

NORTH CAROLINA MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

May 2026

Business Meeting Briefing Materials



May 13-14, 2026

New Bern, N.C.

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MEETING AGENDA

Doubletree by Hilton Hotel; New Bern, NC

May 13-14, 2026

N.C.G.S. 138A-15(e) mandates at the beginning of any meeting of a board, the chair shall remind all members of their duty to avoid conflicts of interest under Chapter 138. The chair also shall inquire as to whether there is any known conflict of interest with respect to any matters coming before the board at that time.

N.C.G.S. 143B-289.54.(g)(2) states a member of the Marine Fisheries Commission shall not vote on any issue before the Commission that would have a "significant and predictable effect" on the member's financial interest. For purposes of this subdivision, "significant and predictable effect" means there is or may be a close causal link between the decision of the Commission and an expected disproportionate financial benefit to the member that is shared only by a minority of persons within the same industry sector or gear group. A member of the Commission shall also abstain from voting on any petition submitted by an advocacy group of which the member is an officer or sits as a member of the advocacy group's board of directors. A member of the Commission shall not use the member's official position as a member of the Commission to secure any special privilege or exemption of substantial value for any person. No member of the Commission shall, by the member's conduct, create an appearance that any person could improperly influence the member in the performance of the member's official duties.

Commissioners having questions about a conflict of interest or appearance of conflict should consult with counsel to the Marine Fisheries Commission or the secretary's ethics liaison. Upon discovering a conflict, the commissioner should inform the chair of the commission in accordance with N.C.G.S. 138A-15(e).

Wednesday, May 13, 2026

- 1:00 p.m. Preliminary Matters
- Commission Call to Order* – *Sammy Corbett, Chairman*
 - Moment of Silence and Pledge of Allegiance
 - Conflict of Interest Reminder
 - Roll Call
 - **Approval of Meeting Minutes ****
- 1:15 p.m. Chairman's Report
- Letters and Online Comments
 - Ethics Training and Statement of Economic Interest Reminder
 - 2026 Proposed Meeting Schedule
- 1:30 p.m. Director's Report – *Kathy Rawls*
- Red Snapper EFP Update – *Trish Murphey*
 - Marine Patrol Update – *Colonel Chris Lee*
 - Incidental Take Permit Update – *Jason Rock*
- 2:00 p.m. Fishery Management Plan Updates – *Dan Zapf, Jeff Dobbs*
- Implementation of Adopted FMPs
 - Upcoming FMPs
 - Red Drum FMP Amendment 2
 - Southern Flounder FMP Amendment 5
- 2:30 p.m. Kingfishes Fishery Management Plan Amendment 1 – *Matthew Doster, Claire Pelletier*
- Background, Life History, and Fishery Characterization

** Times indicated are merely for guidance. The commission will proceed through the agenda until completed.*

***Probable Action Items*

Marine Fisheries Commission Business Meeting Agenda

- 3:00 p.m. Legislative Study of Coastal and Marine Fisheries Report – *Dr. Joel Fodrie*
- 4:00 p.m. Break
- 6:00 p.m. Return for Evening Public Comment Period

Thursday, May 14, 2026

- 9:00 a.m. Public Comment Period
- 9:30 a.m. Rulemaking – *Catherine Blum*
- 2024-2025 Rulemaking Cycle Update
 - 2025-2026 Rulemaking Cycle Update
 - 2026-2027 Rulemaking Cycle
 - **Vote on Notice of Text for Rulemaking for adoption of 15A NCAC 03M .0524 for Atlantic Bonito Management ****
- 10:15 a.m. 2025 Spotted Seatrout Cold Stun Update – *Lucas Pensinger*
- 10:45 a.m. Updates on the Blue Crab Benchmark Stock Assessment Process – *Dan Zapf, Matt Damiano, Matt Zink*
- 12:00 p.m. Lunch Break
- 1:30 p.m. Eastern Oyster Fishery Management Plan Amendment 5 – *Bennett Paradis, McLean Seward, Zach Harrison*
- Deepwater Oyster Recovery Areas Presentation
- 2:15 p.m. Red Drum Satellite Tagging Project – *Cara Kowalchyk, John Mohan*
- 3:00 p.m. Issues from Commissioners
- 3:30 p.m. Meeting Assignments and Preview of Agenda Items for Next Meeting – *Jesse Bisette*
- 3:45 p.m. Adjourn

** Times indicated are merely for guidance. The commission will proceed through the agenda until completed.*

***Probable Action Items*

Marine Fisheries Commission Business Meeting Minutes

DRAFT

Hilton Garden Inn

Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

February 18-19, 2026

The Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) held a business meeting on February 18-19, 2026, at the Hilton Garden Inn in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. In addition to the public comment sessions, members of the public submitted public comment online or via U.S. mail. The written comments, briefing materials, presentations, and full audio from this meeting are available [here](#).

Actions and motions from the business meeting are listed in **bold** type.

BUSINESS MEETING

Wednesday, February 18, 2026

Public Comment Period

Chairman Sammy Corbett held a public comment session that began at 6:00 p.m. The following members of the public provided comment to the commission: Charles Locke, Steve House, James Byrd, Duke Spencer, Reese Stecher, Ralph Craddock, Keith Tongier, Bobby Smith, Mary Ellon Balance, Terry Stuart, Bill Moore, Ervin Bateman. With no one else wishing to speak, Chairman Corbett ended the public comment period at 6:28 p.m.

[View the video recording of the February 18, 2026, 6:00 p.m. public comment session](#)

Thursday, February 19, 2026

Public Comment Period

Chairman Sammy Corbett held a public comment session that began at 9:00 a.m. The following members of the public provided comment to the commission: Bill Foster, Jake Griffin, Chris Hickman, Dewey Hemilright, Thomas Newman, Micah Daniels, Woody Joyner, Tara Foreman, Bob Woodard. With no one else wishing to speak, Chairman Corbett ended the public comment period at 9:24 a.m.

[View the video recording of the February 19, 2026, 9:00 a.m. public comment session](#)

Preliminary Matters

Chairman Corbett called the February 18-19, 2025, business meeting to order.

Chairman Corbett began the meeting with a moment of silence, followed by the pledge of allegiance.

Next, Chairman Corbett reminded all commissioners of N.C. General Statute § 138A-15(e), which mandates at the beginning of any meeting of a board, the Chair shall remind all members of their duty to avoid conflicts of interest under Chapter 138. The Chair also shall inquire as to whether there is any known conflict of interest with respect to any matters coming before the board at that time. There were no stated conflicts of interest from any commissioner.

The following MFC members were in attendance: Mike Blanton, Willie Closs, Sarah Gardner, Alfred Hobgood, John Mallette, Doug Rader, Tom Roller, William Service, and Sammy Corbett – Chairman.

Chairman Corbett asked for any corrections, additions or deletions that need to be made to the November 2025 MFC Quarterly Business Meeting minutes and then requested a motion to approve the minutes.

Motion by Commissioner Roller to approve the November 2025 business meeting minutes.

Second by Commissioner Service.

Motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Commissioner Roller to add a presentation on the Deepwater Oyster Recovery Areas adopted under the Amendment 5 of the Eastern Oyster FMP.

Second by Commissioner Rader.

ROLL CALL VOTE					
Member	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Blanton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Closs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardner	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hobgood	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mallette	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rader	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roller	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corbett	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion passed 8-0, with 1 abstention.

Motion by Commissioner Roller to add Blue Crab FMP Amendment 3 Adaptive Management to the MFC’s May 2026 business meeting agenda, including a possible vote to select Amendment 3 adaptive management options.

Second by Commissioner Rader.

ROLL CALL VOTE					
Member	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Blanton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Closs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hobgood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Malette	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rader	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roller	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corbett	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion failed 4-4, with 1 abstention.

[View the recording of the motions and surrounding discussion](#)

Chairman’s Report

Letters and Online Comments

Chairman Corbett referred commissioners to letters and comments provided in the briefing materials.

Ethics Training and Statement of Economic Interest Reminder

Chairman Corbett reminded commissioners to work with MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette to stay up to date on their ethics training and Statement of Economic Interest.

Director’s Report

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Policy Manager Barbie Byrd sat in place of Director Kathy Rawls. The sheepshead size limit change and a new recreational bad limit has been implemented. An update was also given on the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP), noting that issue papers are currently being drafted, with Steering Committee meetings scheduled for May and July. Regarding the Incidental Take Permit (ITP), Director Rawls

closed management section A to use of gill nets on December 19. Division staff recently met with the NOAA to discuss the authorized take level, which was reached sooner than expected and operates on a rolling two-year cycle. An update was also provided on the CCA lawsuit, noting that the plaintiffs have finished presenting their case and the state is currently presenting evidence, although the timeline for a ruling from the judge remains uncertain. Staff updates included the retirement of field technician David Skinner, Marine Patrol officer Michael Long, and Marine Patrol Major Jason Walker. Additionally, Chris Lee has been appointed as the new Colonel and Eddie Mann as the new Major of Marine Patrol.

[View the video recording of the Director's Report and surrounding discussion.](#)

Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permit Update

DMF Assistant to South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (SAFMC) Trish Murphey gave a presentation of the status of the South Atlantic Exempted Fishing Permit Application for Atlantic red snapper.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Rulemaking

DMF Rulemaking Coordinator Catherine Blum provided updates on the 2024-2025 rulemaking cycle, 2025-2026 rulemaking cycle, and 2026-2027 rulemaking cycle.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

Motion by Commissioner Roller to select Option 4 as the MFC's preferred management option, including the associated proposed language for rulemaking, for the Atlantic Bonito Management issue paper.

Second by Commissioner Hobgood.

ROLL CALL VOTE					
Member	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Blanton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Closs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hobgood	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Malette	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rader	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roller	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corbett	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion passed 5-2, with 2 abstentions.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Fishery Management Plan Updates

DMF Biologists Dan Zapf and Jeff Dobbs gave a presentation providing updates and recent activity related to the recently reviewed and upcoming Fishery Management Plans.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Spotted Seatrout Cold Stun Update

DMF Biologist Lucas Pensinger gave a presentation on the 2025 and 2026 Spotted Seatrout cold stun events.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Rulemaking Coordinator Catherine Blum gave a presentation on the Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

Motion by Commissioner Roller to approve the initial determination of rules and proceed to public notice, per N.C.G.S. 150B-21.3A for the following:

- **15A NCAC 03Q .0100;**
- **All other rules in 15A NCAC 03;**
- **15A NCAC 10C .0100; and**
- **15A NCAC 18A .0100, .0300-.0900, .3400.**

Second by Commissioner Gardner.

ROLL CALL VOTE					
Member	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Blanton	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Closs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gardner	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hobgood	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Malette	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rader	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roller	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corbett	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion passed unanimously.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Mandatory Harvest Reporting Update

MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette gave a verbal update following the December 1, 2025 effective date of the Mandatory Harvest Reporting regulations.

After the presentation, Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments and questions.

[View the video recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

Issues from Commissioners

Chairman Corbett opened the floor to commissioners for comments, questions, and other discussion.

Commissioner Gardner requested a presentation at an upcoming meeting about tagging programs happening within the state.

[View the video recording of the Issues from Commissioners.](#)

Meeting Assignments and Preview of Agenda Items for Next Meeting

The DMF's MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette reviewed meeting assignments and provided an overview of the May 2026 meeting items.

Having no further business to conduct, Chairman Corbett adjourned the meeting at 2:13 p.m.

DRAFT

NC Marine Fisheries Commission

Chairman's Report

May 2026 Quarterly Business Meeting

Documents

State Ethics Education Reminder

2026 Annual Meeting Calendar

MFC Workplan



EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS

Public Servants must complete the Ethics and Lobbying Education program provided by the N.C. State Ethics Commission within **six months** of their election, appointment, or employment. We recommend that this be completed as soon as possible, but the training must be repeated every two years after the initial session.

Our new 90-minute on-demand online program is available on our website under the Education tab. For your convenience, here is the [link](#). The new program is compatible with portable devices such as phones and tablets.

Live webinar presentations are also offered every month. These presentations are 90 minutes in length and give the opportunity to ask questions of the speaker. Registration information for those can be found [here](#).

For questions or additional information concerning the Ethics Education requirements, please contact Tracey Powell at (919) 814-3600.

Marine Fisheries Commission 2026 Calendar

Dates are subject to change

January						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
					2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18		20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

February						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
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22	23	24	25	26	27	28

March						
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29	30	31				

April						
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12	13	14	15	16	17	18
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26	27	28	29	30		

May						
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					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24		26	27	28	29	30
31						

June						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

July						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2		4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

August						
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2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

September						
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6		8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
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27	28	29	30			

October						
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				1	2	3
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11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31


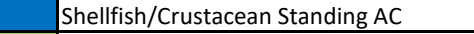
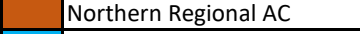
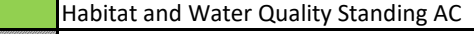
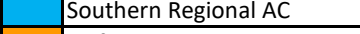

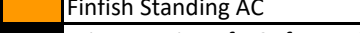


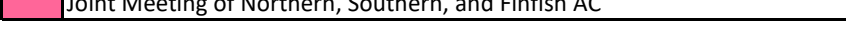
November						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10		12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25			28
29	30					

December						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23			26
27	28	29	30	31		

2026 MFC Meeting Dates

MFC Business Meetings	Northern Regional AC	Southern Regional AC
February 18-19	March 10	March 11
May 20-21	June 18	June 10
August 19-20	September 8	September 9
November 17-18		
Shellfish/Crustacean	Finfish Standing AC	Habitat and Water Quality
March 17	March 12	March 18
June 16	June 11	June 17
September 15	September 10	September 16

Calendar Key

	MFC		Shellfish/Crustacean Standing AC
	Northern Regional AC		Habitat and Water Quality Standing AC
	Southern Regional AC		State Holiday
	Finfish Standing AC		Federal Commission or Council Meeting
	Joint Meeting of ACs for MFC Review and Presentation of Action Items		
	Joint Meeting of Northern, Southern, and Finfish AC		

Marine Fisheries Commission Workplan - May 2026

Note: all listed dates are tentative and are subject to change

Orange = Action Item		Green = No Action Necessary				
Topic	Feb 2026	May 2026	Aug 2026	Nov 2026	Feb 2027	May 2027
Active Management Plans						
Southern Flounder FMP Amendment 5	In Progress	In Progress	In Progress	Send Draft for AC/Public Review	Select Preferred Option	Final Approval
Kingfish FMP Amendment 1		Background Presented	Indicator Analysis Results	Scoping Information Presented	In Progress	In Progress
Red Drum FMP		In Progress	Scoping Information Presented	In Progress	In Progress	In Progress
Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan		Information Presented				
Rulemaking						
Atlantic Bonito Management	Select Preferred Option	Notice of Text	In Progress	Final Approval		
Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules	Approve Initial Determination	Public Review	Approve Final Determination	In Progress	In Progress	Vote on Readoption Schedule

NC Marine Fisheries Commission

March 2026 Committee Reports

May 2026 Quarterly Business Meeting

Documents

Northern Regional Advisory Committee

Southern Regional Advisory Committee

Finfish Advisory Committee

Shellfish/Crustacean Advisory Committee

Habitat & Water Quality
Advisory Committee



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

March 11, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Commission
Northern Regional Advisory Committee

FROM: Coral Sawyer, Program Assistant
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Marine Fisheries Commission's Northern Regional Advisory Committee, March 10, 2026, to have conversation between the Division and the Advisory Committee.

The Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) Northern Regional Advisory Committee (AC) held a meeting on March 10, 2026, at the Washington Civic Center in Washington, North Carolina and via webinar. AC members could attend in either setting to communicate with other committee members.

The following Advisory Committee members were in attendance in person: Keith Bruno, Stuart Creighton, Wayne Dunbar, Robert Makowsky, Thomas Newman, Jason Weeks, and Sara Winslow – Chair. The following members were in attendance online: Everett Blake, Melissa Clark, and Morton Gaskill. (Absent: Jamie Winslow)

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Staff: Jesse Bisette, Barbie Byrd, Jeff Dobbs, Debbie Manley, Dan Zapf, Captain Daniel Ipock, Major Eddie Mann, Officer Candace Rose.

The following members of the public signed in: Sarah Gardner, Brian Horsley, Stephanie Scarborough.

The Northern Regional AC had ten members present at the start of the meeting and a quorum was met.

Northern Regional AC Chair Sara Winslow called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Stuart Creighton and seconded by Robert Makowsky. The motion passed by unanimous consent. A motion to approve the minutes from the April 10, 2025, meeting was made by Melissa Clark and seconded by Wayne Dunbar. The motion passed by unanimous consent.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Sara Winslow opened the floor to the public for comment, no members of the public provided comment.

COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN

MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette gave a verbal update on the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) 2026 Amendment. After the presentation, Chair Sara Winslow opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

[View the recording and the surrounding discussion.](#)

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATES

DMF Biologists Jeff Dobbs and Dan Zapf gave a presentation providing updates on activity related to the recently reviewed and upcoming Fishery Management Plans. After the presentation, Chair Sara Winslow opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording and the surrounding discussion.](#)

ISSUES FROM AC MEMBERS

Chair Sara Winslow opened the floor to advisors for any comments and questions. MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette gave updates concerning the recent MFC business meeting.

Motion by Thomas Newman to support option 1 (status quo) in the Atlantic Bonito Management issue paper. Second by Morton Gaskill.

Member	ROLL CALL VOTE				
	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Blake	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bruno	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clark	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creighton	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dunbar	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gaskill	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Makowsky	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Newman	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Weeks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jamie Winslow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Winslow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Motion passed 7-2, with 1 abstention.

[View the recording of this motion and the surrounding discussion.](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 7:49 p.m.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

March 13, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Commission
Southern Regional Advisory Committee

FROM: Coral Sawyer, Program Assistant
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Marine Fisheries Commission's Southern Regional Advisory Committee, March 11, 2026, to have conversation between the Division and the Advisory Committee.

The Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) Southern Regional Advisory Committee (AC) held a meeting on March 11, 2026, at the Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, North Carolina and via webinar. AC members could attend in either setting to communicate with other committee members.

The following Advisory Committee members were in attendance in person: Samuel Boyce, Tancel Lee, Laura Lukas, Michael Oppegaard, Richard Sear, Ken Seigler, Fred Scharf - Chair. The following members were in attendance online: Jeremy Skinner, Tom Smith. (Absent: Pam Morris, Glen Skinner)

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Staff: Jesse Bissette, Barbie Byrd, Jeff Dobbs, Debbie Manley, Dan Zapf, Colonel Chris Lee, Captain Garland Yopp.

The following members of the public signed in: Sammy Corbett, Philip Hamilton, Jake Griffin, Albie Solana.

The Southern Regional AC had nine members present at the start of the meeting and a quorum was met.

Southern Regional AC Chair Fred Scharf called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Richard Sear and seconded by Ken Seigler. The motion passed unanimously. A motion to approve the minutes from the April 8, 2025, meeting was made by Ken Seigler and seconded by Samuel Boyce. The motion passed unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Fred Scharf opened the floor to the public for comment, no members of the public provided comment.

COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN

MFC Liaison Jesse Bissette gave a verbal update on the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) 2026 Amendment. After the presentation, Chair Fred Scharf opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording and the surrounding discussion.](#)



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATES

DMF Biologists Jeff Dobbs and Dan Zapf gave a presentation providing updates on activity related to the recently reviewed and upcoming Fishery Management Plans. After the presentation, Chair Fred Scharf opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording and the surrounding discussion.](#)

ISSUES FROM AC MEMBERS

Chair Fred Scharf opened the floor to advisors for any comments and questions. Jesse Bisette gave updates concerning the recent MFC business meeting.

Motion by Jeremy Skinner to recommend to the MFC to remain status quo in regard to the Atlantic Bonito Management issue paper. Second by Ken Seigler.

Member	ROLL CALL VOTE				
	Aye	Nay	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Boyce	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lukas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Morris	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Oppegaard	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sear	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seigler	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G. Skinner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
J. Skinner	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Smith	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scharf	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Motion fails 3-4, with one abstention.

[View the recording of this motion and the surrounding discussion.](#)

The meeting adjourned at 8:18 p.m.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

March 13, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Commission
Finfish Advisory Committee

FROM: Coral Sawyer, Program Assistant
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Marine Fisheries Commission's Finfish Advisory Committee, March 12, 2026, to have conversation between the Division and the Advisory Committee.

The Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) Finfish Advisory Committee (AC) held a meeting on March 12, 2026, at DMF's Central District Office in Morehead City, North Carolina and via webinar. AC members could attend in either setting to communicate with other committee members.

The following Advisory Committee members were in attendance in person: Jeff Buckel, Lewis Dunn, Jake Griffin, Selby Lewis, Jesse Mock, Randy Proctor, Tom Roller, William Tarplee, Sammy Corbett – Chair. The following members were in attendance online: Tommy Day, Brent Fulcher.

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Staff: Jesse Bisette, Barbie Byrd, Jeff Dobbs, Debbie Manley, Dan Zapf, Officer Ben Bolton, Colonel Chris Lee.

The following members of the public signed in: Lauren Salter, Malli Han, Dave Pryor.

The Finfish AC had ten members present at the start of the meeting and a quorum was met.

Finfish AC Chair Sammy Corbett called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Tom Roller and seconded by Jake Griffin. The motion passed unanimously. A motion to approve the minutes from the April 16, 2025, meeting was made by Jake Griffin and seconded by Selby Lewis. The motion passed unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Sammy Corbett opened the floor to the public for comment, no members of the public provided comment.

COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN

MFC Liaison Jesse Bisette gave an update on the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) 2026 Amendment. After the presentation, Chair Sammy Corbett opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATES

DMF Biologists Jeff Dobbs and Dan Zapf gave a presentation providing updates on activity related to the recently reviewed and upcoming Fishery Management Plans. After the presentation, Chair Sammy Corbett opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

ISSUES FROM AC MEMBERS

Chair Sammy Corbett opened the floor to advisors for any comments and questions. Jesse Bissette gave updates concerning the recent MFC business meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 7:15 p.m.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

March 18, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Commission
Shellfish/Crustacean Advisory Committee

FROM: Coral Sawyer, Program Assistant
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Marine Fisheries Commission's Shellfish/Crustacean Advisory Committee, March 17, 2026, to have conversation between the Division and the Advisory Committee.

The Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) Shellfish/Crustacean Advisory Committee (AC) held a meeting on March 17, 2026, at DMF's Central District Office in Morehead City, North Carolina and via webinar. AC members could attend in either setting to communicate with other committee members.

The following Advisory Committee members were in attendance in person: Lauren Burch, Mary Sue Hammann, Will Service, Thomas Todd, Brett Wilson, Mike Blanton – Chair. The following members were in attendance online: Michael Hardison, Mike Marshall, Brassai Mustin, Peter Watkins, Tim Willis.

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Staff: Jesse Bissette, Barbe Byrd, Jeff Dobbs, Debbie Manley, Dan Zapf, Officer Zach Nelson.

The following members of the public signed in: Wendy Hubbard, Lauren Salter, Ayden Berry.

The Shellfish/Crustacean AC had 10 members present at the start of the meeting and a quorum was met.

Shellfish/Crustacean AC Chair Mike Blanton called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Thomas Todd and seconded by Tim Willis. The motion passed unanimously. A motion to approve the minutes from the March 20, 2025, meeting was made by Tim Willis and seconded by Brett Wilson. The motion passed unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Mike Blanton opened the floor to the public for comment, no members of the public provided comment.

COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN

MFC Liaison Jesse Bissette gave an update on the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) 2026 Amendment. After the presentation, Chair Mike Blanton opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

[View the recording of the presentation and the surrounding discussion.](#)

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATES

DMF Biologists Jeff Dobbs and Dan Zapf gave a presentation providing updates on activity related to the recently reviewed and upcoming Fishery Management Plans. After the presentation, Chair Mike Blanton opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.

[View the recording of the presentation and the surrounding discussion.](#)

ISSUES FROM AC MEMBERS

Chair Mike Blanton opened the floor to advisors for any comments and questions. Jesse Bissette gave updates concerning the recent MFC business meeting and plans for future meetings.

The meeting adjourned at 8:27 p.m.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

March 20, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Commission
Habitat & Water Quality Advisory Committee

FROM: Coral Sawyer, Program Assistant
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Marine Fisheries Commission's Habitat & Water Quality Advisory Committee, March 18, 2026, to have conversation between the Division and the Advisory Committee.

The Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) Habitat & Water Quality Advisory Committee (AC) held a meeting on March 18, 2026, at DMF's Central District Office in Morehead City, North Carolina and via webinar. AC members could attend in either setting to communicate with other committee members.

The following Advisory Committee members were in attendance in person: Jack Durham, Joel Fodrie, Sarah Gardner, Scott Leahy, Markham Parrish, Mark Sonder, Doug Rader – Chair. The following members were in attendance online: David Glenn, Lisa Rider. (Absent: Cate Arnold, Nathan Hall)

Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) Staff: Jesse Bisette, Barbie Byrd, Charlie Deaton, Zach Harrison, Debbie Manley.

The following members of the public signed in: Brian Horsley, Cohen McClain, Lauren Salter.

The Habitat & Water Quality AC had nine members present at the start of the meeting and a quorum was met.

Habitat & Water Quality AC Chair Doug Rader called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. The full meeting can be viewed [here](#).

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Scott Leahy and seconded by Markham Parrish. The motion passed unanimously. A motion to approve the minutes from the January 15, 2025 meeting was made by Markham Parrish and seconded by Scott Leahy. The motion passed unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Doug Rader opened the floor to the public for comment, no members of the public provided comment.

COASTAL HABITAT PROTECTION PLAN

DMF Biologist Charlie Deaton gave a presentation on the status of the 2026 Amendment to the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan. After the presentation, Chair Doug Rader opened the floor to advisors for comments and questions.



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

[View the recording of the presentation and surrounding discussion.](#)

ISSUES FROM AC MEMBERS

Chair Doug Rader opened the floor to advisors for any comments and questions. Jesse Bissette gave updates concerning the recent MFC business meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 8:09 p.m.

NC Marine Fisheries Commission

Director's Report

May 2026 Quarterly Business Meeting

Documents

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management
Council April 2026 Meeting Report

South Atlantic Fishery Management
Council March 2026 Meeting Report

Rule Suspensions Memo

April 2026 Council Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council met April 7-9, 2026, in New York, NY. The following is a summary of actions taken and issues considered during the meeting. Presentations, briefing materials, motions, and webinar recordings are available on the Council's [April 2026 meeting page](#).

HIGHLIGHTS

During this meeting, the Council:

- **Approved the Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Amendment** for submission to NOAA Fisheries, including revised EFH designations for 14 Council-managed species and new Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) based on updated habitat information.
- **Took final action on the Recreational Tilefish Permitting and Reporting Framework**, selecting preferred alternatives to streamline reporting requirements, reduce unnecessary burden, and improve clarity and enforceability of the recreational tilefish permitting program.
- **Agreed to initiate a framework action to address scup Winter I quota management**, following a review of trip limit performance and a 2026 Winter I quota overage of approximately 22 percent; the framework will consider revisions to trip limit regulations, commercial accountability measures, and additional reporting requirements.
- **Agreed to initiate an omnibus FMP amendment on multi-year specifications**, to consider revisions to specifications frequencies, documentation requirements, and other measures to improve efficiency, with most work planned for 2027.
- **Endorsed a Committee recommendation to discontinue the scoping process for a potential monkfish and/or skate wings IFQ program**, deferring to the New England Fishery Management Council on next steps.
- **Received updates on two Council-sponsored projects** focused on spiny dogfish ageing and sturgeon bycatch reduction in the dogfish gillnet fisheries.
- **Received updates on habitat activities of interest in the region.**
- **Recognized Peter Hughes as the recipient of the 2025 Ricks E. Savage Award** for his exceptional contributions to fishery management and conservation in the Mid-Atlantic region.
- **Agreed to send a letter to NOAA Fisheries and Department of Commerce leadership** expressing serious concern about the delay in finalizing the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework.
- **Clarified its intent on the Atlantic mackerel possession limit** for crew on for-hire trips.

Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment

The Council approved its Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Amendment for submission to NOAA Fisheries. The Council preferred action alternatives include revisions to EFH for 14 Council-managed species and recommends new Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs), as a subset of EFH. The new EFH text and mapping approaches included in this amendment vastly improve the designations with up-to-date, enhanced habitat information and will amplify the impact that HAPCs have on the EFH consultation process by designating several new HAPCs, in addition to the two HAPCs that are already in place. Visit the [EFH Amendment page](#) for additional information and updates.

Recreational Tilefish Permitting and Reporting Framework

The Council took final action on the [Recreational Tilefish Permitting and Reporting Framework](#). After reviewing public comment received during the March 2026 Public Input meeting as well as recommendations from the Tilefish Committee, the Council selected Sub-Alternatives 4.1 (remove requirement to report effort-only trips), revised Sub-Alternative 4.2 (simplify the required reporting fields with the ‘species’ field maintained), and Sub-Alternative 4.5 (require eVTR submission before offloading fish) as their preferred alternatives. The preferred alternatives are expected to improve recreational tilefish permitting and reporting program to ensure that the regulatory approach is appropriate, effective, and proportionate to the data needs for managing blueline and golden tilefish. This action is intended to reduce unnecessary burden, improve clarity and enforceability, and supports the collection of reliable information needed for stock assessment and management.

During the Council discussion, NOAA fisheries indicated that the implementation of Sub-Alternative 4.2 would require substantial revisions to the current reporting system structure. They noted that under current circumstances of competing resources coupled with the substantial lift that would be required under Sub-Alternative 4.2 that changes to the current reporting fields would be highly unlikely to occur prior to 2028 at the earliest.

As a reminder to all tilefish anglers, current permitting and reporting requirements will remain in place until NOAA Fisheries approves and implements the Council's proposed regulatory changes. Visit our tilefish [permitting and reporting page](#) to learn more about how to apply for a permit or submit a trip report.

Scup Winter I Quota Period Landings Threshold Analysis

The Council reviewed an evaluation of Winter I scup trip limit reduction performance and recent landing patterns. Following the staff presentation, the Regional Administrator provided additional details regarding the impact of late dealer reports on in-season management of the 2026 Winter I fishery. The Winter I trip limit reduction was not implemented as required; delayed data availability, compounded by late dealer reports and an unusually rapid pace of landings compared to recent years, contributed to an early closure of the fishery on March 16. Based on preliminary data, the 2026 Winter I quota allocation was exceeded by about 22 percent.

The Council agreed to initiate a framework action to consider building management flexibility into the scup Winter I regulations. The framework will consider the following options: 1) revisions to the Winter I trip limit regulations, 2) adjustments to the scup commercial accountability measures, and 3) an additional reporting requirement for federal limited access scup permits (e.g., daily catch reports via VMS or an IVR system). Potential modifications to the Winter I commercial measures (i.e., initial 50,000-pound trip limit, 80 percent quota threshold activating a trip limit reduction, reduced 1,000-pound trip limit) would be addressed separately through the annual specifications process.

Multi-Year Specifications

The Council reviewed a staff memorandum on multiple-year specifications frequencies and agreed to initiate an omnibus FMP amendment. This amendment will consider the following topics: 1) potential revisions to the multi-year specifications frequencies, 2) clarification on the meetings and documentation required each year to support the specifications process, 3) potentially expanding the lists of measures which can be modified through a framework adjustment for several species, and 4) other measures to improve efficiency. Most work on this amendment will take place in 2027.

Individual Fishing Quota Program Scoping for Monkfish and/or Skate Wings

Monkfish is jointly managed by the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils, with the New England Council serving as lead. In December, the New England Council voted to initiate scoping for a potential individual fishing

quota (IFQ) program for the monkfish and/or skate wing fisheries. At this meeting, Ms. Jenny Couture (New England Council staff) presented a draft scoping document, along with a summary of recommendations from a March 19, 2026 joint meeting of the Monkfish and Skate Committees and Advisory Panels. Among Committee and Advisory Panel members, there was near-unanimous support for discontinuing development of this action. The Committees concluded that an IFQ program would not address the primary challenges facing these fisheries and that monkfish and skate issues may require different management approaches. Advisory Panel members and public commenters similarly expressed a lack of support for continuing the scoping process. After considering this input, the Council passed a motion endorsing the Monkfish and Skate Committee's recommendation to discontinue further scoping for an IFQ program for these fisheries.

Because scoping meetings have already been scheduled, New England Council staff proposed pivoting these meetings to a series of structured listening sessions to gather input on potential improvements in the monkfish and skate fisheries. The Council agreed to defer to the New England Council on next steps, while expressing general support for obtaining additional input from industry on ways to improve monkfish and/or skate management. Council staff also [communicated to the New England Council](#) that it may be beneficial to hold a workshop with fishery participants from across regions before initiating any additional management actions.

Habitat Activities Update

Karen Green (NOAA Fisheries GARFO Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division) provided an update on regional habitat activities of interest to the Council. She highlighted several major infrastructure projects, including the Key Bridge replacement, Chesapeake Bay Crossing, and other port and navigation projects. She also noted ongoing efforts such as the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers Coastal Storm Risk Management projects, NASA's Wallops Island Shoreline Protection Program, offshore sand borrow areas for beach renourishment, and proposals to place dredge materials for beneficial habitat use. The division recently provided conservation recommendations on the Aurora Submarine Fiber Optic Cable, which will run from New Jersey to Denmark, and a technical assistance letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on a proposed blue mussel mariculture operation in federal waters. In addition, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management received an unsolicited mineral lease sale for mining heavy mineral sands and phosphorites in offshore Virginia. The next anticipated step is publication of Request for Information in the Federal Register to solicit public comment. Lastly, she noted the public can track NOAA Fisheries Essential Fish Habitat and Endangered Species Consultations through the [Environmental Consultations Organizer \(ECO\)](#).

Council-Sponsored Projects

Spiny Dogfish Ageing

Dr. Michelle Passerotti (NOAA) and Ms. Madison Philipp (Formerly A.I.S., Inc. in support of NOAA), presented the results of a multi-year effort to advance spiny dogfish age determination using dorsal spines. This work addressed a gap in ageing expertise, reduced a backlog of archived samples, created instructional and reference materials, and modernized cleaning procedures, workflows, and data management systems. Project deliverables included proceedings from an ageing workshop that included scientists from multiple countries, a curated reference collection of aged spines, a comprehensive guide on cleaning, storage, and ageing of spiny dogfish dorsal spines, and approximately 9,000 new ages from dogfish collected between 2006 and 2024.

Sturgeon Bycatch Reduction

Dr. Dewayne Fox (Delaware State University) presented the results of cooperative research trials of modified low profile sink gill nets for smooth and spiny dogfish, designed to minimize catch of endangered Atlantic sturgeon. While statistical analyses are still underway, preliminary results indicate that gear performance differed between fisheries. In the spiny dogfish fishery, the modified nets substantially reduced Atlantic sturgeon bycatch with only minor impacts on target catch. In the smooth dogfish fishery, there was no

measurable reduction in sturgeon bycatch, but the experimental net increased smooth dogfish catch. As the research team analyzes the results fully, they will also reach out to fishery participants to evaluate these and other potential gear modifications to refine gear solutions to reduce Atlantic sturgeon bycatch.

Ricks E Savage Award

The Council recognized Peter Hughes as the recipient of the 2025 Ricks E Savage Award. The award is given annually to an individual who has made exceptional contributions to the management and conservation of fishery resources in the mid-Atlantic region.

Hughes was appointed to the Council in 2016 and served with distinction for nine years before completing his service in 2025. During this time, he became one of the Council's most steadfast leaders, bringing broad, practical knowledge of fisheries to every discussion. As Chair of the Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish Committee for eight years, Hughes guided the Council through the development of several challenging management actions, including two Atlantic mackerel rebuilding actions, an amendment to establish long-term management of chub mackerel, and a framework that established measures to limit future capacity increases in the *Illex* squid fishery. He also served as Chair of the Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Committee for five years, providing steady leadership throughout the development of a major amendment to modify species separation requirements in the Atlantic surfclam and ocean quahog fisheries. Hughes also served as the Council's liaison to the New England Fishery Management Council throughout his entire tenure, representing the Mid-Atlantic Council on several New England committees. In that role, he ensured that the Mid-Atlantic Council's decisions and priorities were clearly communicated to its New England counterpart, while effectively conveying New England's actions and concerns back to the Mid-Atlantic Council.



The Council extends its gratitude to Peter Hughes for his years of dedicated service and congratulates him on this well-deserved honor.

Other Business

Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework Delays

During the meeting, the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Administrator informed the Council that the agency cannot approve the 2026 recreational measures for summer flounder and black sea bass, adopted through the Council, Commission, and state process, due to the delay in publication of the proposed and final rules for the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework. As a result, the agency must enforce the 2025 non-preferred coastwide measures. Council members expressed serious concern and frustration about this situation, noting that it has been more than eight months since the Council submitted final documents for rulemaking and that the non-preferred measures for both species are much more restrictive than the recommended 2026 measures for multiple states. The Council agreed to send a letter conveying these concerns to NOAA Fisheries and Department of Commerce leadership. The letter is available [here](#).

Atlantic Mackerel Possession Limit Clarification

NOAA Fisheries is finalizing rulemaking for expanded commercial and recreational opportunities for Atlantic mackerel, [per December 2025 Council action](#). There was some ambiguity about the possession limit for crew on

for-hire trips, so the Council passed the following motion to clarify its intent: “When carrying passengers for hire, the recreational Atlantic mackerel possession limit for vessels issued a squid/mackerel/butterfish charter/party permit is 50 Atlantic mackerel per person per trip, including captains and crew. When not carrying passengers for hire, the recreational Atlantic mackerel possession limit for vessels issued a squid/mackerel/butterfish charter/party permit is 25 Atlantic mackerel per person per trip.”

Next Council Meeting

The next Council meeting will be held by webinar **June 16-18, 2026**, in Alexandria, Virginia. A complete list of upcoming meetings can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events>.



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

Council Considers Changes Affecting Commercial Fishermen, Headboats, and Spawning Areas

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council held its quarterly meeting last week, March 2-6, 2026, in Jekyll Island, GA. Much of the week was spent in the Snapper Grouper Committee, addressing topics such as commercial management measures, fishery management unit revision, and headboat vessel limits. The Council also discussed the SEDAR committee, including a name change to the program, and the scheduling of the Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel meeting in fall of 2026 and subsequent assembly of the committee in March 2027.

Commercial Management Measures (Amendment 60)



The Council began the week by convening the Snapper Grouper Commercial Sub-committee to discuss next steps for [Amendment 60](#), addressing commercial management measures. This amendment intends to increase flexibility and adaptability in the commercial snapper grouper fishery by revising permit accessibility, trip limits, and bottom longline gear stowage requirements to allow fishermen to switch from, or to, bottom longline gear during trips.

The sub-committee discussed the potential removal of the “2-for-1” provision for unlimited commercial permits (SG1), noting public opposition and concerns related to leasing vessels and associated permits. The sub-committee will continue evaluating possible changes to the commercial permit structure, including limits on permit ownership, when it meets in April 2026. The amendment will also consider a range of trip limit changes for several snapper grouper species and develop a process that would allow temporary trip limit increases or decreases through an annual evaluation and temporary changes to the trip limits issued by the NMFS Southeast Regional Office.

Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision (Amendment 61)

On Wednesday, the Council continued discussions on Snapper Grouper [Amendment 61](#), addressing a reduction in the number of species included in the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit (FMU). The Council addressed a subset of species identified for further evaluation in terms of the need for conservation and management to better align with the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Changes to species could



include removal from the FMU or designation as an Ecosystem Component (EC) species. EC species remain in the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to support ecosystem management goals, but do not face management measures such as annual catch limits.

Council staff recapped [background data](#) showing the annual catch limits across the candidate species to help narrow down which species would continue to be considered in the amendment. Bar jack, Atlantic spadefish, and misty grouper were identified as species that could be evaluated further, whereas queen snapper, cubera snapper, and banded rudderfish will no longer be evaluated in Amendment 61 and will remain under their current level of federal management.

Headboat Vessel Limits

The Council discussed potential changes to improve how retention limits apply to federally permitted headboats. Council staff presented a preliminary [analysis](#) examining how “one fish per six passengers” could affect landings for gag and black grouper, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, and snowy grouper. For gag and black grouper (currently 2 fish of each species per person per day), shifting to one fish per six passengers would have little impact on overall catch levels. For scamp and yellowmouth (currently a maximum of 3 fish of either species), one fish per six passengers would increase harvest by around 5%. Snowy grouper were initially included in the analysis but were removed from further consideration after concerns were raised about the species’ overfished status and existing strict regulations (currently one per vessel).

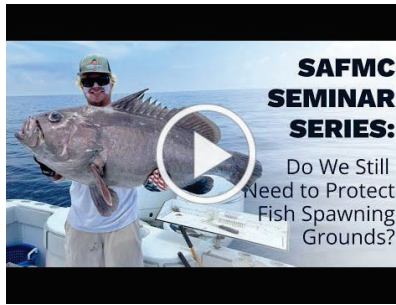


The Council voted to begin developing a framework amendment to establish vessel limits for federally permitted headboats based on the number of passengers aboard. For example, if the limit were two fish per six passengers, a vessel carrying 13 passengers could retain four fish. The amendment would further analyze the potential impacts of this approach and include opportunities for advisory panel input and public comment before the Council considers any final changes.

Spawning Special Management Zones

The Council discussed the future of whether to continue the current restrictions in several [Spawning Special Management Zones](#) (SSMZs) that were established to protect important spawning areas for snapper grouper species. These areas were originally implemented through Snapper Grouper [Amendment 36](#) with a sunset provision that would reopen the areas to fishing in 2027 unless further action is taken. Council staff presented an [overview of the research](#) being conducted on the SSMZs since they were implemented in 2016. Observations from these research efforts have documented high densities of species such as scamp grouper.

The Council agreed that additional analysis and public input are needed before deciding whether the areas should reopen or remain closed. The Council opted to begin developing a framework amendment to address the sunset provision implemented in Amendment 36. The amendment will consider a range of options, including removing the sunset provision entirely or extending it for additional periods of 10, 15, or 20 years. The analysis will also consider information from ongoing research and monitoring efforts as the Council evaluates the long-term role of these spawning protection areas.



Additional Information

Additional information about the Council’s March 2026 meeting, including individual reports from committee meetings and meetings of the Full Council, is available from the Council’s website at: <https://safmc.net/events/march-2026-council-meeting/>. The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for Jun 8 – Jun 12, 2026, in St. Augustine, FL.

About the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida. For more information, visit: www.safmc.net.

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South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Full Council and Committee
SUMMARY MOTIONS
March 2-6, 2026

This is a summary of the motions approved by the Council. Motions addressing actions and alternatives for FMP amendments are followed by text showing the result of the approved motion. Complete details on motions and other committee recommendations are provided in the Committee Reports available on the SAFMC website.

Full Council

MOTION 1: DIRECT STAFF TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

- PREPARE LETTER TO NMFS ON RISK/VALUE MATRIX
- PREPARE LETTER TO HMS IN RESPONSE TO PROPOSED CHANGES TO SHARKS MANAGEMENT

MOTION 2: DIRECT STAFF TO BEGIN WORK ON THE NEXT REVIEW OF THE WRECKFISH ITQ PROGRAM.

Snapper Grouper Committee

Amendment 60 (Commercial Permit and Trip Efficiency)

MOTION 3: REMOVE GRAY TRIGGERFISH FROM ACTION 2 (TRIP LIMIT REVISION). The Council clarified that the species included for trip limit revisions in Action 2 do not need to be the same species that are considered for temporary adjustments to trip limits under Action 3. Lists of species for each action are in the Snapper Grouper Sub-Committee Report.

MOTION 4: REMOVE CONSIDERATION OF THE 3,000 LBS TRIP LIMIT FOR VERMILION SNAPPER (BOTH SEASONS).

Spawning Special Management Zones

MOTION 5: INITIATE A FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT TO CONSIDER A RANGE OF OPTIONS TO REMOVE SUNSET PROVISION OR EXTEND THE SUNSET PROVISION BY 10 TO 20 YEARS FOR THE SPAWNING SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ZONES.

Headboat Vessel Limits

MOTION 5: INITIATE FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT TO ADJUST THE HEADBOAT LIMITS TO NUMBER OF FISH PER SIX PASSENGERS FOR GAG, BLACK GROUPE, SCAMP, AND YELLOWMOUTH GROUPE.

Black Sea Bass

MOTION 6: INITIATE A FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT TO CONSIDER RE-OPENING THE NEARSHORE SEASONAL CLOSED AREAS TO ON-DEMAND BLACK SEA BASS POT FISHING AND CHANGING THE TRIP LIMIT FOR BLACK SEA BASS POTS.

Timing and Tasks

MOTION 7: DIRECT STAFF TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

- CONTINUE DEVELOPMENT OF AMENDMENT 60 FOR CONSIDERATION OF PUBLIC HEARING APPROVAL IN JUNE 2026.
- CONVENE THE SNAPPER GROUPE ADVISORY PANEL IN APRIL.
- INITIATE DEVELOPMENT OF FRAMEWORK AMENDMENTS TO ADDRESS SPAWNING SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ZONES, HEADBOAT TRIP LIMITS, AND RE-OPENING OF NEARSHORE SEASONAL CLOSED AREAS FOR ON-DEMAND BLACK SEA BASS POTS.
- CONTINUE DEVELOPMENT OF AMENDMENT 44 FOR CONSIDERATION OF PUBLIC HEARING APPROVAL IN JUNE, PENDING DATA AVAILABILITY.
- CONTINUE DEVELOPMENT OF AMENDMENT 61 FOR REVIEW IN JUNE 2026.
- DEVELOP A DRAFT ALLOCATION REVIEW REPORT FOR VERMILION SNAPPER FOR APPROVAL IN JUNE 2026.
- CONVENE THE SNAPPER GROUPE COMMERCIAL SUB-COMMITTEE BEFORE THE JUNE 2026 COUNCIL MEETING.
- WRITE A LETTER TO OST REQUESTING EARLY ACCESS FOR BLACK SEA BASS CATCH ESTIMATES FROM MRIP.

SEDAR Committee

MOTION 8: APPROVE THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE ATLANTIC SPANISH MACKEREL STOCK ASSESSMENT, THE SOUTH ATLANTIC KING MACKEREL STOCK ASSESSMENT, AND THE DOLPHIN MSE REVIEW WORKSHOP. ALLOW THE COMMITTEE CHAIR TO APPROVE ANY SUBSEQUENT EDITS RECOMMENDED BY THE COMMITTEE.

MOTION 9: APPROVE NAME CHANGE OF THE SEDAR COMMITTEE TO: SEDAR, CATCH ADVICE, AND DATA COMMITTEE (SECAD).



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

April 28, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission
FROM: Jason Rock, Fisheries Science Section Chief
SUBJECT: Temporary Rule Suspensions

Issue

In accordance with the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries Resource Management Policy Number 2014-2, Temporary Rule Suspension, the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission will vote on any new rule suspensions that have occurred since the last meeting of the commission.

Findings

There have been no new rule suspensions since the February 2026 meeting. One previously suspended rule, 15A NCAC 03J .0103 (h) Gill Nets, Seines, Identification Restrictions, is no longer suspended due to the recent statewide closure for small mesh gill nets. However, when small mesh gill nets reopen, the previous rule suspension will be reinstated along with the extension of year-round attendance requirements in portions of the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse rivers.

Action Needed

No action is needed.

Overview

In accordance with policy, the division will report current rule suspensions previously approved by the commission as non-action items. They include:

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03J .0501 (e)(2) DEFINITIONS AND STANDARDS FOR POUND NETS AND POUND NET SETS

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to increase the minimum mesh size of escape panels for flounder pound nets in accordance with Amendment 3 of the North Carolina Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan. This suspension was implemented in proclamation [M-34-2015](#) and continues in Proclamation [M-9-2024](#).



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03L .0103 (a)(1) PROHIBITED NETS, MESH LENGTHS AND AREAS

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to adjust trawl net minimum mesh size requirements in accordance with Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Shrimp Fishery Management Plan. This suspension was implemented in Proclamation [SH-3-2019](#) and continues in Proclamation [SH-1-2022](#).

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03L .0105 (2) RECREATIONAL SHRIMP LIMITS

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to modify the recreational possession limit of shrimp by removing the four quarts heads on and two and a half quarts heads off prohibition from waters closed to shrimping in accordance with Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Shrimp Fishery Management Plan. This suspension was implemented in Proclamation [SH-4-2022](#).

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03L .0205 (a) CRAB SPAWNING SANCTUARIES

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to close crab spawning sanctuaries year-round to the use of trawls in accordance with Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Shrimp Fishery Management Plan. This suspension was implemented in Proclamation [M-13-2024](#).

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0502 (a) MULLET

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to modify the recreational and for-hire possession limits of mullet in accordance with Amendment 2 to the North Carolina Striped Mullet Fishery Management Plan. This suspension was implemented in Proclamation [FF-27-2024](#).

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03M .0515 (a)(2) DOLPHIN

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to adjust the recreational vessel limit to complement management of dolphin under the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Amendment 10 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Dolphin and Wahoo Fishery of the Atlantic. This suspension was implemented in Proclamation [FF-30-2022](#).



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

NCMFC Rule 15A NCAC 03Q .0107 (4) SPECIAL REGULATIONS: JOINT WATERS

Suspension of a portion of this rule for an indefinite period. Suspension of this rule allows the division to adjust the creel limit for American shad under the management framework of the North Carolina American Shad Sustainable Fishery Plan. This suspension was continued in Proclamation [FF-8-2026](#).

NC Marine Fisheries Commission

Fishery Management Plans

May 2026 Quarterly Business Meeting

Documents

FMP Schedule

FMP Development Tracker

2025 Spotted Seatrout

Cold Stun Report

N.C. FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW SCHEDULE (July 2025–June 2030)
 Revised November 12, 2024

SPECIES (Date of Last Action)	2025–2026	2026–2027	2027–2028	2028–2029	2029–2030
SOUTHERN FLOUNDER (5/22) *					
RED DRUM (8/17) **					
KINGFISHES (8/20)					
BLUE CRAB (2/20) +					
BAY SCALLOP (8/20) **					
SHRIMP (2/22)					
ESTUARINE STRIPED BASS (11/22)					
RIVER HERRING (8/22)					
INTERJURISDICTIONAL (5/22) ++					
STRIPED MULLET (5/24)					
SPOTTED SEATROUT (3/25)					
EASTERN OYSTER (5/25)					
HARD CLAM (5/25)					

* In 2024 the DEQ Secretary approved an early FMP review to consider alternate options for managing the recreational flounder fishery, while maintaining Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements.

** In 2024 the DEQ Secretary approved the division request to delay the plan review one year to afford time for completion of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s red drum stock assessment which will inform management

+ In 2024 the DEQ Secretary approved the division request to delay the plan review one year to afford time to implement Amendment 3 adaptive management

++ In 2024 the DEQ Secretary approved the division request to delay the plan review one year to reduce overlap in ongoing plan reviews

This schedule assumes no rulemaking is required to implement plan amendments.

FMP Development Tracker - May 2026

Fishery Management Plans	Division forms Plan Development Team	Division discuss issues and Goals and Objectives	Hold Scoping Meetings and Scoping Period	Division drafts issue papers	Hold FMP Advisory Committee Workshop	Division drafts FMP	MFC Approve Draft FMP for Public Review	Public and Committee Review of Plan	MFC Select Preferred Management Options	MFC Give Final Approval of FMP and Rules
Southern Flounder					June 2026					
Red Drum			June 2026							
Kingfishes			Sept-Oct 2026							
Bay Scallop	Opens July 1, 2026									
Blue Crab	Opens July 1, 2026									

Legend

	Step Completed
	Step In-Progress
	Step Upcoming

January 2025 Spotted Seatrout Cold Stun Report

Lucas Pensinger
Matthew Zink
Melinda Lambert

May 2026

North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries
3441 Arendell Street
P.O. Box 769
Morehead City, NC 28557

ABSTRACT

Following a period of cold weather and a major winter storm with coastal snow accumulation ranging from 3- to 9-inches, the Division received reports of cold stunned Spotted Seatrout throughout coastal North Carolina. In addition to reports of cold stunned fish, water temperatures met established triggers, prompting the Director to issue a proclamation to close the Spotted Seatrout fishery. The closure was extended following the adoption of Amendment 1 to the Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. Division staff used data from NC Trip Ticket Program, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), the Division's Fishery Independent Gill Net Survey (Program 915), water temperature data downloaded from the Division's water temperature loggers (Program 909), and water temperature data downloaded from the Beaufort NOAA buoy to: 1) quantify if seasonal changes in relative abundance are related to colder winter temperatures, 2) visually assess if colder winters corresponded with changes in the length composition of Spotted Seatrout, and 3) identify the scope (spatial extent) of affected Spotted Seatrout from known cold stuns. Data and analyses in this report do not include any potential effects from the cold stun which occurred in the winter of 2026.

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INTRODUCTION

Spotted Seatrout that over-winter in estuarine environments in North Carolina are susceptible to periodic cold stun events which occur when winter water temperatures drop below the minimum temperature (3–5 °C) Spotted Seatrout can withstand (Ellis et al. 2017). These events are associated with sudden or prolonged cold temperatures or run-off of snow and/or ice melt. While cold stun events are not always lethal, Spotted Seatrout exposed to sub-optimal water temperatures (7 °C) can become lethargic or immobile making them unable to escape to warmer water (Ellis et al. 2017). This can lead to mass Spotted Seatrout mortality events which can lead to declines in population abundance (NCDMF 2012; Ellis et al. 2018; NCDMF 2022; Brooks et al. 2024). The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (Division) began developing the original Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan (FMP) in 2009. Since then, Spotted Seatrout cold stun events occurred in the winters of 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, and 2018, 2025, and 2026 (NCDMF 2012, 2016).

In the original Spotted Seatrout FMP, the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (NCMFC) directed the Division to remain status quo regarding cold stun management with the assumption that the Director would use proclamation authority to temporarily close the Spotted Seatrout fishery in the event of a “catastrophic” cold stun (NCDMF 2012). The Director used the adaptive management guidelines developed following adoption of the Spotted Seatrout FMP to close the Spotted Seatrout fishery due to cold stun events in 2011 and 2014 through June 15. Peak Spotted Seatrout spawning in North Carolina occurs between May and June. Closing Spotted Seatrout harvest through June 15 following a significant cold stun allows surviving Spotted Seatrout to escape harvest through most of the peak spawning season, potentially increasing recruitment the year after a cold stun. Public reports during the 2015 cold stun were inconsistent with what Division staff observed during their investigations, leading many stakeholders to disagree with the Division’s decision not to close the Spotted Seatrout fishery in 2015 citing subjectivity in the Director’s discretion whether to close to fishery. In 2016, the Division enacted new cold stun guidelines which considered the size and scope of a cold kill and water temperature triggers of 5 °C (41 °F) for eight consecutive days and/or 3 °C (37.4 °F) for a consecutive 24-hour period (NCDMF 2016). Water temperature triggers were based on survival probabilities of Spotted Seatrout following prolonged exposure to water temperatures below their thermal tolerance (Ellis et al. 2017). The Director used these new guidelines to close the Spotted Seatrout fishery following the 2018 cold stun event.

In January 2025, coastal North Carolina experienced an extended period of cold weather beginning with multiple nights of below freezing temperatures and days of near freezing temperatures in mid-January. On January 21, most areas of coastal North Carolina were affected by a major winter storm with snow fall accumulation ranging from three to nine inches. The storm was followed by almost a week of unusually cold temperatures with multiple days of temperatures not rising above freezing, lows in the single digits, and some areas experiencing sub-zero wind chills.

The Division began receiving reports of cold stunned Spotted Seatrout on January 13, 2025 with early, confirmed reports from areas off the Pamlico River (Chocowinity Bay), the Albermarle Sound (Little Alligator River), and the Currituck Sound (Currituck Sound Bridge and Wanchese). However, widespread reports from the public and observations by Division staff of cold stunned Spotted Seatrout continued throughout January 2025. Reports were confirmed throughout coastal North Carolina from the Little Alligator River to Topsail Island with most confirmed reports occurring in the Little Alligator River, Croatan Sound, and the central rivers and creeks. For example, multiple reports were confirmed along the Neuse River (Clubfoot Creek, Oriental, Reedy Creek, Smith Creek, South River, Trent River), the

Newport River (Gallant's Channel/Beaufort Inlet Seafood, Piver's Island, southern shore of Harlowe Creek off Country Club Road), and the Little Alligator River and Croatan Sound (Little Alligator River, Second Creek, Spencer's Creek). Additional reports of dead Spotted Seatrout were confirmed in the New River (Chadwick Bay and Fullard's Creek), the Currituck Sound (Currituck Sound Bridge and Wanchese), and Onslow County (Freeman Creek). Division staff also observed mortality of other species including Bluefish; Menhaden; Red Drum; Sheepshead; Southern Flounder; thousands of Striped Mullet; and 10s of thousands of Atlantic Croaker, Spot, and Weakfish.

Division water temperature loggers recorded water temperatures below both the 5 °C eight-day trigger and the 3 °C 24-hour trigger during the January 2025 cold stun event. Water temperature loggers at 12 stations located in known or ideal Spotted Seatrout winter habitats – from Currituck Sound near the Virginia border to Tucker Creek off the Neuse River – all recorded water temperatures which met the eight-day trigger. However, water temperature loggers at 40 stations across all areas of the state recorded temperatures that met the 3 °C for a consecutive 24-hours trigger. Some stations (water depth >2 m) have a shallow and a deep logger to measure potential water temperature gradients in areas where deeper water may act as a thermal refuge for Spotted Seatrout. In almost all cases where temperatures met the 3 °C trigger and water depth was deep enough for the deployment of two loggers at a station; both the shallow and deep loggers met the trigger indicating Spotted Seatrout were likely unable to find deeper thermal refuge in these areas.

As a result of confirmed reports of cold stunned Spotted Seatrout and water temperature data, the Director issued Proclamation FF-11-2025 (Appendix 1) to close the Spotted Seatrout fishery effective at 5:00 p.m. on January 24, 2025 until 11:59 p.m. on June 15, 2025. Amendment 1 to the Spotted Seatrout FMP was adopted in March 2025 and included a cold stun adaptive management strategy which extended this closure through June 30 (NCDMF 2025). Following the adoption of Amendment 1, the Director issued Proclamation FF-15-2025 (Appendix 2) which extended the cold stun closure until 11:59 p.m. on June 30, 2025.

Division staff used data from NC Trip Ticket Program, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), the Division's Fishery Independent Gill Net Survey (Program 915), the Division's fish house sampling (primarily Program 461), water temperature data downloaded from the Division's water temperature loggers (Program 909), and water temperature data downloaded from the Beaufort NOAA buoy to: 1) quantify if seasonal changes in relative abundance are related to colder winter temperatures, 2) visually assess if colder winters corresponded with changes in the length composition of Spotted Seatrout, and 3) identify the scope (spatial extent) of affected Spotted Seatrout from known cold stuns.

METHODS

Analysis Overview

Recreational and commercial Spotted Seatrout harvest data in the fall following a cold stun was compared to harvest data in years without cold stuns and harvest data between different cold stun years. Using data collected from Program 915, the difference between fall and spring relative abundance indices were compared to the number of degree days below 7 °C (Brooks et al. 2024) and weighted length quantiles were calculated and compared over time. Water temperature data from Program 909 was used to evaluate the spatial extent of the cold stun using water temperature triggers (NCDMF 2016; Ellis et al. 2017).

Study Area and Data

Data used in this analysis were from Program 915 from 2005 to 2025. Data were isolated to Pamlico Sound, Pamlico River, Neuse River, and Pungo River. The survey occurs annually from February 15th to December 15th and uses a stratified random sampling design in each region, using multiple mesh gill nets (3.0-6.5 inch stretched mesh, ½ inch increments). Indices of relative abundance are calculated as the number of fish per 12-hour soak time per 240 yards of net for all regions and strata combined.

sdmTMB Index of Relative Abundance

A geostatistical generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) with Gaussian Markov random fields (GMRFs) was fit to the Program 915 data at a seasonal timestep. The spring season included March through May, and the fall season included September through November. Geodata were converted to UTM-18N for coastal North Carolina and catch per unit effort (CPUE) was calculated as the total number caught divided by the hours fished. The model was specified and fit using the sdmTMB package (Anderson et al. 2025) in R (R core team, 2025). Each season (e.g., spring 2015, fall 2015) was included as a fixed effect, and spatiotemporal random fields were included to address the spatial autocorrelation among sample sites. Data was not available for spring and fall 2020, and spring 2021 due to COVID. These seasons were omitted and specified as extra time (i.e., interpolated over) in the sdmTMB model. The seasonal time step was chosen to generate estimates of relative abundance in the fall and spring to: 1) capture changes in abundance over the winter season when cold stuns occur, and 2) limit the influence of other processes that drive changes in abundance such as recruitment, fishing mortality, and movement.

The model was specified as a delta model with a binomial distribution with a logit link and a gamma distribution with a log link for the encounter and catch rate, respectively. Model fit was evaluated with DHARMA residuals, which takes all parameters at their maximum likelihood estimates and simulates new observations. Model residuals were then visually inspected with quantile-quantile plots.

Abundance and winter water temperatures

An analysis similar to Brooks et al. (2024) was conducted to evaluate the relationship of cold stuns and indices of relative abundance for spotted sea trout. Winter cold stuns are hypothesized to cause a decline in abundance in the following spring and thus we evaluated the change in abundance from fall to the following spring as it relates to winter water temperatures. The threshold for a cold day was defined as an average daily sea surface temperature below 7 °C. This temperature threshold was used by Brooks et al. 2024 and stems from laboratory and field work that showed number of days below 7 °C resulted in increased natural mortality in spotted seatrout (Ellis et al. 2017). Program 915 does not sample in January and has limited sampling in December and February.

Therefore, we used the historic water temperature data from the National Data Buoy Center for Beaufort Inlet, NC (NOAA National Data Buoy Center, 2025) to quantify the winter water temperatures. Data from the Buoy Center spanned 2005 to 2025 and average daily water temperatures were calculated for the months of December, January, and February.

Temperature data from February 2008, and January/February 2009 were missing data from the Buoy Center. We calculated the difference in relative abundance from fall to spring as

$$y = \frac{I_{S,t+1} - I_{F,t}}{I_{F,t}}$$

Where $I_{S,t+1}$ is the index of relative abundance in the spring season in year $t + 1$ and $I_{F,t}$ is the index of relative abundance in the fall of year t . A positive or negative y would indicate

an increase or decrease in abundance after winter, respectively. We used linear regression to investigate the relationship between the difference in relative abundance and the number of days with an average daily water temperature below 7 °C. The winter of 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 were omitted due to COVID driven data limitations.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon$$

Where y is the relative difference, β_0 is the intercept, X_1 is the number of days where SST was below 7°C, and ϵ is a normally distributed error term.

Length Composition

Weighted length quantiles were calculated for the P915 catch of Spotted Seatrout. The weighted length quantiles track the size distribution of the fish caught in the respective program over time: this can be a useful exercise to determine the effect of fishing, or in this case cold stuns, on the size distribution of the population. Trends in size of catch provide a valuable indicator of the health of the stock as declines and condensing of length quantiles indicate smaller fish are available. Conversely, larger and expanding length quantiles indicate larger fish are available. Differences in sample sizes across length bins and years are controlled for in the weighting to create more robust estimates of the length quantiles. The more recent years in the time series are weighted more heavily than observations in the beginning of the time series. For an in-depth explanation, see Akinshin (2023). The weighted quantile method was implemented with the cNORM package (Lenhard et al. 2018) in R (R core team 2025).

RESULTS

sdmTMB Index of Relative Abundance

The model successfully converged on a solution and residual plots were not problematic, indicating an adequate fit to the data. The index model was fit to 7,820 sampling events. From 2004 to 2018 the index of relative abundance varied with no global trend. In 2019, abundance peaks and then, while variable, is sustained at a higher level than the earlier portion of the time series (Figure 1). The spring seasons in 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, and 2018 all have lower indices of abundance compared to the prior fall indices, but subsequent fall seasons see an increase in abundance within the range observed in the time series. Visually, cold stun years do not correspond to consistent or sustained low indices of abundance.

Abundance and Winter Water Temperatures

A total of 18 winters were included in the model. The seasonal difference in abundance from fall to spring from the sdmTMB model was significantly related to the number of cold days ($p = 0.01$) (Table 1). The number of cold days, or winter severity, explained 36% of the variation in the seasonal differences of relative abundance ($R^2 = 0.357$). Greater winter severity had a significant, negative impact on the subsequent spring abundance (Figure 2).

Length Composition

The weighted length quantiles of Spotted Seatrout were generally stable across the annual (February-December) time series with the median length (50th quantile) remaining around 420 mm from 2008 through 2019. Following the 2020-2021 data gap, a steady upward trend in sizes was observed, with the median size reaching approximately 440 mm by 2025 (Figure 3). The spring (April-June) time series showed higher inter-annual variability with

the median length dropping significantly in 2011, 2016, and 2019, contrasting with the more stable annual variables (Figure 4).

The two data series also differed in the timing of maximum size expansion. The annual distribution data recorded its peak size range in 2015 with the 90th quantile reaching approximately 544 mm. However, the spring data reached its maximum size range later in the time series in 2019 where the 90th quantile was 538 mm.

DISCUSSION

sdmTMB Index of Relative Abundance and Winter Water Temperatures

Spotted Seatrout in North Carolina are near the northern extent of its range and overwinter in shallow creeks and bays making Spotted Seatrout more likely to experience population-level effects from cold stun events than other estuarine species in North Carolina such as Weakfish, adult Red Drum, and Southern Flounder (Bacheler et al. 2008; McGrath and Hilton 2017; Ellis et al. 2018; Krause et al. 2020); however, the duration of these population-level effects is unknown. Population-level effects are seen in the relationship between winter severity and Spotted Seatrout relative abundance the following spring and in decreased relative abundance in the spring following a cold stun. The increase in Spotted Seatrout abundance by the subsequent fall following a cold stun implies that the population-level effects of a cold stun may be short-lived (Figure 1). Spotted Seatrout life history may at least partly explain the apparent short-lived effects of a cold stun and the resiliency of the population. Spotted Seatrout grow quickly and mature early with most Spotted Seatrout able to reproduce by age one. Furthermore, Spotted Seatrout are batch spawners and highly fecund meaning female fish spawn multiple times during a spawning season and have the potential to produce many offspring in a single spawning season (Nieland et al. 2002; Roumillat and Brouwer 2004; Murphy et al. 2010). Spotted Seatrout that survive a cold stun are likely able to reproduce the following spawning season even if they were just spawned the season prior. Fast growth rates could theoretically lead to fish spawned early in the spawning season following a cold stun – for example, Spotted Seatrout spawned late in April or early in May after a cold stun – showing up in the Program 915 fall relative abundance index.

The Division response to a significant cold stun of closing Spotted Seatrout harvest until at least partway through the peak spawning season may also help explain some of the increase in relative abundance by the subsequent fall. Closing harvest allows surviving Spotted Seatrout to escape harvest and allows more fish a chance to reproduce during the subsequent spawning season. Interestingly, Spotted Seatrout harvest in the summer and fall following a cold stun is much less than harvest during the same months of a non-cold stun year (Figure 5). While decreased Spotted Seatrout harvest could be a sign of decreased population size, abundance indices the fall after a cold stun indicate there may just be fewer legal sized Spotted Seatrout available rather than fewer fish overall. The decrease in recreational harvest during the summer and fall following a cold stun is noticeably larger than the decrease in commercial harvest. In addition to fewer legal sized Spotted Seatrout available for harvest, recreational anglers could be consciously choosing not to harvest Spotted Seatrout even after harvest reopens.

Length Composition

Weighted length quantiles did not indicate concerning trends following cold stun events. Observations from Program 915 and the commercial catch are inherently constrained by gear and mesh-specific selectivity, meaning the resulting size distributions characterize only the portion of the stock susceptible to the multi-mesh configurations used. Despite the gear selectivity, distinct trends in size distribution remain discernable.

The absence of long-term size truncation in either time series suggests the spotted seatrout stock maintains a robust and stable size distribution, remaining resilient to periodic winter cold stun events. The relative stability of the annual length distributions in contrast to the variability observed in the spring distributions suggests that while cold stun events could immediately influence size structure, they may not result in a permanent size structure shift. While the contractions in the spring-specific data could signify the mortality or thermal displacement of vulnerable cohorts, the rapid recovery of the size distributions after significant drops is consistent with the life-history characteristics of spotted seatrout, specifically rapid growth and early maturation. Since recruitment to the spawning stock can occur at Age-1, the replenishment of depleted size classes can occur quickly after mortality events. Management measures, including spawning season closures, likely facilitate the retention of larger, more fecund females. The preservation of high spawning potential protects the population's size structure despite episodic declines in relative abundance.

Recommendations

The scope of the January 2025 cold stun encompassed the entire state with water temperatures below the 24-hour trigger (Figure 6) and confirmed cold stun reports from just below the NC-VA border to Wilmington. Despite the widespread nature of the cold stun and an initial decrease in Spotted Seatrout abundance in the spring of 2025, fall abundance increased in a similar fashion to previous cold stuns (Figure 1). Additionally, there was no evidence of age or size class truncation following the January 2025 cold stun. When only considering the January 2025 cold stun, the Division does not currently recommend additional cold stun adaptive management measures. However, the January 2025 cold stun cannot be properly evaluated as a standalone event.

Cold weather in December 2025 led to isolated but confirmed reports of cold stunned Spotted Seatrout in Queen's Creek around Swansboro with additional unconfirmed reports in Bear Creek and the Newport River. Then, in January of 2026, North Carolina experienced a severe cold stun for the second year in a row. Based on confirmed cold stun reports and preliminary water temperature analysis, it appears the January 2026 cold stun was likely much more severe than the January 2025 cold stun. When 2026 data are available, Division staff will evaluate the combined effect on the Spotted Seatrout population of cold stuns in back-to-back years using similar methodologies as those used in this report and determine whether additional cold stun adaptive management measures are recommended. Quantifying population level effects of cold stuns would require a stock assessment that can incorporate the effects of fishing and recruitment to partition out the natural mortality associated with cold stuns.

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TABLES

Table 1. Results from the linear regression relating the difference in seasonal abundance (fall to spring) to the number of days where water temperature was below 7°C during December, January, and February.

Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	p
Intercept	-0.13	0.11	-1.28	0.22
Slope	-0.03	0.01	-2.98	>0.01*

FIGURES

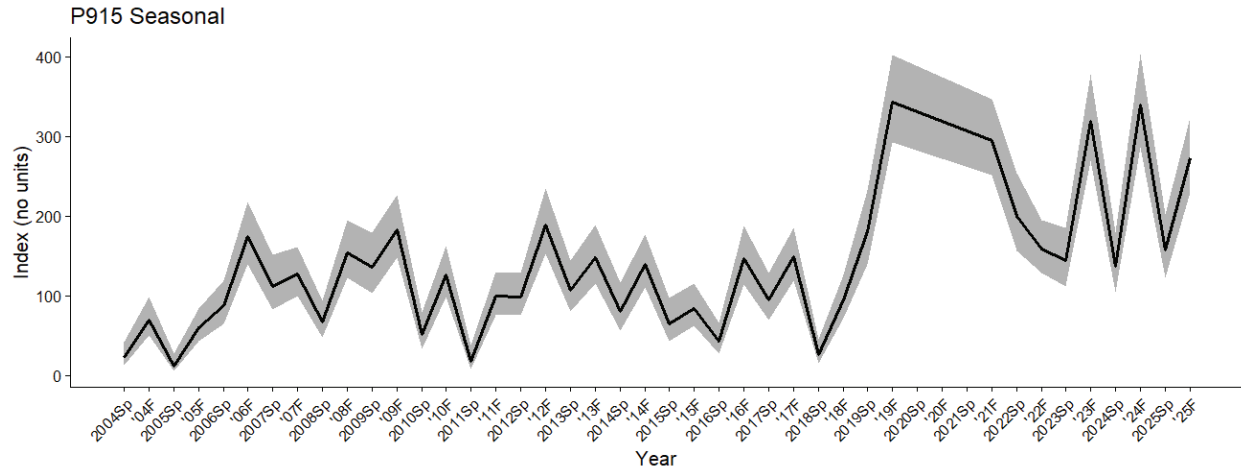


Figure 1. Index of relative abundance generated from the sdmTMB model. Gray shaded area corresponds to the 95% confidence interval. In this case the index is unitless and the values on the y-axis should be interpreted relative to other estimates. The spring season is indicated with year and “Sp”, while fall seasons are abbreviated years with “F” (e.g., 2010Sp and ‘10F).

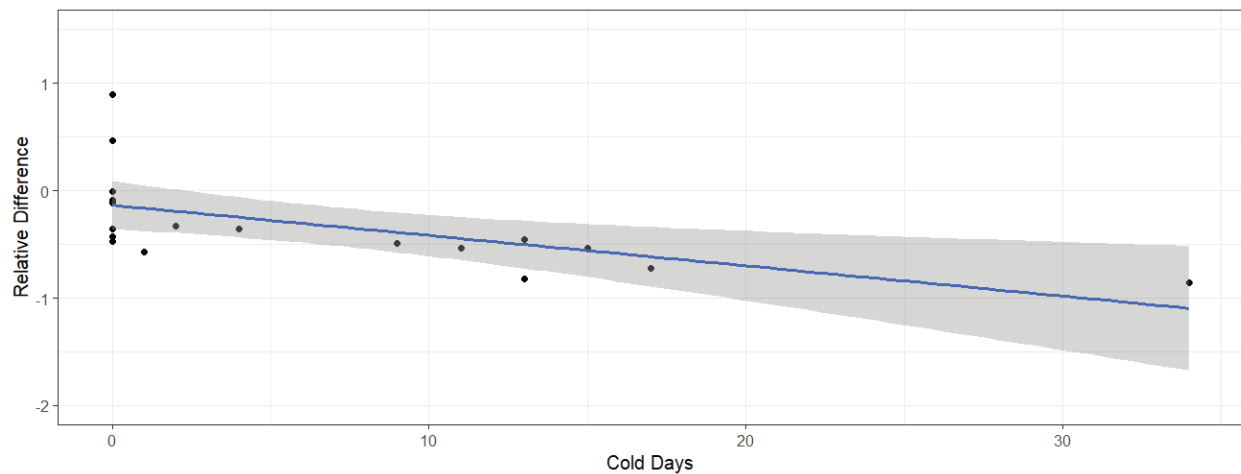


Figure 2. Results from the linear regression relating the difference in seasonal abundance (fall to spring) to the number of days where water temperature was below 7°C during December, January, and February. The gray shaded bar represents the 95% confidence interval.

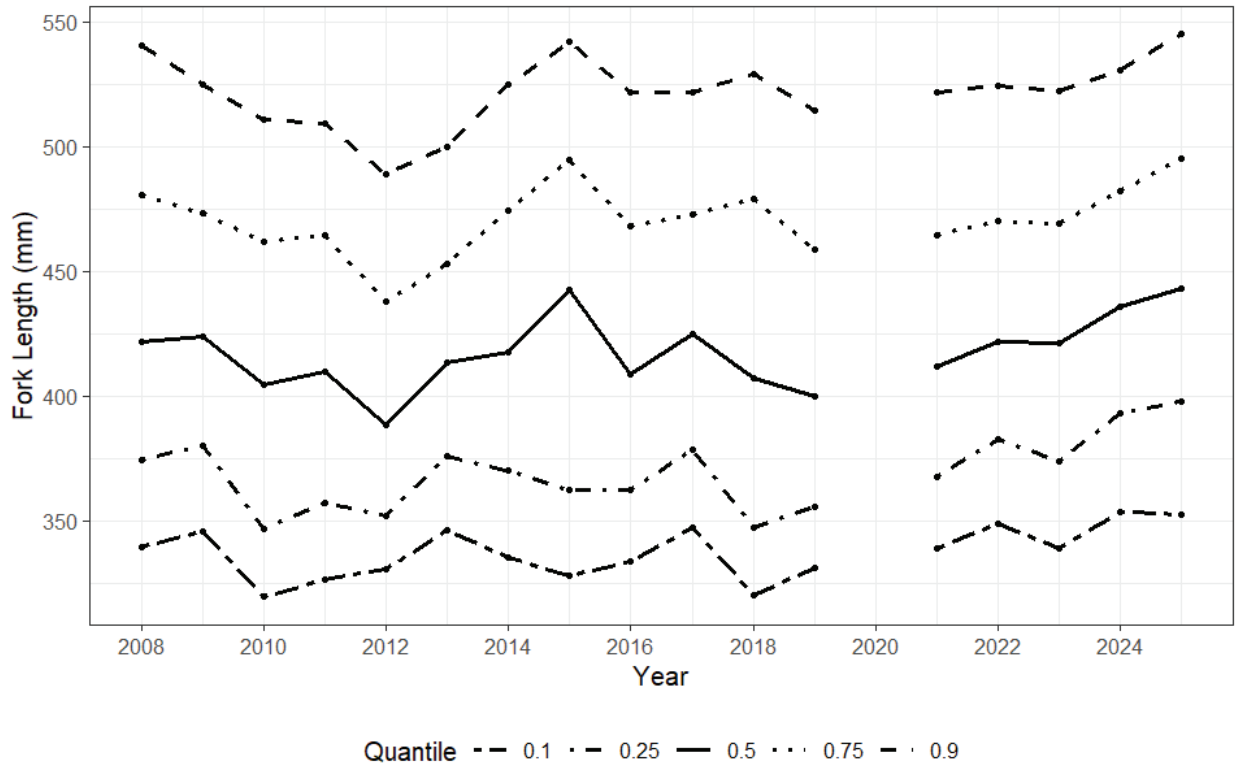


Figure 3. Weighted length quantiles for Spotted Seatrout caught annually from February through December, 2008 to 2025. Data gaps from 2020 to 2021 represent the incomplete data collection in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19.

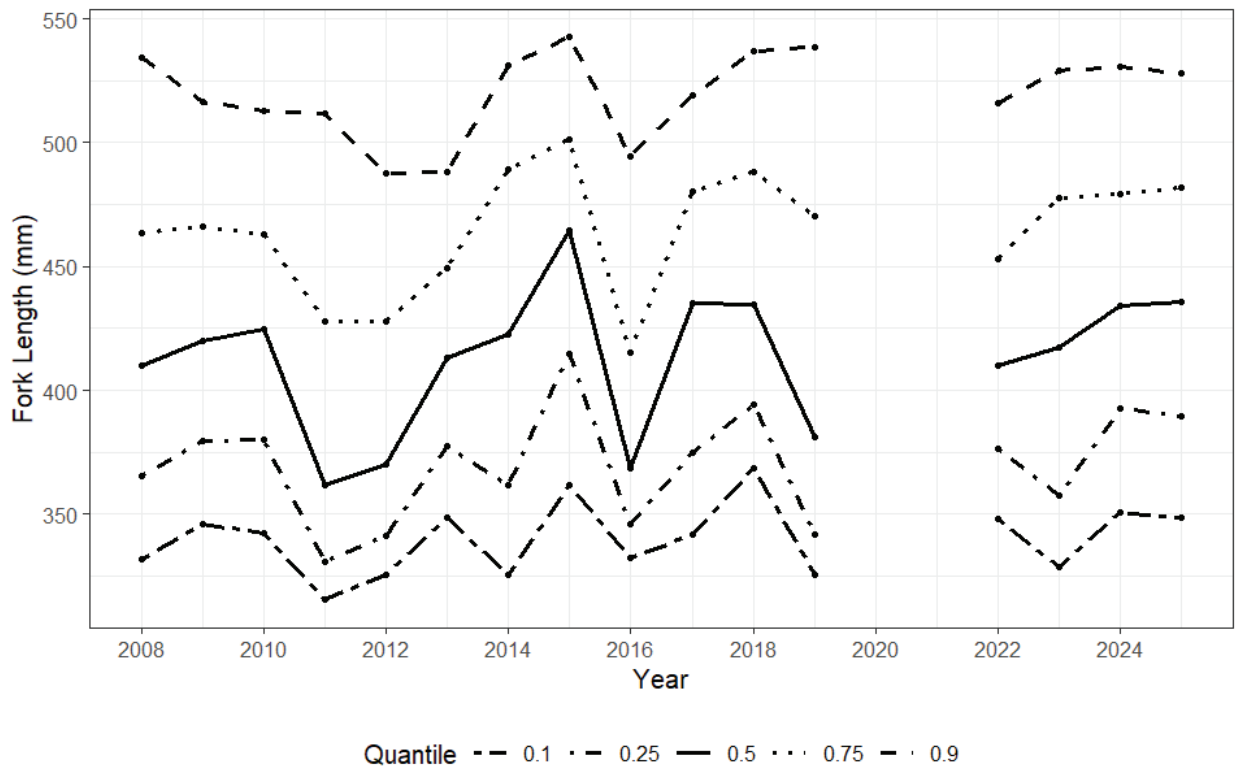


Figure 4. Weighted length quantiles for Spotted Seatrout caught annually from April through June, 2008 to 2025. Data gaps from 2020 to 2021 represent the incomplete data collection in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19.

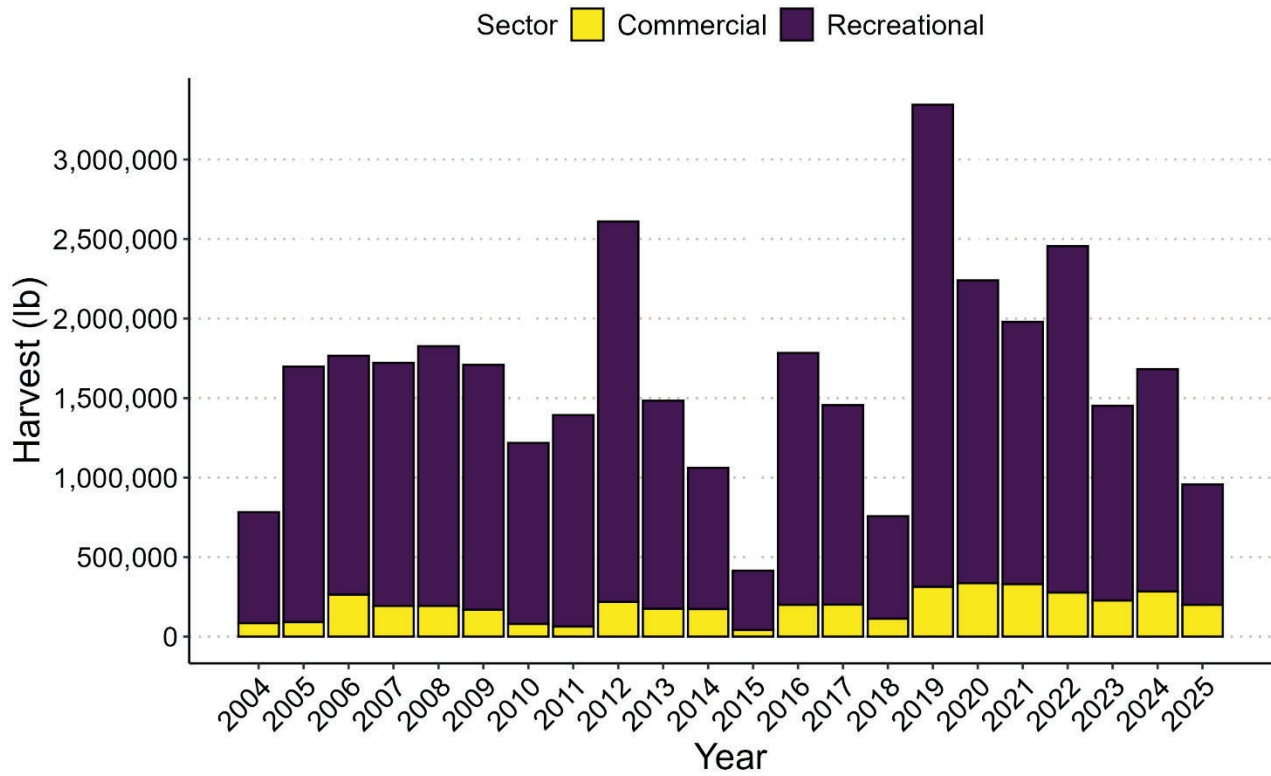


Figure 5. Annual Spotted Seatrout harvest in pounds by sector from July–December. These months are selected to account for any decrease in Spotted Seatrout harvest due to a closure of the fishery following a significant cold stun. In other words, Spotted Seatrout harvest is open July–December every year in the time series.

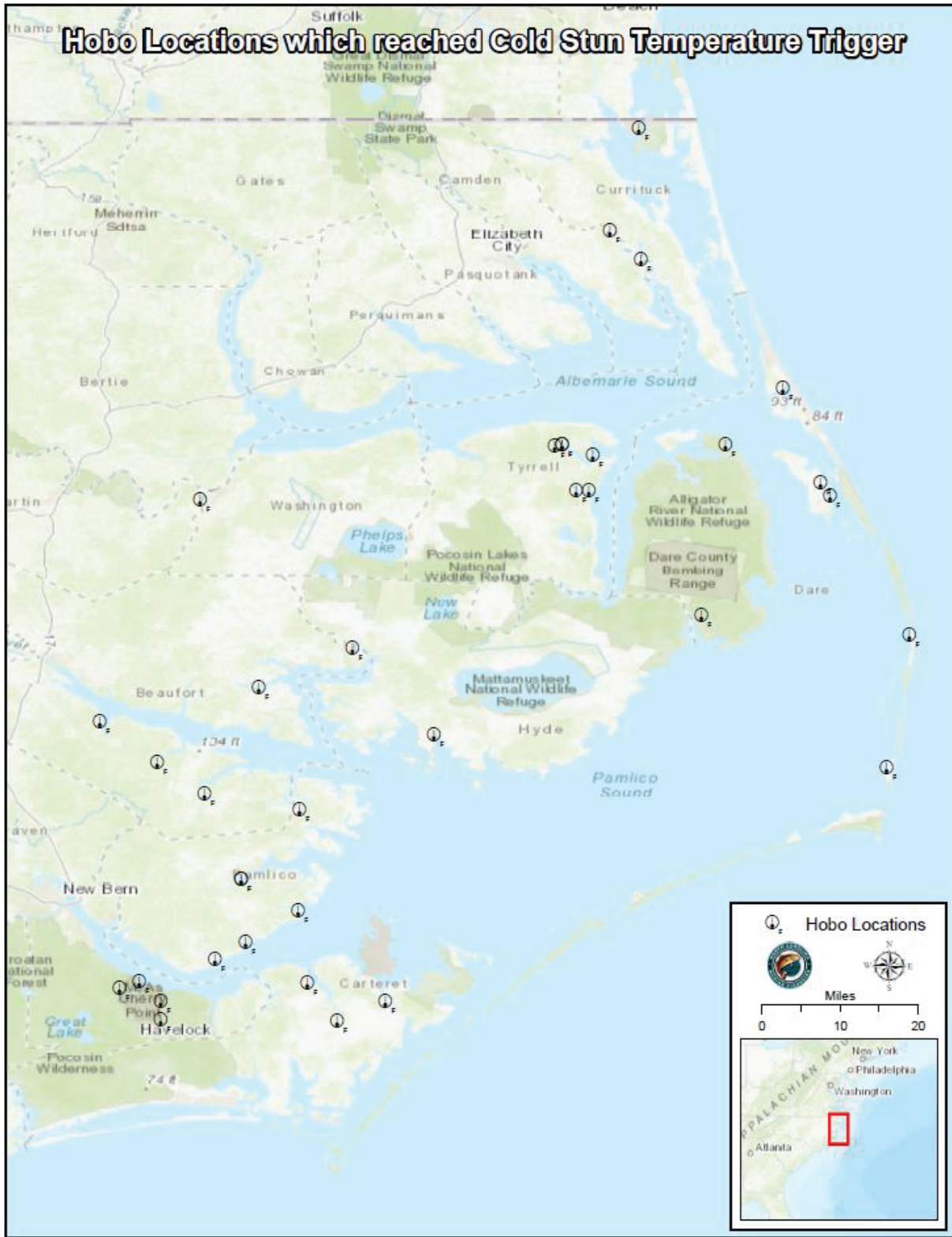


Figure 6. Map of Spotted Seatrout water temperature monitoring sites (Program 909) where water temperatures met or exceeded the 3 °C for a consecutive 24-hour period temperature trigger. Temperature triggers were met in all areas of the state.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

FF-11-2025

PROCLAMATION

RE: SPOTTED SEATROUT – COASTAL AND JOINT FISHING WATERS INCLUDING THE ATLANTIC OCEAN - COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL FISHERY CLOSURE – COLD STUN EVENTS

This proclamation supersedes proclamations FF-23-2018 and FF-24-2018, dated June 11, 2018. This proclamation closes the commercial and recreational spotted seatrout fishery in Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters due to cold stun events, in accordance with the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. The spotted seatrout fishery will open June 15, 2025, by proclamation unless the reopening date is modified by the adoption of Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.

Kathy B. Rawls, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries, hereby announces that effective **5:00 P.M., January 24, 2025**, following restrictions will apply to spotted seatrout in **Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters including the Atlantic Ocean**:

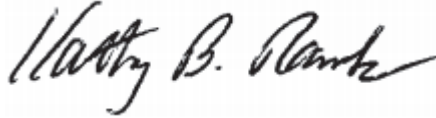
I. HARVEST RESTRICTIONS

It shall be **unlawful to possess, transport, buy, sell or offer for sale** spotted seatrout taken from Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters of North Carolina except dealers will have until 5:00 P.M., January 31, 2025 to dispose of unfrozen spotted seatrout in their possession taken prior to the closure.

II. GENERAL INFORMATION

- A. This proclamation is issued under the authority of N.C.G. S. 113-134; 113-134.1; 113-170.4; 113-170.5; 113-182; 113-182.1; 113-221.1; 143B-289.52 and N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission Rules 15A NCAC 03H .0103, 03M .0512 and 03M .0522.
- B. It is unlawful to violate the provisions of any proclamation issued by the Fisheries Director under his delegated authority pursuant to N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission Rule 15A NCAC 03H .0103.
- C. This action was taken to control fishing effort following a severe cold stun event under the approved management strategy in the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.
- D. It is the intent of the Fisheries Director to open the spotted seatrout season for commercial and recreational fishing by proclamation later in 2025 after surviving fish have had the opportunity to spawn in accordance with the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.
- E. In accordance with N.C. General Statute 113-221.1(c) all persons who may be affected by proclamations issued by the Fisheries Director are under a duty to keep themselves informed of current proclamations.

- F. Contact the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, P.O. Box 769, Morehead City, NC 28557, phone 252-515-5500 or 800-682-2632 for more information or visit the division website at www.ncmarinefisheries.net.
- G. **This proclamation closes the commercial and recreational spotted seatrout fishery due to cold stun events, in accordance with the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. The spotted seatrout fishery will open June 15, 2025, by proclamation unless the reopening date is modified by the adoption of Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.**



By: _____ Kathy B. Rawls, Director
DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES

January 22, 2025
3:30 P.M.

PROCLAMATION

RE: SPOTTED SEATROUT – COASTAL AND JOINT FISHING WATERS INCLUDING THE ATLANTIC OCEAN - COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL FISHERY CLOSURE – COLD STUN EVENTS

This proclamation supersedes proclamations FF-11-2025, dated January 22, 2025. This proclamation extends the closure of the commercial and recreational spotted seatrout fishery in Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters due to cold stun events, in accordance with Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. The spotted seatrout fishery will open July 1, 2025 by proclamation. The proclamation opening the fishery will also specify size and bag limits and other restrictions consistent with Amendment 1.

Kathy B. Rawls, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries, hereby announces that effective **12:01 A.M., April 10, 2025**, following restrictions will apply to spotted seatrout in **Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters including the Atlantic Ocean**:

I. HARVEST RESTRICTIONS

It shall be **unlawful to possess, transport, buy, sell or offer for sale** spotted seatrout taken from Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters of North Carolina except dealers may possess frozen spotted seatrout landed from Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters that were in their possession prior to the January 22, 2025, cold stun closure.

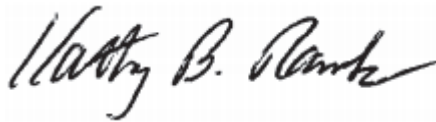
II. GENERAL INFORMATION

- A. This proclamation is issued under the authority of N.C.G. S. 113-134; 113-134.1; 113-170.4; 113-170.5; 113-182; 113-182.1; 113-221.1; 143B-289.52 and N.C. Marine

Fisheries Commission Rules 15A NCAC 03H .0103, 03M .0512 and 03M .0522.

- B. It is unlawful to violate the provisions of any proclamation issued by the Fisheries Director under her delegated authority pursuant to N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission Rule 15A NCAC 03H .0103.
- C. This action was taken to control fishing effort following a severe cold stun event under the approved management strategy in Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.
- D. It is the intent of the Fisheries Director to open the spotted seatrout season for commercial and recreational fishing by proclamation later in 2025 after surviving fish have had the opportunity to spawn in accordance with Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.
- E. In accordance with N.C. General Statute 113-221.1(c) all persons who may be affected by proclamations issued by the Fisheries Director are under a duty to keep themselves informed of current proclamations.

- F. Contact the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, P.O. Box 769, Morehead City, NC 28557, phone 252-515-5500 or 800-682-2632 for more information or visit the division website at www.ncmarinefisheries.net.
- G. **This proclamation extends the closure of the commercial and recreational spotted seatrout fishery due to cold stun events, in accordance with Amendment 1 to the N.C. Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. The spotted seatrout fishery will open July 1, 2025 by proclamation. The proclamation opening the fishery will also specify size and bag limits and other restrictions consistent with Amendment 1.**



By: _____ Kathy B. Rawls, Director
DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES

April 8, 2025
11:30 A.M.

Documents

Rulemaking Update Memo

2024-2025 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

2025-2026 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

2026-2027 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

Fiscal Impact Analysis of Proposed
Atlantic Bonito Management Rule



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

April 22, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission

FROM: Catherine Blum, Rulemaking Coordinator
Marine Fisheries Commission Office

SUBJECT: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission Rulemaking

Issue

Update the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) on the status of rulemaking in support of the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 rulemaking cycles. Request the MFC vote on approval of Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process for the single rule in the 2026-2027 cycle.

Findings

- 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 Rulemaking Cycles – Update
 - At its August 2024 business meeting, the MFC began the process for eight rules about pot marking requirements, false albacore management, and the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact. At its May 2025 business meeting, the MFC began the process for nine rules about permits, and franchises and shellfish leases.
 - The Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact rules became effective June 1, 2025.
 - The pot marking requirements, false albacore management, permits, and franchises and shellfish lease rules are available for legislative review in the 2026 short session.
- 2026-2027 Rulemaking Cycle – **Action**
 - At its May 2026 business meeting, the MFC is scheduled to vote on Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process for one rule for the management of Atlantic bonito.
 - The Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM) approved the fiscal analysis of this proposed rule, and the rulemaking process is ready to begin.
 - It is important to note that harvest restrictions would not automatically go into effect upon the effective date of a proposed rule except for the proposed five-fish recreational bag limit per person per day; additional steps must occur, as outlined in this memo.

Action Needed

The MFC will be asked to vote on approval of Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process for one rule in the 2026-2027 rulemaking cycle, for Atlantic bonito management.

2024-2025 Rulemaking Cycle (8 rules)

At its August 2024 business meeting, the MFC approved Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process for eight rules about pot marking requirements, false albacore management, and the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact. A table showing the timing of the steps in the process is included in the rulemaking section of the briefing materials. On October 1, 2024, a news release was issued and the proposed rules were published in the *N.C. Register*, beginning the public comment period. The MFC accepted public comments on the proposed rules from October 1 through December 2, 2024. A public hearing was held on October 30, 2024. The public comments received were presented to the MFC at its March 2025 business meeting when it gave final approval of the rules.

The N.C. Rules Review Commission (RRC) approved two of the rules on April 24, 2025; both rules are available for legislative review in the 2026 short session (pots, false albacore). The RRC approved five rules on May 29, 2025; one rule was withdrawn as it was determined to be unnecessary. These five rules became effective June 1, 2025 (Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact; 15A NCAC 03O .0600). A summary of the two subjects for which the proposed rules are pending legislative review is provided below.

POT MARKING REQUIREMENTS RULE AMENDMENTS (1 rule)

Proposed amendments would simplify pot marking requirements for commercial fishermen by requiring only one of three ways to mark pot buoys, not two ways: 1) gear owner's current motorboat registration number; or 2) gear owner's U.S. vessel documentation name; or 3) gear owner's last name and initials. The current rule requires the gear owner's last name and initials be identified on each buoy as a baseline. Then, if a vessel is used, the identification must also include either the gear owner's current motorboat registration number or the gear owner's U.S. vessel documentation name. There have been no problems with pot identification and pot identification would be sufficient via a single identifier. The proposed amendments would simplify the requirements and grant some relief to commercial fishermen that use pots in their commercial fishing operation. The rule is subject to legislative review pursuant to Session Law 2019-198 and N.C.G.S. § 14-4.1.

FALSE ALBACORE MANAGEMENT RULE ADOPTION (1 rule)

The proposed adoption of this rule would provide a mechanism to implement management measures to cap harvest when the false albacore fishery landings exceed a threshold of 200% of average landings from both sectors combined from 2018 to 2022. Harvest restrictions would be implemented if the threshold is exceeded as a means to prevent further expansion of the false albacore fisheries beyond the threshold. Currently, there are no rules in place for management of false albacore in North Carolina. There is no baseline stock assessment for false albacore and thus, no biological basis for reducing harvest. The only mechanism to monitor false albacore is through annual landings in North Carolina, which is not a measure for sustainability of the stock. While there is no need to manage to meet sustainability requirements, the MFC is seeking proactive management of false albacore to limit expansion of new and existing fisheries. Management options would include commercial trip limits, recreational bag limits, and recreational vessel limits. The rule is subject to legislative review pursuant to N.C.G.S. § 150B-21.3.

2025-2026 Rulemaking Cycle (9 rules)

At its May 2025 business meeting, the MFC approved Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process for nine rules about permits, and franchises and shellfish leases. A table showing the timing of the steps in the process is included in the rulemaking section of the briefing materials. On August 1, 2025, a news release was issued and the proposed rules were published in the *N.C. Register*, beginning the public comment period. The MFC accepted public comments on the proposed rules from August 1 through September 30, 2025. A public hearing was held on August 26, 2025. The public comments received were presented to the MFC at its November 2025 business meeting when it gave final approval of the rules. The RRC approved the rules on December 18, 2025; the rules are available for legislative review in the 2026 short session pursuant to Session Law 2019-198 and N.C.G.S. § 14-4.1. A summary of the proposed rules by subject is provided below.

PERMIT RULE AMENDMENTS (5 rules) (15A NCAC 03I .0101, .0114, 03O .0501-.0503)

Consistent with N.C.G.S. § 150B-19.1, Requirements for agencies in the rule-making process, DMF employees reviewed several MFC rules with permit requirements and suggested amendments to several rules that would achieve a variety of actions. These actions would add requirements to permanent rules that are no longer variable in nature, increase efficiencies for quota monitoring, protect DMF employees and improve data collection and public health protection, reduce the burden on regulated stakeholders, clarify rules, and remove outdated or unnecessary requirements from rules.

An issue paper was provided to the MFC at its May 2025 business meeting that provides information about the affected permits, processes, and requirements, as well as a detailed description of the proposed rule amendments, which are expected to accomplish the following:

- Update and clarify MFC rules, including:
 - Adding four permits to permanent rule that are currently issued by proclamation;
 - Clarifying a fish dealer is required to submit a trip ticket for fish not sold consistent with N.C. law and MFC rules for commercial harvest reporting requirements;
 - Relocating from proclamation to rule the permit condition that makes it unlawful to refuse to allow DMF employees to obtain data for the conservation and management of marine and estuarine resources;
 - Broadening the definition of "educational institution" to better align with the original purpose of two permits;
 - Adding links to webpages in rules for supporting information that can change frequently; and
 - Repealing the Horseshoe Crab Biomedical Use Permit;
- Reduce burden on regulated stakeholders, including:
 - Adding email as an additional means to satisfy call-in requirements for two permits; and
 - Removing the requirement to notarize a permit application, instead requiring the initial permit general condition form to be notarized. This is a more appropriate time in the permit issuance process to verify a permittee's identity; and

- Achieve efficiencies for quota monitored fisheries by requiring any seafood dealer that reports trip tickets electronically to report quota monitoring logs electronically.

CONFORMING RULE AMENDMENTS FOR FRANCHISES AND SHELLFISH LEASES (5 rules)

(15A NCAC 03I .0101, 03O .0201, .0207, .0208, .0210)

Shellfish franchises recognized under N.C.G.S. § 113-206 are perpetual. The DMF has understood that because franchises are perpetual, the DMF does not have the authority to terminate franchises and thus subjecting a franchise to production requirements would have no consequence. The N.C. General Assembly codified this understanding with the passage of Session Law 2024-32, Section 5.(a), which removed franchises from the production requirements of Session Law 2019-37, Section 3. The MFC's authority over private and protected deeded rights of a shellfish franchise is limited to subjects such as proper marking requirements and permitting of the aquaculture activities occurring on a franchise. So, proposed amendments include the removal of franchises from all shellfish production requirements, as the production requirements are grounds for termination of a leasehold only. Proposed amendments also remove franchises from the rule for termination procedures.

Additional proposed amendments in 15A NCAC 03O .0201, in Paragraphs (d) through (g), clarify production requirements for shellfish leases based on the date a shellfish lease was granted or last renewed. Additional amendments to Paragraphs (i) and (j) clarify who determines eligibility for additional shellfish lease acreage, the time at which the determination of eligibility for additional acreage occurs, what is considered additional shellfish lease acreage, and what is considered acres under a shellfish lease. An issue paper was provided to the MFC at its May 2025 business meeting that provides background information and a detailed description of the proposed rule amendments.

While clarifying amendments are proposed in this issue paper for shellfish leaseholders, it is important to note that the primary reason for the proposed rule amendments is to undertake a paper exercise to align MFC rules with current DMF procedures and N.C. General Assembly authority for shellfish aquaculture, neither of which has changed in practice in recent years relative to requirements for franchises. This issue paper presents a single option for consideration, as it is the only option that achieves the objective of the proposed rule changes: to align with current statutory authority and DMF procedures for franchises and shellfish leases, consistent with N.C. Session Law 2019-37, Section 3 as amended by N.C. Session Law 2024-32, Section 5.(a), as well as rulemaking requirements in the Administrative Procedure Act. This option complies with State law and clarifies MFC rules by removing out-of-date requirements, but it requires undergoing the lengthy rulemaking process.

2026-2027 Rulemaking Cycle (1 rule)

ATLANTIC BONITO MANAGEMENT (15A NCAC 03M .0524)

At its May 2024 business meeting, the MFC passed a motion to request DMF staff develop an issue paper for Atlantic bonito management, including landings information and proposed rule language, using the previous sheepshead issue paper (February 11, 2013) as a model to follow. Discussions among commissioners noted concerns expressed by recreational stakeholders about

angler behavior changing in targeting Atlantic bonito in more recent years and the potential need to implement a recreational bag limit. Further concerns expressed by the MFC identified limited information about Atlantic bonito in this part of the Atlantic Ocean and no measure of stock status for the population, and whether these recent increases in recreational catches may not be due to more fish, but rather due to changes in fishing tactics and new technologies available to recreational anglers to improve their success in catching Atlantic bonito when available in state waters. Commissioners did not express concern for commercial catches due to a limited shelf life as a fresh product and not being desirable frozen as likely reasons behind no similar increase in commercial harvest occurring. Potential waste of the resource was discussed, since there are no current limits on Atlantic bonito. The MFC also identified the need to learn more about the fisheries and develop a rule to implement regulations to get ahead of a potential problem.

Commissioners continued discussions on Atlantic bonito at the August and November 2024, and May 2025 MFC business meetings with an urgency to be proactive in their management and continued to stress the need to implement a bag limit in the recreational fishery. After key DMF vacancies were filled, DMF staff presented background information about the life history and catch characteristics of Atlantic bonito to the MFC at its August 2025 business meeting. Commissioners discussed that Atlantic bonito appear to behave differently off southeast North Carolina than in other locations along the coast, showing preference for structure and pondered if these preferences are associated with spawning, thereby making Atlantic bonito more vulnerable to harvest. Commissioners mentioned that the presentation illustrated the increasing trends in recreational landings with smaller fish being caught in recent years and discussed the potential for implementing both a bag limit and possibly a size limit on the recreational sector. The MFC passed a motion to ask the DMF staff to bring proposed rulemaking language for a five-fish recreational bag limit per person (per day) for Atlantic bonito to its November 2025 business meeting, a request DMF staff fulfilled.

The DMF developed an [issue paper for the management of Atlantic bonito](#)¹ containing background information, authority for management, and discussion of potential management options, including proposed rule options. The issue paper was presented to the MFC at its February 2026 business meeting when it selected Option 4 as its preferred management option for Atlantic bonito. Upon the effective date of the proposed rule, this option would implement a five-fish recreational bag limit per person per day and delegate authority to the Fisheries Director to implement additional harvest restrictions by proclamation; however, additional steps would be required before issuance of a proclamation. Any harvest restrictions beyond the five-fish recreational bag limit would undergo a process including the DMF presenting the most recent data to the MFC, MFC consent that harvest restrictions are needed based on the data, outreach and education to the regulated public that management will change, and identification of an appropriate effective date for the proclamation that would be issued to implement the restrictions so the regulated public can prepare.

Following the February 2026 MFC business meeting, DMF staff developed a fiscal analysis of the proposed rule that was approved by the Office of State Budget and Management. At its May

¹ <https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/marine-fisheries-commission/february-2026/atlantic-bonito-issue-paper/open>

2026 business meeting, the MFC will be asked to vote on approval of Notice of Text for Rulemaking to begin the process as part of its 2026-2027 annual rulemaking cycle. A table showing the timing of the steps in the process is included in the rulemaking section of the briefing materials. The proposed rule is subject to legislative review per Session Law 2019-198 and N.C.G.S. § 14-4.1 and could possibly be effective following the legislative review process in the 2027 long session; however, the timing is such that the legislative review process will likely not occur until the 2028 short session.

Periodic Review and Expiration of Existing Rules (335 rules)

North Carolina N.C.G.S. § 150B-21.3A, enacted in 2013, requires state agencies to review existing rules every 10 years in accordance with a prescribed process that includes a report phase, followed by rule readoption. To comply with the periodic review schedule adopted by the RRC for the second iteration of the requirements, the MFC gave approval at its February 2026 business meeting of the initial agency determination of each of its rules as “necessary” to proceed to public notice for four groups of rules, per N.C.G.S. § 150B-21.3A:

- 15A NCAC 03Q .0100 (9 rules);
- ALL OTHER 15A NCAC 03 RULES (194 rules);
- 15A NCAC 10C .0100 (11 rules); and
- 15A NCAC 18A .0100, .0300-.0900, .3400 (132 rules).

The public comment period for the reports on these four groups of rules was determined to be March 2 through May 1, 2026. All the rules are in Title 15A, which is the Department of Environmental Quality. The nine MFC rules in 15A NCAC 03Q .0100 are jointly adopted with the Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). The 11 WRC rules in 15A NCAC 10C .0100 are jointly adopted with the MFC. All 20 jointly adopted rules set requirements for joint fishing waters. Rules in Chapter 03 are for the management of marine fisheries, while rules in Subchapter 18A are for the management of shellfish sanitation and recreational water quality.

After the public comment period, the agency must review the public comments and prepare a brief response addressing the merits of each comment. This information becomes the final report and is scheduled to be voted on by the MFC for approval at its August 2026 business meeting. The final report is then submitted to the RRC, which, if approved, is forwarded to the Joint Legislative Administrative Procedure Oversight Committee for final determination. The MFC’s reports are due to the RRC for its January (15A NCAC 03Q .0100; all other 03 rules; 10C .0100) and March (15A NCAC 18A .0100, .0300-.0900, .3400) 2027 meetings.

The second part of the process is the re-adoption of rules. The final report determines the process for re-adoption. A necessary rule must be readopted as if it was a new rule. An unnecessary rule will expire at the end of the report process and be removed from the N.C. Administrative Code. The RRC works with each agency to consider the agency’s rulemaking priorities in establishing a deadline for the re-adoption of rules. This consultation process is expected to occur in the spring of 2027. It is anticipated that the MFC will need to readopt all 335 of its rules that are subject to the Periodic Review requirements as if they are new rules. Rules can be amended during readoption and fiscal analysis of the rules will still be required. Based on the MFC’s rulemaking priorities, the readoption process is expected to take several years to complete.

N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission 2024-2025 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

May 2026

Time of Year	Action
February-July 2024	Fiscal analysis of rules prepared by DMF staff and approved by Office of State Budget and Management
Aug. 23, 2024	MFC approved Notice of Text for Rulemaking
Oct. 1, 2024	Publication of proposed rules in the <i>North Carolina Register</i>
Oct. 1-Dec. 2, 2024	Public comment period held
Oct. 30, 2024, 6 p.m.	Public hearing held via WebEx with listening station
March 12, 2025	MFC received public comments and gave final approval of eight permanent rules
April 24, 2025	Two rules subject to legislative review approved by Office of Administrative Hearings/Rules Review Commission (15A NCAC 03J .0301, 03M .0523)
May 29, 2025	Five rules approved by Office of Administrative Hearings/Rules Review Commission and one rule withdrawn (15A NCAC 03O .0600)
June 1, 2025	Effective date of five rules not automatically subject to legislative review
June 1, 2025	Rulebook supplement available online
2026 legislative session	Possible effective date of two rules subject to legislative review per S.L. 2019-198 and G.S. 14-4.1, and G.S. 150B-21.3
2026 legislative session	Rulebook supplement available online pending legislative review process

N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission 2025-2026 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

May 2026

Time of Year	Action
February-April 2025	Fiscal analysis of rules prepared by DMF staff and approved by Office of State Budget and Management
May 22, 2025	MFC approved Notice of Text for Rulemaking
Aug. 1, 2025	Publication of proposed rules in the <i>North Carolina Register</i>
Aug. 1-Sept. 30, 2025	Public comment period held
Aug. 26, 2025, 6 p.m.	Public hearing held via WebEx with listening station
Nov. 20, 2025	MFC received public comments and gave final approval of permanent rules
Dec. 18, 2025	Rules approved by Office of Administrative Hearings/ Rules Review Commission
2026 legislative session	Possible effective date of rules subject to legislative review per S.L. 2019-37, Section 3, as amended by S.L. 2024-32, Section 5.(a); and S.L. 2019-198 and G.S. 14-4.1
2026 legislative session	Rulebook supplement available online pending legislative review process

N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission 2026-2027 Annual Rulemaking Cycle

May 2026

Time of Year	Action
February-April 2026	Fiscal analysis of rule prepared by DMF staff and approved by Office of State Budget and Management
May 14, 2026	MFC votes to approve Notice of Text for Rulemaking
August 3, 2026	Publication of proposed rule in the <i>North Carolina Register</i>
August 3 - October 2, 2026	Public comment period held
TBD (August 18 - October 2, 2026)	Public hearing held via WebEx with listening station at NCDEQ Division of Marine Fisheries Central District Office at 5285 Highway 70 West, Morehead City
November 18 or 19, 2026	MFC receives public comments and votes on final approval of permanent rule
December 2026 or January 2027	Rule reviewed by Office of Administrative Hearings/ Rules Review Commission
2027 or 2028 legislative session	Possible effective date of rule subject to legislative review per S.L. 2019-198 and G.S. 14-4.1
2027 or 2028 legislative session	Rulebook supplement available online pending legislative review process

Fiscal Impact Analysis of Proposed Atlantic Bonito Management Rule

Rule Proposal: 15A NCAC 03M .0524

Name of Commission: N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission

Agency Contact: Jason Walsh, Fisheries Economics Program Manager
N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries
3441 Arendell Street
Morehead City, NC 28557
Jason.walsh@deq.nc.gov
252-269-9299

Impact Summary: State government: No
Local government: No
Federal government: No
Substantial impact: No

AUTHORITY

N.C. General Statutes

G.S. 113-134. Rules.
G.S. 113-182. Regulation of fishing and fisheries.
G.S. 113-221.1. Proclamations; emergency review.
G.S. 143B-289.52. Marine Fisheries Commission – powers and duties.

Necessity: The need for management of Atlantic bonito (*Sarda sarda*) has emerged from growing concern among North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (NCMFC) members and the public about increasing recreational fishing pressure and the absence of a rule to implement management measures for this species. North Carolina does not currently have any means to manage the Atlantic bonito fishery, and the MFC is seeking this proposed rule to be prepared if the fishery continues to expand.

I. Summary

Atlantic bonito landings from the recreational sector have increased in state waters over the last 10 years and North Carolina accounts for 22% of the overall coastwide landings. Additionally, trends in the number of recreationally harvested fish have increased while trends in the number of released fish have remained stable over this time (Table 1). Currently, there is no targeted commercial fishery for Atlantic bonito in North Carolina. Due to the opportunistic nature of the fishery, commercial trips typically land less than 50 pounds per trip, with trips exceeding 300 pounds making up less than 5% of the total number of trips in state and federal waters. Further, there does not appear to be an immediate biological concern for the Atlantic bonito stock since there is no evidence of size truncation in the commercial and recreational fisheries over the past decade, and most fish are caught at or above the size where fifty percent or more of the fish are mature (L_{50}), which is 15 inches fork length in Atlantic bonito, except in the most recent two years of recreational data (2023, 2024). Although current data do not indicate an immediate

biological concern, the available information is not sufficient to demonstrate that the recent increase in harvest is sustainable over the long term.

For that reason, the NCMFC is proposing a rule that would do two things. First, it would establish a five-fish recreational bag limit, which is intended primarily as a precautionary cap; based on current harvest patterns, it is not expected to have a major near-term effect because anglers are not commonly retaining that many fish per trip. Second, it would grant the Fisheries Director proclamation authority, with prior NCMFC consent, to implement additional management measures more quickly if future conditions warrant action. In practice, the five-fish limit functions as an early management threshold, while the proclamation authority creates a mechanism for faster response if landings or stock conditions change.

If adopted, the immediate practical effect of the bag limit is expected to be limited, because current harvest patterns indicate that anglers rarely retain that many fish per trip. It would also provide a management framework for responding to future variable conditions (N.C.G.S. § 113-221.1) in the fishery without the delay associated with additional rulemaking. In that sense, the rule's most significant effect is not a change in current fishing behavior, but improved management readiness if conditions are variable.

The measures are not expected to reduce participation in Atlantic bonito recreational fishing, as the majority of Atlantic bonito fishing is catch-and-release or consists of catches less than five fish per trip (Table 2), which will not be restricted by the proposed management measures. The effect on commercial fishing is likely to be minimal as Atlantic bonito have low commercial value in the United States (Table 3), and they are only incidentally caught by commercial fishers pursuing other species with gill nets and hook-and-line gear.

II. Introduction and Purpose of Rule Proposal

Atlantic Bonito Life History

Atlantic bonito (*Sarda sarda*) is a small tuna species in the mackerel/tuna family Scombridae. Its body is spindle-shaped, with bluish to greenish shades dorsally, fading to silvery below. The upper sides have numerous diagonal dark stripes, with underlying diffuse dark bars. Anglers often confuse Atlantic bonito with false albacore (*Euthynnus alletteratus*; also called little tunny) and skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*) due to similarity in size and coloration. In addition to general misidentification, there is also significant confusion regarding the use of the same common name for many of these species. Many people, including anglers, often use names like "bonito," "bonita," "little tunny," and "skipjack" interchangeably, and these common names can vary regionally.

A predominantly coastal species, Atlantic bonito are found in the Eastern Atlantic from Oslo, Norway, to Port Elizabeth, South Africa, as well as in the Mediterranean and Black seas. In the Western Atlantic, they range from Nova Scotia, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico, and south to northern Argentina, but are apparently absent from most of the Caribbean Sea (Collette and Nauen 1983). Atlantic bonito school with similarly sized Scombrid species (Yoshida 1980), and most likely migrate north during the summer and early fall and south in the winter, but there is a

lack of scientific documentation of these migrations. Current tagging studies are underway by North Carolina State University, the Nature Conservancy, and the American Saltwater Guides Association to conduct research on Atlantic bonito migratory patterns on the East Coast of the United States.

Interjurisdictional Atlantic Bonito Management

Little information exists on the status of Atlantic bonito in the Western Atlantic, and as a result their stock status is considered unknown. Internationally, small tunas, including Atlantic bonito, are assessed and managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in the Small Tunas Species Group. Currently, the small tunas in the Atlantic are divided into five stock regions based on traditional ICCAT management areas: Northwest Atlantic, Southwest Atlantic, Northeast Atlantic, Southeast Atlantic, and Mediterranean. Atlantic bonito are one of 13 species in the Small Tunas Species Group. Of these 13 species, the seven most important, Atlantic bonito (31%), little tunny (18%), frigate tuna (13%) king mackerel (12%), Spanish mackerel (9%), bullet tuna (5%), and wahoo (4%), represent about 91% of nominal catches between 1950 and 2023. Although there is currently no ICCAT assessment or management plan for Atlantic bonito, it has been identified as a species for which more data should be collected for stock assessment (ICCAT 2019). Genetic studies have shown that there is genetic isolation between both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Viñas et al. 2010), and clear heterogeneity among Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean populations (Viñas et al. 2020). These studies suggest that Atlantic bonito might have multiple stock units in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea that disagree with the management areas adopted by ICCAT (Viñas et al. 2020).

National fisheries regulations in the Eastern Atlantic have recently been implemented. The Turkish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has set a seasonal ban on all recreational and sport fishing for Atlantic bonito along all coastal regions from April 1 to August 14. These regulations are part of a nationwide initiative to safeguard marine biodiversity during peak spawning months. Outside of this time frame, regulations are a minimum size of 25 cm (10 inches) with a 5 kg (11 lb) daily limit per angler (Sport Fishing Türkiye 2025).

In the United States, the only state that has adopted regulations for Atlantic bonito is Massachusetts. In May of 2025, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries enacted the first-ever size and possession limits for both false albacore (little tunny) and Atlantic bonito. The minimum size limit for both species is 16 inches curved FL and reflects the estimated size-at-maturity for both species. Additionally, retention is limited to no more than five fish per person per day of both species combined and applies only to fish caught and possessed in state waters (0-3 miles). These new limits apply universally to all persons whether commercially or recreationally fishing; however, there are bycatch exemptions for commercial fish weirs and mechanized mackerel jigging operations, as sorting and discarding the bycatch would be unduly burdensome for these fisheries. Massachusetts has seen considerable growth in the fishery without the benefit of stock assessments, extensive understanding of species life history, or fishery management plans (FMPs) to control fishing mortality. As a result, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries chose to adopt these precautionary management measures until a time when a more robust science and management program is implemented. The new possession

limits are designed to constrain recreational harvest approximately at current levels and discourage further expansion while curtailing the development of a directed commercial fishery (Commonwealth of Mass. DMF 2025).

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, though it has been discussed by the ASMFC, the SAFMC, and the MAFMC. At the August 2016 MAFMC meeting, council staff recommended the Council consider developing management actions for the species in the future (including a potential small tuna FMP), due to a high level of public concern for the species, particularly from the recreational sector. The ASMFC Interstate Fisheries Management Program Policy Board (Policy Board) tasked ASMFC staff in February 2022 to present an options paper on possible paths forward for management of Atlantic bonito and false albacore after concerns were raised regarding increased recreational harvest of juvenile fish in some state waters. Staff presented possible options for developing different paths to management for both Atlantic bonito and false albacore at the [May 2023 ASMFC Policy Board meeting](#). The information also included the states' ability to regulate a species and timing to implement measures without an ASMFC FMP. ASMFC staff noted that if additional species were added to the ASMFC portfolio, it would increase the workload for ASMFC and state staff, some of which are already at full capacity. Although some member states are interested in management measures for these species, ASMFC's Policy Board decided not to pursue management at the interstate level. Similarly, management of Atlantic bonito through a small tuna FMP has not been pursued yet by a federal management body.

Proposed N.C. Atlantic Bonito Management

At its May 2024 business meeting, the NCMFC passed a motion to request N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) staff develop an issue paper for Atlantic bonito management, including landings information and proposed rule language, using the previous sheephead issue paper (February 11, 2013) as a model to follow. Discussions among commissioners noted concerns expressed by recreational stakeholders about angler behavior changing in targeting Atlantic bonito in more recent years and the potential need to implement a recreational bag limit. Further concerns expressed by the NCMFC identified limited information about Atlantic bonito in this part of the Atlantic Ocean and no measure of stock status for the population, and whether these recent increases in recreational catches may not be due to more fish, but rather due to changes in fishing tactics and new technologies available to recreational anglers to improve their success in catching Atlantic bonito when available in state waters. Commissioners did not express concern for commercial catches due to Atlantic bonito having a limited shelf life as a fresh product and not being desirable frozen as likely reasons behind no similar increase in commercial harvest. Potential waste of the resource was discussed, since there are no current limits on Atlantic bonito. The NCMFC also identified the need to learn more about the fisheries and develop rule language in order to implement regulations to get ahead of a potential problem. Commissioners continued discussions on Atlantic bonito at their August and November 2024, and May 2025 business meetings with an urgency to be proactive in their management and continued to stress the need to implement a bag limit in the recreational fishery.

At the August 2025 NCMFC business meeting, NCDMF staff presented background information, which outlined life history and catch characteristics of Atlantic bonito. Commissioners discussed that Atlantic bonito appear to behave differently off southeast North Carolina than in other locations along the coast, showing preference for structure and pondered if these preferences are associated with spawning thereby making Atlantic bonito more vulnerable to harvest. Commissioners mentioned that the presentation illustrated the increasing trends in the recreational landings with smaller fish being caught in recent years and discussed the potential for implementing both a bag limit and possibly a size limit on the recreational sector. A commissioner stressed that in their own capture of Atlantic bonito the fish have a mouth-to-gills structure more like Spanish mackerel and therefore the hooks are often closer to the gills creating higher potential for release mortality. The commissioner therefore expressed hesitation to consider a size limit as it could increase discards. Smaller Atlantic bonito appear later in the season often mixed in with Spanish mackerel and regardless will result in the catch of smaller fish. The stated intention behind the NCMFC adopting a rule to delegate broad proclamation authority to the Fisheries Director is to implement a recreational bag limit soon after the rule becomes effective. The NCMFC passed a motion for NCDMF staff to bring proposed rulemaking language for a five-fish recreational bag limit per person for Atlantic bonito to its November 2025 business meeting. At the November 2025 NCMFC business meeting several proposed rulemaking options were presented, followed by a brief discussion of next steps in the rulemaking process. At the February 2026 NCMFC business meeting, the NCMFC selected a management option that would implement a five-fish recreational bag limit and delegate the authority for the Fisheries Director to issue a proclamation to manage all other parameters of the commercial and recreational fisheries with prior NCMFC consent.

Summarizing the available data, landings from the recreational sector have increased in state waters over the last 10 years and North Carolina accounts for 22% of the overall coastwide landings. Additionally, trends in the number of recreationally harvested fish have increased while trends in the number of released fish have remained stable over this time. Currently, there is no targeted commercial fishery for Atlantic bonito in North Carolina. Due to the opportunistic nature of the fishery, commercial trips typically land less than 50 pounds per trip, with trips exceeding 300 pounds making up less than 5% of the total number of trips in state and federal waters. Further, there appears to be no biological concern for the Atlantic bonito stock since there is no evidence of size truncation in the commercial and recreational fisheries over the past decade, and most fish are caught at or above the L_{50} (15 inches FL) except in the most recent two years of recreational data (2023, 2024). Likewise, there is no biological evidence that higher harvest in recent years is sustainable. While these trends do not indicate the need for immediate management, it would be prudent to continue to monitor landings and collect additional biological information for this species.

The proposed rule delegates authority to the Fisheries Director to issue a proclamation to address variable conditions in the Atlantic bonito fishery to manage time, area, means and methods, season, size, and except for a bag limit of five fish per person per day for recreational purposes that would be set in rule. Implementation of the proposed rule, once in effect, would include formal monitoring of the commercial and recreational Atlantic bonito fisheries by the NCDMF. Formal monitoring would mean NCDMF annually providing a landings summary with trends in

the fishery, length frequency distributions, updates on any biological studies, and any changes in management that may occur at the state and federal level to the NCMFC at its first business meeting after July 1, typically occurring in August. Including NCMFC consent in the rule provides the opportunity during a public meeting for the NCMFC to review and discuss the proposed issuance of a proclamation since there is no baseline stock assessment of Atlantic bonito and no FMP to address adaptive management when landings are variable year to year.

III. Fiscal Analysis

The purpose of this document is to examine the potential economic impacts (costs and benefits) of the proposed Atlantic bonito management rule.

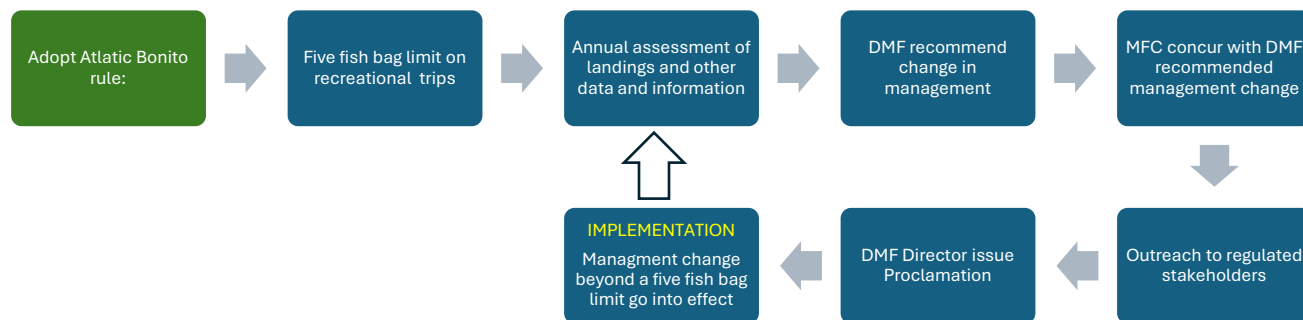
In the near term, the rule would impose a five-fish recreational bag limit. This restriction could reduce harvest for anglers who currently retain more than five Atlantic bonito per trip. However, NCDMF's collected data indicate that most recreational trips land less than five fish, and because many recreational Atlantic bonito fishing trips are catch-and-release and the available catch and trip data are imprecise, NCDMF cannot reliably estimate the magnitude of any resulting change in harvest, effort, or discards. Supporting data are provided in the companion document. "Atlantic Bonito Management Issue Paper" that was presented to the NCFMC at its February 2026 business meeting located here: [<https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/marine-fisheries-commission/february-2026/atlantic-bonito-issue-paper/open>].

The rule would also establish proclamation authority for the Fisheries Director, with prior NCMFC consent, to implement additional management measures if future conditions warrant action. Although any additional restrictions would depend on future biological or fishery conditions, establishing this framework in advance provides regulatory certainty to the regulated community regarding the types of measures that could be implemented. It may also improve compliance slightly if a proclamation is issued in the future, because stakeholders would already have notice of the potential management tools available. It is also possible that no additional management measures would ever be implemented beyond the five-fish recreational bag limit.

The costs to the regulated community would primarily consist of reduced harvest opportunities under the five-fish bag limit and any future restrictions that may be adopted through proclamation. Recreational fishers who do not retain Atlantic bonito, or who retain five or fewer fish per trip, would not be affected by the bag limit. The proposed rule is not expected to create costs for the State because enforcement of the bag limit and any future proclamation-based measures would occur through existing Marine Patrol duties without requiring additional resources.

The rule's primary long-term benefit would be to expedite implementation of additional management measures if changes in commercial or recreational trends, length frequency distributions, biological studies, or state and federal management indicate that further action is needed. Figure 1 below illustrates the steps that would follow adoption of the rule if additional management measures were later implemented through proclamation.

Figure 1. Steps from Adoption of Rule to Implementation




IV. Conclusion


Although the rule’s near-term effects are expected to be minimal and its long-term benefits are not readily quantifiable due to data limitations and uncertainty about future conditions, the rule would provide three real advantages: (1) a precautionary harvest cap, (2) regulatory certainty about potential future management tools, and (3) faster, transparent response capability through proclamation authority with prior public NCMFC consent. These improvements would enhance NCDMF’s ability to manage Atlantic bonito sustainably while preserving public participation in the process, ultimately benefiting both the species and North Carolina’s marine resources users.

Because additional management measures may never be needed, and because the available data are highly imprecise, it is impractical to predict the likelihood of realizing costs and benefits associated with future proclamation-based management. Any such measures could be implemented only through the Fisheries Director’s use of proclamation authority, with prior consent from the NCMFC. That prior consent would be considered at an NCMFC business meeting, where the public may attend and provide comment in advance of and during the meeting.

Table 1. Recreational harvest (number of fish landed and weight in pounds) and releases (number of fish) and commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of Atlantic bonito from North Carolina for the period 1994–2025. Data with an asterisk is preliminary (up to October for recreational and up to September for commercial) and not included in averages. PSE is Percent Standard Error. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program and North Carolina Trip Ticket Program)

Year	Recreational						Commercial	Total Weight (lb)
	# Landed	PSE	# Released	PSE	Weight Landed (lb)	PSE	Weight (lb)	
1994	11,860	48.2	18,933	48.6	23,712	56.7	37,372	61,084
1995	10,528	73.8	2,407	49.2	41,312	80.6	34,717	76,029
1996	864	58.2	10,845	56.1	5,394	71.9	16,267	21,661
1997	31,090	41.4	29,816	52.7	162,980	41.8	42,372	205,352
1998	13,513	68.4	8,836	72.7	145,837	87.7	21,352	167,189
1999	6,045	44.8	2,682	73	38,657	44.2	23,291	61,948
2000	13,617	93.4	9,257	58.4	69,579	89.9	13,343	82,922
2001	7,722	48.2	5,001	56.1	23,603	50.7	16,531	40,134
2002	28,728	64	30,165	65.7	97,115	66.1	15,456	112,571
2003	2,275	58.8	12,968	50.9	6,685	51.2	27,379	34,064
2004	10,274	56.6	19,082	39.3	48,251	57.3	9,302	57,553
2005	2,102	76.6	42,363	98.6	9,388	73.8	11,672	21,060
2006	1,037	102.4	2,755	51.4	4,457	102.4	9,770	14,227
2007	7,685	48.1	4,523	41.8	34,693	46.3	16,085	50,778
2008	5,230	56.8	23,411	61.1	39,093	61.8	16,576	55,669
2009	1,380	71.8	2,561	92.2	13,799	85.4	9,981	23,780
2010	447	42.4	16,583	41.6	8,019	47.1	15,686	23,705
2011	21,235	73.1	28,618	42.1	287,458	66.4	11,039	298,497
2012	6,913	37.1	7,858	35.6	95,947	49.3	11,343	107,290
2013	19,182	59.9	4,609	41.3	99,252	55.4	10,506	109,758
2014	18,379	49.3	59,926	62.7	91,227	53.6	9,081	100,308
2015	16,973	44.8	1,325	60.8	102,408	42.8	20,989	123,397
2016	3,411	64.7	10,196	45.2	22,127	60.3	14,838	36,965
2017	1,999	45.6	40,094	75.6	9,579	53	11,345	20,924
2018	12,577	42.5	11,745	66.4	42,879	49.7	13,848	56,727
2019	35,875	66.6	24,033	66.1	122,931	48.6	14,045	136,976
2020	52,337	50.9	23,818	55.3	179,803	47.9	15,926	195,729
2021	20,178	26.6	7,793	44.5	104,789	29.1	7,351	112,140
2022	12,301	45.4	11,763	70.7	70,411	45.7	6,576	76,987
2023	72,973	40.4	31,930	70.4	268,260	36.8	17,876	286,136
2024	61,813	34.4	7,513	48.6	130,686	43.2	12,100	142,786
2025	96,013*	26.9*	36,892*	27.5*	303,905*	28.6*	32,326*	336,231*
Average	16,469	56	16,562	58	77,430	58	16,581	94,011

 A PSE value greater than 50 indicates very imprecise estimates.

 A PSE value between 30 and 50 indicates using the data with caution.


 A PSE value less than 30 indicates estimates have a relatively low margin of error.

Table 2. Maximum, minimum, and average recreational landings and release rates (numbers per trip) in North Carolina by area, 2011-2024. (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program)

Year	Area	Landings			Releases		
		Average	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Minimum	Maximum
2011	State	1.7	0.0	1.7	0.5	0.0	0.5
	Federal	0.4	0.0	0.4	1.9	0.0	1.9
2012	State	0.8	0.0	0.8	1.1	0.0	1.1
	Federal	0.8	0.0	0.8	0.8	0.0	0.8
2013	State	2.4	0.0	2.4	0.3	0.0	0.3
	Federal	0.5	0.0	0.5	0.8	0.0	0.8
2014	State	1.7	0.0	1.7	3.6	0.0	3.6
	Federal	0.4	0.0	0.4	4.8	0.0	4.8
2015	State	2.9	0.0	2.9	0.1	0.0	0.1
	Federal	1.4	0.0	1.4	0.1	0.0	0.1
2016	State	0.5	0.0	0.5	0.7	0.0	0.7
	Federal	0.2	0.0	0.2	1.0	0.0	1.0
2017	State	0.2	0.0	0.2	9.2	0.0	9.2
	Federal	0.3	0.0	0.3	1.5	0.0	1.5
2018	State	1.2	0.0	1.2	0.8	0.0	0.8
	Federal	1.1	0.0	1.1	1.2	0.0	1.2
2019	State	3.0	0.0	3.0	1.7	0.0	1.7
	Federal	1.2	0.0	1.2	1.8	0.0	1.8
2020	State	3.8	0.0	3.8	1.0	0.0	1.0
	Federal	0.9	0.0	0.9	1.7	0.0	1.7
2021	State	1.3	0.0	1.3	0.6	0.0	0.6
	Federal	1.1	0.0	1.1	0.3	0.0	0.3
2022	State	1.1	0.0	1.1	0.2	0.0	0.2
	Federal	0.9	0.0	0.9	2.8	0.0	2.8
2023	State	2.9	0.0	2.9	2.2	0.0	2.2
	Federal	1.8	0.0	1.8	0.1	0.0	0.1
2024	State	2.0	0.0	2.0	0.3	0.0	0.3
	Federal	1.7	0.0	1.7	0.2	0.0	0.2

1
2
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Table 3. North Carolina commercial landings in pounds by gear and value, 1994-2024. (Source: North Carolina Trip Ticket Program)

Year	Gear			Total	Value	Price/Pound
	Gill Nets	Hook & Line	Other*			
1994	30,848	5,742	782	37,372	\$14,201	\$0.38
1995	29,576	4,999	143	34,717	\$6,943	\$0.20
1996	5,880	10,015	372	16,267	\$3,843	\$0.24
1997	35,689	6,119	564	42,372	\$9,455	\$0.22
1998	17,030	4,260	63	21,352	\$24,199	\$1.13
1999	11,083	12,196	12	23,291	\$20,832	\$0.89
2000	6,240	7,089	14	13,343	\$18,798	\$1.41
2001	11,814	4,689	28	16,531	\$10,433	\$0.63
2002	5,058	10,384	14	15,456	\$11,741	\$0.76
2003	19,494	7,763	122	27,379	\$18,563	\$0.68
2004	5,521	3,706	76	9,302	\$9,086	\$0.98
2005	174	10,898	600	11,672	\$7,286	\$0.62
2006	5,501	4,099	170	9,770	\$10,503	\$1.08
2007	4,382	11,683	20	16,085	\$20,403	\$1.27
2008	8,310	8,101	165	16,576	\$19,937	\$1.20
2009	3,359	6,422	200	9,981	\$14,060	\$1.41
2010	12,985	2,435	266	15,686	\$20,152	\$1.28
2011	5,160	4,890	989	11,039	\$20,041	\$1.82
2012	7,173	3,879	291	11,343	\$15,833	\$1.40
2013	2,666	7,721	119	10,506	\$15,460	\$1.47
2014	3,969	4,771	341	9,081	\$14,386	\$1.58
2015	13,100	7,664	225	20,989	\$32,905	\$1.57
2016	10,487	4,346	6	14,838	\$26,780	\$1.80
2017	7,084	4,130	131	11,345	\$20,261	\$1.79
2018	8,248	5,552	48	13,848	\$25,228	\$1.82
2019	10,256	3,705	84	14,045	\$15,556	\$1.11
2020	10,824	5,062	41	15,926	\$12,835	\$0.81
2021	4,649	2,646	56	7,351	\$16,620	\$2.26
2022	4,689	1,775	112	6,576	\$12,544	\$1.91
2023	15,744	1,972	160	17,876	\$30,287	\$1.69
2024	8,583	3,279	238	12,100	\$19,733	\$1.63

*Other gear includes seines, trawls, and pound nets

1 **Appendix I.: Proposed Rule Changes**

2 15A NCAC 03M .0524 is proposed for adoption as follows:

3

4 **15A NCAC 03M .0524 ATLANTIC BONITO**

5 (a) It shall be unlawful to possess more than five Atlantic bonito per person per day for recreational purposes.

6 (b) The Fisheries Director may, with prior consent of the Marine Fisheries Commission, by proclamation and pursuant
7 to 15A NCAC 03H .0103, impose any of the following requirements on the taking of Atlantic bonito:

8 (1) specify time;

9 (2) specify area;

10 (3) specify means and methods;

11 (4) specify season;

12 (5) specify size; and

13 (6) specify quantity, except as provided in Paragraph (a) of this Rule.

14

15 *History Note: Authority G.S. 113-134; 113-182; 113-221.1; 143B-289.52*

16

Appendix II.: Literature Cited

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