

DECISION DOCUMENT

Estuarine Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan Amendment 2 Central Southern Management Area Data Evaluation



This Decision Document provides background information for Amendment 2 to the N.C. Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan and the adaptive management steps prescribed for the Central Southern Management Area stocks.

May 2025

Summary

Estuarine striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) in North Carolina are managed under Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Fishery Management Plan (FMP) adopted in November 2022 and its subsequent revision (2024). Striped bass stocks in North Carolina are managed jointly by the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). Amendment 2 management for the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers stocks carried forward the Supplement A no-possession measure, maintained the gill net closure above the ferry lines, and maintained the use of 3-foot tied-downs below the ferry lines. The Amendment 2 adaptive management framework for the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers stocks prescribes that in 2025, data through 2024 will be reviewed to determine if populations are self-sustaining and if sustainable harvest can be determined. In addition, the gill net prohibition was maintained to be able to assess its performance”.

Amendment 2 Goal and Objectives

The goal of Amendment 2 is to manage the estuarine striped bass fisheries to achieve self-sustaining populations that provide sustainable harvest based on science-based decision-making processes. If biological and/or environmental factors prevent a self-sustaining population, then alternate management strategies will be implemented that provide protection for and access to the resource. The following objectives will be used to achieve this goal.

- Implement management strategies within North Carolina and encourage interjurisdictional management strategies that maintain and/or restore spawning stock with adequate age structure and abundance to maintain recruitment potential and to prevent overfishing.
- Restore, enhance, and protect critical habitat and environmental quality in a manner consistent with the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan, to maintain or increase growth, survival, and reproduction of the striped bass stocks.
- Use biological, social, economic, fishery, habitat, and environmental data to effectively monitor and manage the fisheries and their ecosystem impacts.
- Promote stewardship of the resource through public outreach and interjurisdictional cooperation regarding the status and management of the North Carolina striped bass stocks, including practices that minimize bycatch and discard mortality.

Background

There are two estuarine striped bass management units and four stocks in North Carolina. The Northern Management Unit includes the Albemarle Sound Management Area (ASMA) and Roanoke River Management Area (RRMA). The striped bass stock in these management areas is the Albemarle-Roanoke (A-R) stock. The A-R stock is also included in the management unit of Amendment 7 to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

(ASMFC) Interstate FMP for Atlantic Striped Bass. The Southern Management Unit is the CSMA and includes the Tar-Pamlico, Neuse, and Cape Fear rivers stocks.

CSMA Stock Status

Stock status of the CSMA striped bass is unknown, no stock status determination has been performed, and no biological reference points have been generated. The [CSMA Estuarine Striped Bass Stocks](#) report, completed in 2020, is a collection of 1) all data that have been collected, 2) all management effort, and 3) all major analyses that have been completed for CSMA stocks to serve as an aid in development of Amendment 2. While this report does not determine stock status, it does indicate sustainability of Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers stocks is unlikely at any level of fishing mortality, lack of natural recruitment is the primary limiting factor, and without stocking abundance will decline.

Supplement A

At the November 2018 MFC business meeting, the division [recommended development](#) of temporary management measures to supplement the FMP providing for a no-possession provision for striped bass in the internal coastal and joint waters of the CSMA to protect important year classes of striped bass while Amendment 2 to the N.C. Estuarine Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan was developed. [Supplement A](#) to the Estuarine Striped Bass FMP was [adopted](#) by the MFC at their February 2019 business meeting and by the WRC in March 2019. Supplement actions implemented March 29, 2019, consisted of the following:

- Commercial and recreational no possession measure for striped bass (including hybrids) in coastal and inland fishing waters of the CSMA ([Proclamation FF-6-2019](#)). The WRC hook and line closure proclamation had the effect of suspending rules 15A NCAC 10C .0107 (l) and 10C .0314 (g). A no-possession requirement already exists in the Cape Fear River by rule.
- Consistent with [Amendment 1](#), commercial anchored gill-net restrictions requiring tie-downs and distance from shore measures will apply year-round.

Ferry Line Gill Net Closures

See Figure 1 for gill net restrictions in the Pamlico, Pungo, Bay, and Neuse rivers in place prior to implementation of the ferry line gill net closures

Independent of Supplement A but also at the February 2019 MFC business meeting, the following [motion passed](#):

“Ask the director of NCDMF to issue a proclamation, effective in conjunction with the Supplement, that restricts the use of gill-nets that interact with striped bass upstream of the ferry lines and requires attendance of gill-nets that interact with striped bass upstream of the tie-down lines.”

After [careful consideration](#), the director declined the motion request, concluding the scientific data did not support the requested management measure.

On March 13, 2019, the [MFC held an emergency meeting](#) and passed a [motion](#) directing the director to issue a proclamation regarding gill nets, beyond what was contained in Supplement A. [Proclamation M-6-2019](#) implemented the following:

- Prohibits the use of all gill nets upstream of the ferry lines from the Bayview Ferry to Aurora Ferry on Pamlico River and the Minnesott Beach Ferry to Cherry Branch Ferry on the Neuse River.
- Maintains tie-down (vertical height restrictions) and distance from shore restrictions for gill nets with a stretched mesh length 5 inches and greater in the western Pamlico Sound and rivers.

[North Carolina General Statute section 113-221.1\(d\)](#), authorizes the Chair of the MFC to call an emergency meeting (pursuant to the request of five or more MFC members) to review the desirability of directing the fisheries director to issue a proclamation. Once the MFC votes under this provision to direct issuance of a proclamation, the fisheries director has no discretion to choose another management option and is bound by law to follow the MFC decision. In these cases, under existing law, the decision of the MFC to direct the director to issue a proclamation is final and can only be overruled by the courts.

Amendment 2

[Amendment 2](#) management measures for the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers stocks carried forward the Supplement A no-possession measure. Amendment 2 also maintained the gill net closure above the ferry lines and the use of 3-foot tie-downs. The draft of Amendment 2 presented to the MFC at their February 2022 business meeting included discussion of the ferry line gill net closures and options that would have provided limited access for the gill net fishery above the ferry lines while continuing to minimize striped bass discards. However, [at that meeting](#), the MFC approved a [motion](#) to send the draft Estuarine Striped Bass FMP Amendment 2 for review by the public and advisory committees with the change of deleting these options. Therefore, the only option considered by the public, Advisory Committees, and MFC related to the ferry line gill net closure in Amendment 2 was to maintain it.

[The Amendment 2 CSMA adaptive management framework](#) prescribes in 2025, data through 2024 will be reviewed to determine if populations are self-sustaining and if sustainable harvest can be determined. In addition, the approved [motion](#) included language to: “maintain the gill net prohibition through 2024 to allow for assessment of its performance”.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management allows managers to adjust management measures as new information or data becomes available. Management options which are selected during FMP adoption account for the most up to date data on the biological and environmental factors which affect the stock. After FMP adoption, data through 2024 will be reviewed in 2025. Trends in key population parameters like adult abundance, age structure, natural recruitment, and hatchery contribution will be evaluated to determine the impact of the

2019 no-possession provision on the stocks. Analysis will also consider environmental conditions (e.g., river flow), changes to stocking strategies, and new life history information.

If the data review suggests continuing the no-possession provision is needed for stock recovery, no changes in harvest management measures will be recommended until the next FMP Amendment is developed. Adaptive management may be used to adjust management measures including area, time, and gear restrictions if it is determined additional protections for the stocks are needed.

If analysis indicates the populations are self-sustaining and a level of sustainable harvest can be determined, recommendations for harvest strategies will be developed. Conversely, if analysis indicates biological and/or environmental factors prevent a self-sustaining population, then, consistent with the goal of Amendment 2, alternate management strategies will be developed that provide protection for and access to the resource.

Next Steps and Timeline

Division staff began reviewing Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers striped bass data at the beginning of 2025 and will present final data analysis at the August 2025 MFC business meeting. Trends in key population parameters like adult abundance, age structure, natural recruitment, and hatchery contribution will be evaluated to determine the impact of the 2019 no-possession provision on the stocks. Analysis will also consider environmental conditions (e.g., river flow), changes to stocking strategies, and new life history information.

The analysis will address whether the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers stocks are self-sustaining, and dependent on results, will present recommendations for management strategies that provide additional stock protections or alternate management strategies that provide protection for and access to the resource. The analysis will also evaluate effectiveness of the ferry line gill net closures at increasing striped bass abundance.

There is no action for the MFC in May 2025 but there will be actions for the commission to consider regarding Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers striped bass management and the ferry line gill net closures at future business meetings.

Timeline

(gray indicates completed step)

Supplement A to Amendment 1 adopted	March 2019
Ferry Line Gill Net Closure implemented	March 15, 2019
Amendment 2 adopted	November 2022
Division begins data review	January 1, 2025
Division provides background to MFC - NO ACTION	May 21 - 23, 2025
Division presents data analysis/conclusions/recommendations to MFC	August 2025

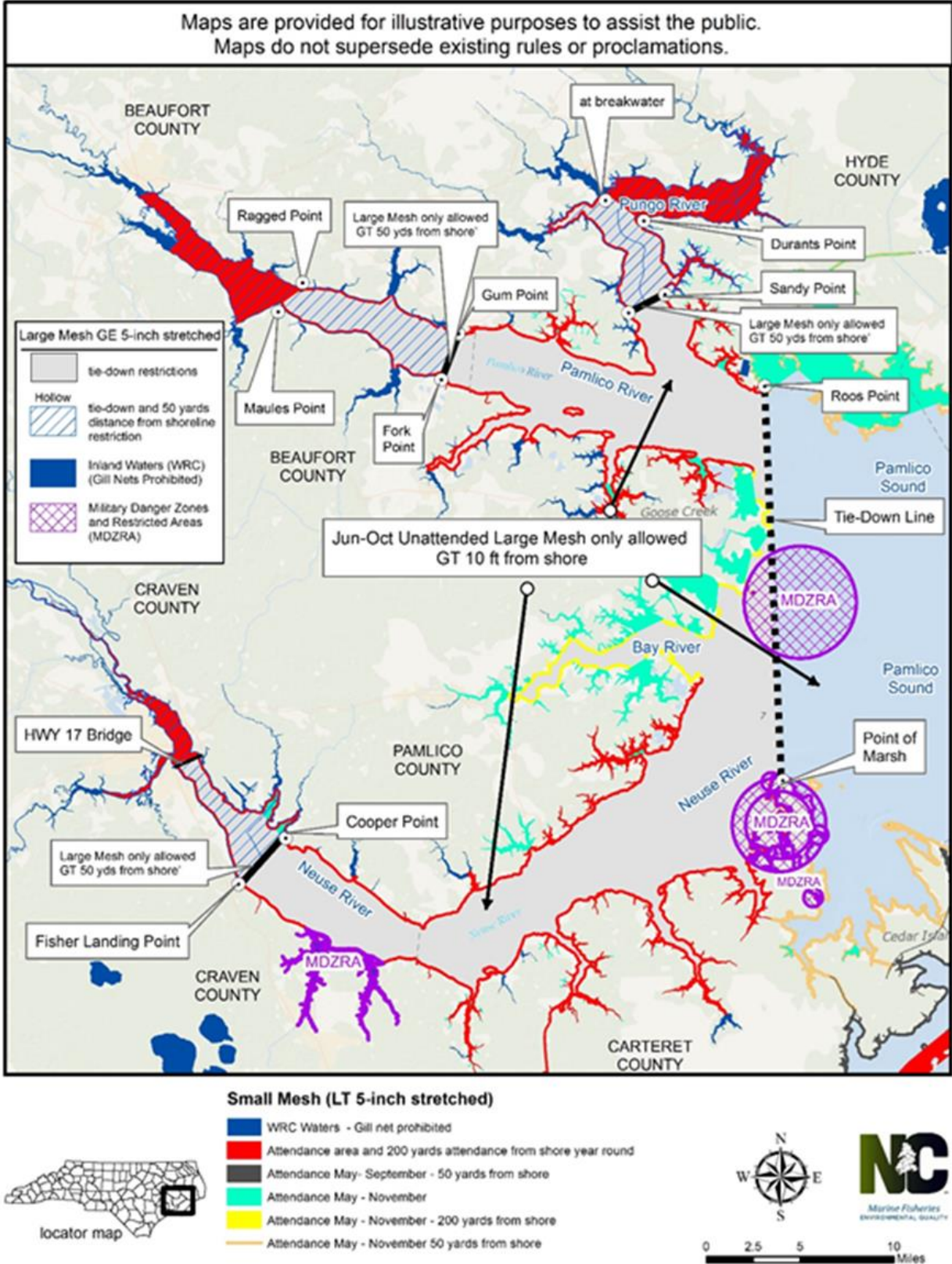


Figure 1. Gill-net regulations for small and large mesh gill nets in the Pamlico, Pungo, Bay, and Neuse rivers.

