

During the 31-day scoping period 93 public comments were submitted online. These comments mirrored the strong support for single-species management the Division heard at the in-person meetings. Online commentors also expressed strong support for an ocean only season for the ocellated species to occur prior to the fall Southern Flounder season, preventing full year closures, and concern about multi-state management. Additionally, many online comments expressed support for phasing out large mesh gill nets in the Southern Flounder fishery.

## **Issues to be Addressed in Amendment 5**

Prior to scoping, the DMF identified several broad topics for initial discussion. The topics came from previous MFC, public, and AC feedback about ways to improve recreational access and management. These topics can be found in the [Amendment 5 Scoping Document](#).

Following the scoping period, the Division identified an initial list of issues that will be addressed in Amendment 5, including:

### ***Recreational Topics***

- Managing Southern Flounder separate from the other two left-eyed flounder, Summer and Gulf Flounder.
- Altering the timing of the recreational Southern Flounder season to optimize access and season length.

### ***Commercial***

- Address the best use of the extremely limited mobile gear allocation left when the fishery moves to 50/50 (commercial/recreational) allocation parity
  - Re-evaluate commercial sub-allocations based on recent participation
  - Phase out anchored large mesh gill nets?
  - Evaluate trip limits and gear restrictions
  - Re-evaluate seasons

### ***General***

- Adaptive management to adjust management in response to a rebuilding stock

## **Next Steps**

Due to the broad range of topics discussed during the scoping period, and feedback received, the preliminary Amendment 5 timeline will be revised to allow sufficient time to fully evaluate these topics. The Division will provide the commission an updated timeline at its August business meeting. The Division will consider scoping input and input provided by the MFC at their May 2025 business meeting to develop a first draft of Amendment 5, a Southern Flounder FMP AC will be solicited, and the first draft of Amendment 5 will be reviewed during the FMP AC workshop.