

**FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
SUMMER FLOUNDER
AUGUST 2025**

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

Original FMP Adoption:	1982 – ASMFC	
	1988 – MAFMC	
Amendments:	Amendment 1	1991
	Amendment 2	1993
	Amendment 3	1993
	Amendment 4	1993
	Amendment 5	1993
	Amendment 6	1994
	Amendment 7	1995
	Amendment 10	1997
	Amendment 11	1998
	Amendment 12	1999
	Framework 1	2001
	Framework 2	2001
	Addendum III	2001
	Addendum IV	2001
	Framework 5	2004
	Addendum VIII	2004
	Addendum XIV	2004
	Addendum XV	2004
	Addendum XVI	2005
	Addendum XVII	2005
	Framework 6	2006
	Addendum XVIII	2006
	Framework 7	2007
	Addendum XIX	2007
	Amendment 16	2007
	Amendment 15	2011
	Amendment 19	2013
	(Recreational Accountability Amendment)	
	Addendum XXV	2014
	Amendment 17	2015
	Addendum XXVI	2015
	Amendment 18	2015
	Addendum XXVII	2016
	Addendum XXVIII	2017
	Amendment 20	2017
	Framework 10	2017
	Framework 11	2018
	Framework 13	2018
	Addendum XXXI	2018
	Addendum XXXII	2018
	Framework 14	2019

	Framework 15	2020
	Amendment 21	2020
	Framework 16	2020
	Amendment 22	2022
	Framework 17 & Addendum XXXIV	2022/2023
	Addendum XXXVI	2025
Comprehensive Review:	2023	

Because of their presence in, and movement between state waters (0–3 miles) and federal waters (3–200 miles), the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) manages summer flounder (*Paralichthys dentatus*) cooperatively with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). The two management entities work in conjunction with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as the federal implementation and enforcement entity.

Specific details for each Amendment include:

Amendment 1 established an overfishing definition for summer flounder.

Amendment 2 established rebuilding schedule, commercial quotas, recreational harvest limits, size limits, gear restrictions, permits, and reporting requirements for summer flounder; created the summer flounder monitoring committee.

Amendment 3 revised the exempted fishery line for summer flounder; increased the large mesh net threshold for summer flounder; established otter trawl retention requirements for large mesh use in the summer flounder fishery.

Amendment 4 revised state-specific shares for summer flounder commercial quota allocation.

Amendment 5 allowed states to combine or transfer summer flounder commercial quota.

Amendment 6 set criteria for allowance of multiple nets on board commercial vessels for summer flounder; established deadline for publishing catch limits; established commercial management measures for summer flounder.

Amendment 7 revised the fishing mortality rate reduction schedule for summer flounder.

Amendment 10 modified commercial minimum mesh requirements; continued commercial vessel moratorium permit; prohibited transfer of summer flounder at sea; established a special permit for the summer flounder party/charter sector.

Amendment 11 modified certain provisions related to vessel replacement and upgrading, permit history transfer, splitting, and permit renewal regulations.

Amendment 12 revised Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass FMP to comply with the Sustainable Fisheries Act and established a framework adjustment process; established quota set-aside for research for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass; established state-specific conservation equivalence measures; allowed the rollover of the winter scup quota; revised the start date for the scup summer quota period; established a system to transfer scup at sea.

Framework 1 established quota set-aside for research for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass.

Framework 2 established state-specific conservation equivalency measures for the recreational summer flounder fishery.

Addendum III established recreational fishing specifications for 2001 for summer flounder and scup.

Addendum IV provided that upon the recommendation of the relevant monitoring committee and joint consideration with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the ASMFC's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board will decide the state regulations rather than forward a

recommendation to the National Marine Fisheries Science Center; made states responsible for implementing the ASMFC's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Boards decisions on regulations.

Framework 5 established multi-year specification setting of the quotas for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass.

Addendum VIII established a program wherein any state which exceeds its recreational harvest limit for summer flounder in 2003 and beyond will receive a reduction from its future recreational harvest limits.

Addendum XIV implemented a system of conservation equivalency for the recreational fishery of summer flounder to achieve the annual recreational harvest limit.

Addendum XV established an allocation program for the increase in commercial total allowable landings in the summer flounder fishery for 2005 and 2006 only.

Addendum XVI provided a species-specific mechanism of ensuring that a state meets its obligations under the plan in a way that minimizes the probability that a state's delay in complying does not adversely affect other states fisheries or conservation of the resource.

Addendum XVII established a program wherein the ASMFC Management Board has the ability to subdivide the recreational summer flounder coast-wide allocations into voluntary regions.

Framework 6 established region-specific conservation equivalency measures for summer flounder.

Addendum XVIII stabilized fishing rules as close to those that existed in 2005, in part, to minimize the drastic reductions facing three states.

Framework 7 built flexibility into process to define and update status determination criteria for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass.

Addendum XIX continued the state-by-state black sea bass commercial management measures, without a sunset clause; broadened the descriptions of stock status determination criteria contained within the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass FMP to allow greater flexibility in those definitions, while maintaining objective and measurable status determination criteria for identifying when stocks or stock complexes covered by the fishery management plan are overfished.

Amendment 16 standardized bycatch reporting methodology.

Amendment 15 established annual catch limits and accountability measures.

Amendment 19 modified the accountability measures for the MAFMC recreational fisheries.

Addendum XXV established regional management for the 2014 recreational black sea bass and summer flounder fishery.

Amendment 17 implemented standardized bycatch reporting methodology.

Addendum XXVI established alternate regional management for the 2015 recreational summer flounder fishery.

Amendment 18 eliminated the requirement for vessel owners to submit "did not fish" reports for the months or weeks when their vessel was not fishing; removed some of the restrictions for upgrading vessels listed on federal fishing permits.

Addendum XXVII continued regional management of the recreational summer flounder fishery extended ad hoc regional management of the black sea bass recreational fishery for the 2016 and 2017 fishing year and addressed the discrepancies in recreational summer flounder management measures within Delaware Bay.

Addendum XXVIII initiated an addendum to consider adaptive management, including regional approaches, for the 2017 summer flounder recreational fishery.

Amendment 20 implemented management measures to prevent the development of new, and the expansion of existing, commercial fisheries on certain forage species in the Mid-Atlantic.

Framework 10 implemented a requirement for vessels that hold party/charter permits for Council-managed species to submit vessel trip reports electronically (eVTRS) while on a trip carrying passengers for hire.

Framework 11 established a process for setting constant multi-year Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) limits for Council-managed fisheries, clarified that the Atlantic Bluefish, Tilefish, and Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish FMPs will now automatically incorporate the best available scientific information in calculating ABCs (as all other Mid-Atlantic management plans do) rather than requiring a separate management action to adopt them, clarified the process for setting ABCs for each of the four types of ABC control rules.

Framework 13 modified the accountability measures required for overages not caused by directed landings (i.e., discards) in the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries.

Addendum XXXI established conservation equivalency for black sea bass and transit provisions in federal waters around Block Island, Rhode Island for recreational and commercial fishermen which allows permitted fishermen to pass through federal waters legally.

Addendum XXXII established a specifications process instead of an addendum process to implement recreational management measures more quickly for summer flounder and black sea bass.

Framework 14 gives the Council the option to waive the federal recreational black sea bass measures in favor of state measures through conservation equivalency; implements a transit zone for commercial and recreational summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries in Block Island Sound; and allows for the use of a maximum size limit in the recreational summer flounder and black sea bass fisheries.

Framework 15 established a requirement for commercial vessels with federal permits for all species managed by the Mid-Atlantic and New England Councils to submit vessel trip reports electronically within 48 hours after entering port at the conclusion of a trip.

Amendment 21 modified the summer flounder commercial state quota allocation system and FMP goals and objectives.

Framework 16 modified MAFMC's ABC control rule and risk policy. The revised risk policy is intended to reduce the probability of overfishing as stock size falls below the target biomass while allowing for increased risk and greater economic benefit under stock biomass conditions. This action also removed the typical/atypical species distinction currently included in the risk policy.

Amendment 22 revised the commercial and recreational sector allocations for all three species.

Framework 17/Addendum XXXIV Recreational Harvest Control Rule established a new process for setting recreational bag, size, and season limits (i.e., recreational measures) for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. This action also modified the recreational accountability measures for these species.

Addendum XXXVI which made further modifications to the process for setting recreational measures and accountability measures for these four species. The changes, which include modifications the Percent Change Approach based on lessons learned over the past few years, will be implemented in two phases.

Specific details for each amendment under development include:

The Percent Change Approach was implemented in 2023 (new process for setting recreational measures bag, size, and season limits), and will sunset at the end of 2025.

In April 2025, the Policy Board and Council adopted Addendum XXXVI to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass FMP and Addendum III to the Bluefish FMP, which made further modifications to the process for setting recreational measures and accountability measures for these four species. The changes, which include modifications the Percent Change Approach based on lessons learned over the past few years, will be implemented in two phases. The first phase of changes aims to better account for stock status when setting measures and will create more opportunities for stability in management measures. The second phase of modifications, which will be implemented for setting 2030 recreational measures and beyond, will update the process to use a catch-based target. For further information see the management plan at asmfc.org.

To ensure compliance with interstate requirements, North Carolina also manages this species under the North Carolina Fishery Management Plan for Interjurisdictional Fisheries (IJ FMP). The goal of the IJ FMP is to adopt fishery management plans, consistent with N.C. law, approved by the MAFMC, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, or the ASMFC by reference and implement corresponding fishery regulations in North Carolina to provide compliance or compatibility with approved fishery management plans and amendments, now and in the future. These plans were established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (federal council plans) and the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (ASMFC plans) with the goal, like the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 to “ensure long-term viability” of these fisheries (NCDMF 2022).

Management Unit

U.S. waters in the western Atlantic Ocean from the southern border of North Carolina northward to the U.S.-Canadian border.

Goal and Objectives

Amendment 21 in 2020 approved the proposed revised FMP Goals and Objectives for Summer Flounder and are as follows:

- Goal 1: Ensure the biological sustainability of the summer flounder resource in order to maintain a sustainable summer flounder fishery.
 - Objective 1.1: Prevent overfishing and achieve and maintain sustainable spawning stock biomass levels that promote optimum yield in the fishery.
- Goal 2: Support and enhance the development and implementation of effective management measures.
 - Objective 2.1: Maintain and enhance effective partnership and coordination among the Council, Commission, Federal partners, and member states.
 - Objective 2.2: Promote understanding, compliance, and the effective enforcement of regulations.
 - Objective 2.3: Promote monitoring, data collection, and the development of ecosystem-based science that support and enhance effective management of the summer flounder resource.
- Goal 3: Optimize economic and social benefits from the utilization of the summer flounder resource, balancing the needs and priorities of different user groups to achieve the greatest overall benefit to the nation.
 - Objective 3.1: Provide reasonable access to the fishery throughout the management unit. Fishery allocations and other management measures should balance responsiveness to changing social, economic, and ecological conditions with historic and current importance to various user groups and communities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

Summer flounder are estuarine-dependent members of the left eyed flounder family (*Paralichthyidae*) that also includes southern flounder (*Paralichthys lethostigma*) and gulf flounder (*Paralichthys albigutta*), all of which occur in North Carolina waters. Summer flounder are found in both inshore and offshore waters from Nova Scotia, Canada to Florida but are most abundant from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to Cape Fear, North Carolina. Spawning typically occurs at age 2 to 3 during the months of November to March as they move offshore. Juveniles move inshore to coastal and estuarine areas for about one year and later begin to join adults offshore. Summer flounder typically mature by age 1 with females maturing at 11 inches total length and males maturing at 10 inches total length. Summer flounder have a maximum age of 19 years. They like to burrow into sandy substrates and ambush prey such as small fish, crabs, shrimp, squid and worms (Packer 1999).

Stock Status

The 2023 management track stock assessment indicates that summer flounder is not overfished but is experiencing overfishing.

Stock Assessment

The 2023 assessment indicates that current recruitment values have been below average for the last 10 years. This assessment also noted a decreasing mean length and weight at age and decreasing maturity.

Spawning stock biomass (SSB) is approximately 83% of the SSB target and fishing mortality is approximately 103% of the fishing mortality threshold. The stock assessment report can be found on the summer flounder page on the ASMFC website for further information.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

Commercial: There is a 14-inch total length minimum size limit in Atlantic Ocean waters and a 15-inch total length minimum size limit in internal coastal waters as well as harvest seasons and minimum mesh size requirements for the flounder trawl fishery. Trip limits replaced harvest limits to provide additional opportunities to land the quota, which are established by proclamation [see most recent North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) proclamation on commercial summer flounder fishery]. At the end of 2024 (Dec 1–31), individual trip limits were set due to a low amount of quota remaining. A bycatch trip limit of 100 pounds is in place for shrimp trawls during closed flounder trawl harvest periods. A license to land flounder from the Atlantic Ocean is required to land more than 100 pounds per trip.

Recreational: Season closures are currently in effect for North Carolina. The recreational flounder fishery did not open in 2024 for all flounder species in North Carolina in coastal fishing waters. The 2023 recreational season exceeded its southern flounder quota, and paybacks were required in accordance with Amendment 3 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan. In 2025 the recreational season is still to be determined but will occur sometime between August 16 and September 30.

Commercial Fishery

All landings reported as caught in the Atlantic Ocean are considered to be summer flounder by the North Carolina Trip Ticket Program. Since 2019, summer flounder have only been allowed to be harvested by trawls from the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 1). Although in history's past other gears were also comparable in summer flounder landings coming from the Atlantic Ocean. Commercial state allocations were modified via Amendment 21, which became effective on January 1, 2021. The revised allocation system modifies the state-by-state commercial quota allocations in years when the annual coastwide commercial quota

exceeds the specified trigger of 9.55 million pounds. North Carolina has an allocation of 27.4% (baseline quota) and an additional allocation of 12.37% if the 9.55 million pounds of coastwide commercial quota is triggered. In the last 20 years, landings peaked in 2004 and have been generally stable since 2007, aside from 2012 and 2013, when landings were lower than average (Table 1; Figure 2). The low landings in 2012 and 2013 were primarily due to the closure of Oregon Inlet to large vessels (such as trawlers) due to shoaling and the consequent transfer of most of North Carolina's quota allocation to Virginia and other states. Dredging efforts in 2024 has helped mitigate shoaling and has made navigation through Oregon Inlet passable for larger trawlers. In 2024 there were more trips and higher landings for summer flounder.

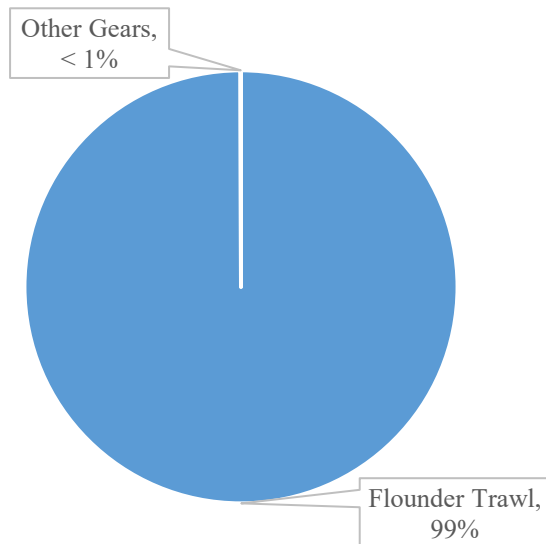


Figure 1. Commercial harvest of summer flounder in North Carolina by gear type in 2024.

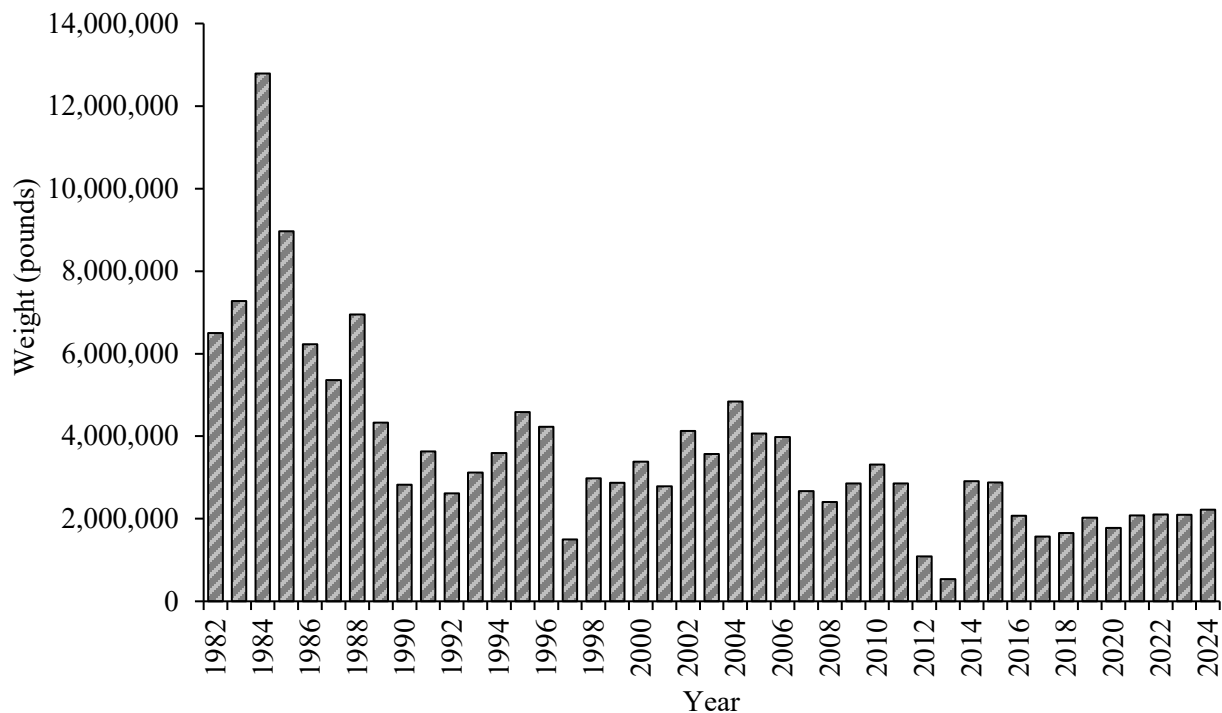


Figure 2. Annual commercial landings in pounds for summer flounder in North Carolina from 1982–2024.

Recreational Fishery

Summer flounder harvest is reported through the NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Recreational estimates across all years have been updated and are now based on the new MRIP Fishing Effort Survey-based calibrated estimates. For more information on MRIP, see <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/recreational-fishing-data>. Recreational harvest of summer flounder has varied annually but has seen a decline over the years (Table 1; Figure 3). Some of this decline in landings is likely the result of increases in size limits and the lack of these larger summer flounder being prevalent in this area. The limited harvest opportunities and closed and shortened seasons in accordance with Amendment 2 and 3 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder FMP have also contributed to the decline in landings. In 2024, there was no recreational flounder season.

Table 1. Recreational harvest (number of fish landed and weight in pounds) and releases (number of fish) and commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of summer flounder from North Carolina for the period 2015–2024.

Year	Recreational			Commercial	
	Number Landed	Number Released	Weight Landed (lb)	Weight Landed (lb)	Total Weight Landed (lb)
2015	99,263	856,849	157,437	2,878,743	3,036,180
2016	65,494	664,388	110,392	2,071,100	2,181,492
2017	91,193	977,285	147,426	1,572,707	1,720,133
2018	57,913	440,676	92,032	1,654,569	1,746,601
2019	34,895	467,942	52,872	2,025,401	2,078,273
2020	24,699	705,247	37,935	1,779,865	1,817,800
2021	13,863	1,187,109	27,492	2,081,420	2,108,912
2022	10,591	314,007	22,151	2,107,650	2,129,801
2023	20,164	511,094	34,192	2,096,443	2,130,635
2024	0	0	0	2,223,062	2,223,062
Mean	41,808	612,460	68,193	2,049,096	2,117,289

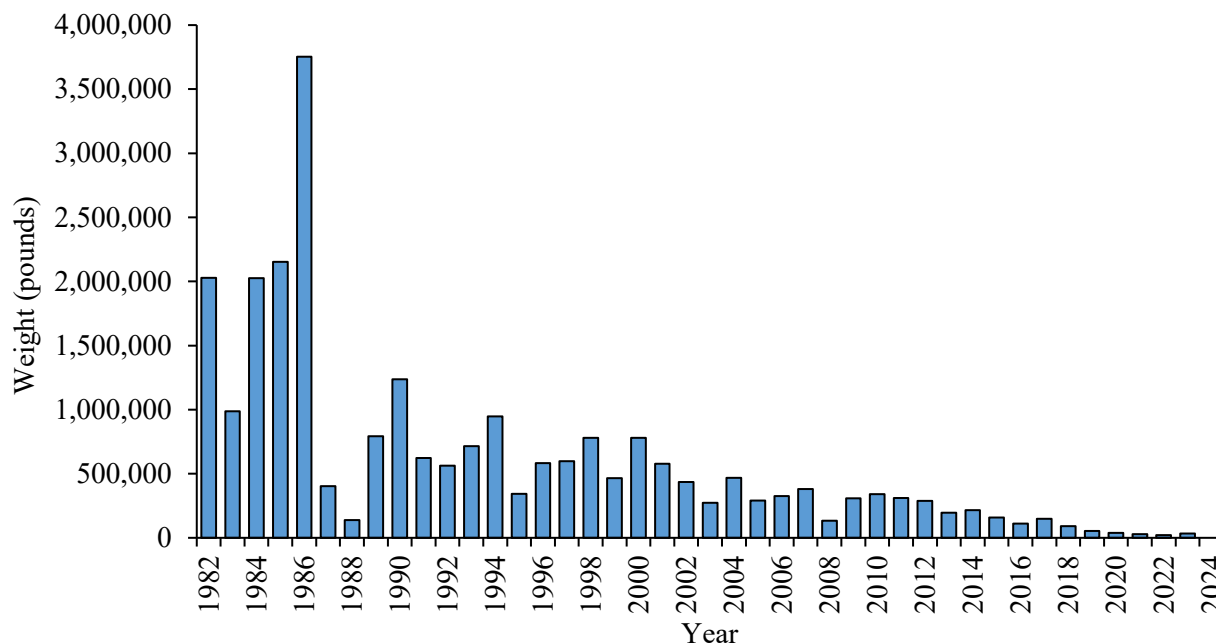


Figure 3. Annual recreational landings in pounds for summer flounder in North Carolina from 1982–2024. Note: No landings data for 2024.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Several DMF sampling programs collect biological data on commercial and recreational fisheries that catch summer flounder. Program 433 (ocean trawl fishery) is the primary program that collects commercial length and age data for harvested summer flounder. Other programs that collect information include: 432 (flounder pound net), 434 (ocean gill net), 435 (beach seine), 461 (estuarine gill net), and 437 (long haul seine). Programs 466 (sea turtle bycatch monitoring) and 570 (commercial shrimp trawl fishery characterization) collect length data on harvested and discarded flounder. Recreational fishery sampling for harvest, releases and lengths occurs through the NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program. Age data from the recreational fishery are collected through the North Carolina Carcass Collection Program.

From 1991 to 2024, annual mean length in the commercial fishery fluctuated from 17 to 20 inches total length (TL). Summer flounder harvested commercially during 2024 ranged from 13 to 34 inches TL with 21% being the mode at 15 inches TL (Figure 4). From 1991 to 2024, summer flounder harvested commercially ranged from 12 to 35 inches TL (Figure 5).

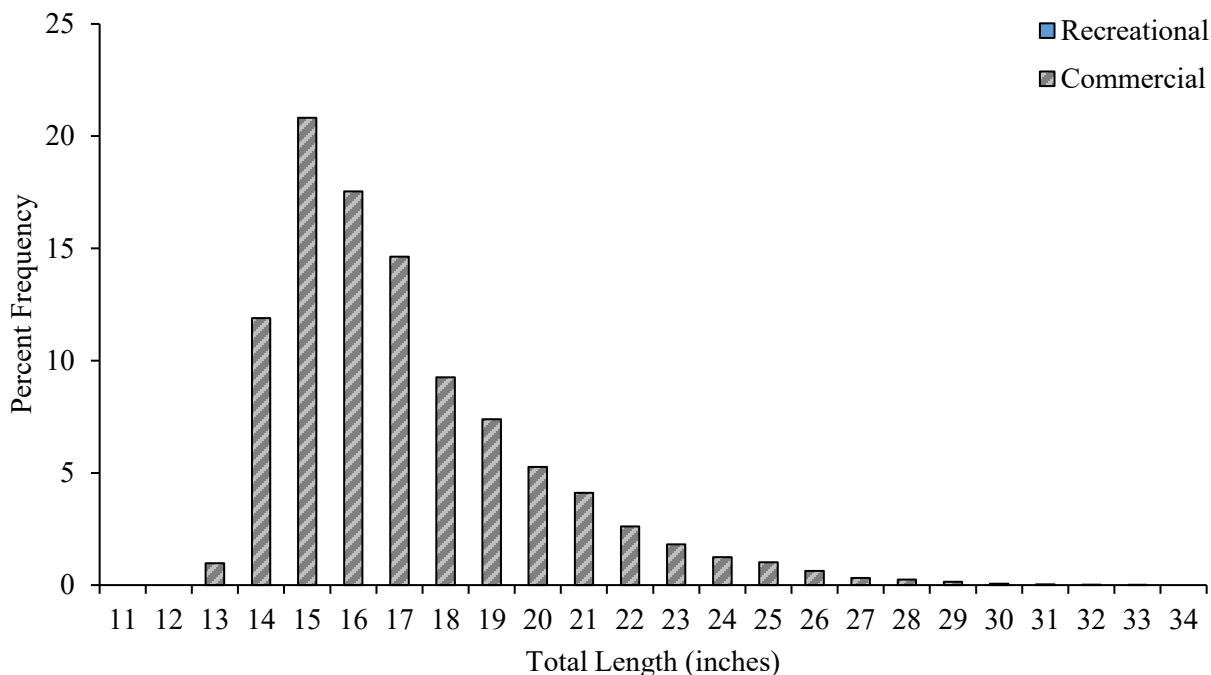


Figure 4. Commercial and recreational length frequency distribution from summer flounder harvested in North Carolina in 2024. Note: No recreational data for 2024.

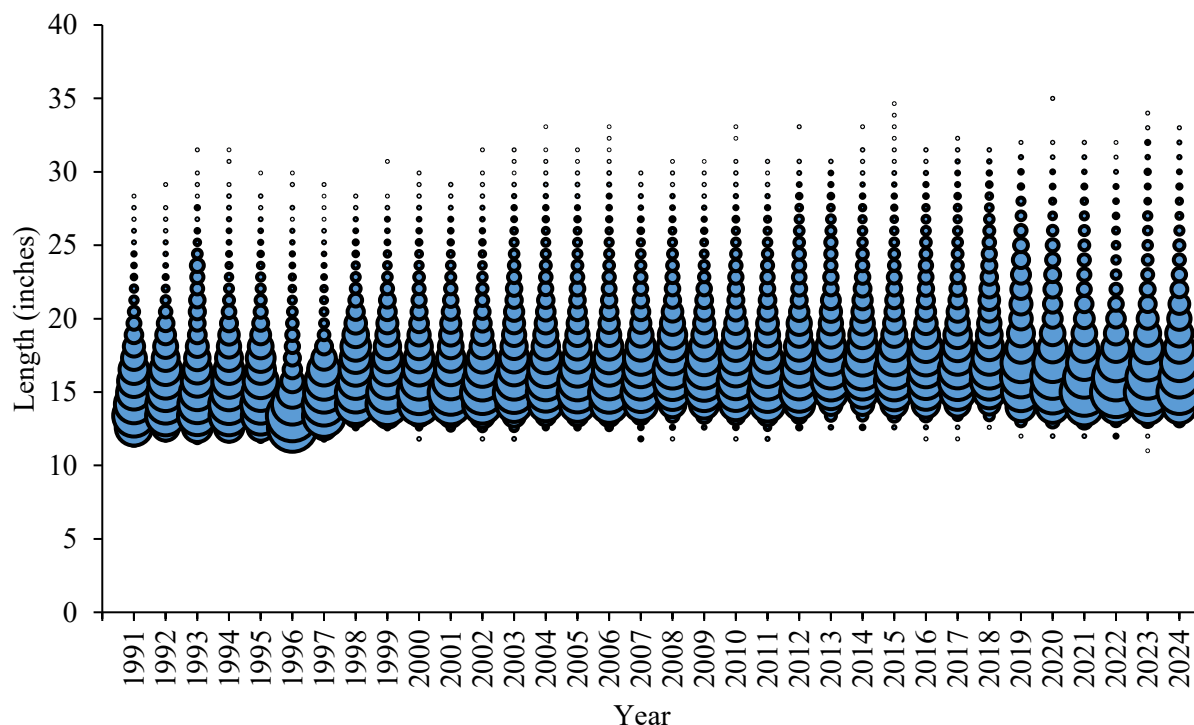


Figure 5. Commercial length frequency (total length, inches), of summer flounder harvested in North Carolina from 1991–2024. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length.

As for recreational fishery length data from 1982 to 2023, annual mean lengths increased over time as size limits have been implemented. With the exception of 2024 (no length data), the number of fish measured from 1991 to 2023 were variable. From 1991 to 2023, summer flounder harvested recreationally ranged from 5 to 29 inches TL, but in the last 10 years have measured 16–17 inches TL (Table 2; Figure 6).

Table 2. Summer flounder length (total length, inches) data from NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program recreational samples in North Carolina, 2015–2024.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
2015	16	13	20	116
2016	16	13	21	59
2017	16	13	24	129
2018	16	13	20	91
2019	16	13	19	65
2020	16	8	24	38
2021	17	15	19	13
2022	17	15	21	34
2023	16	15	24	10
2024	-	-	-	-

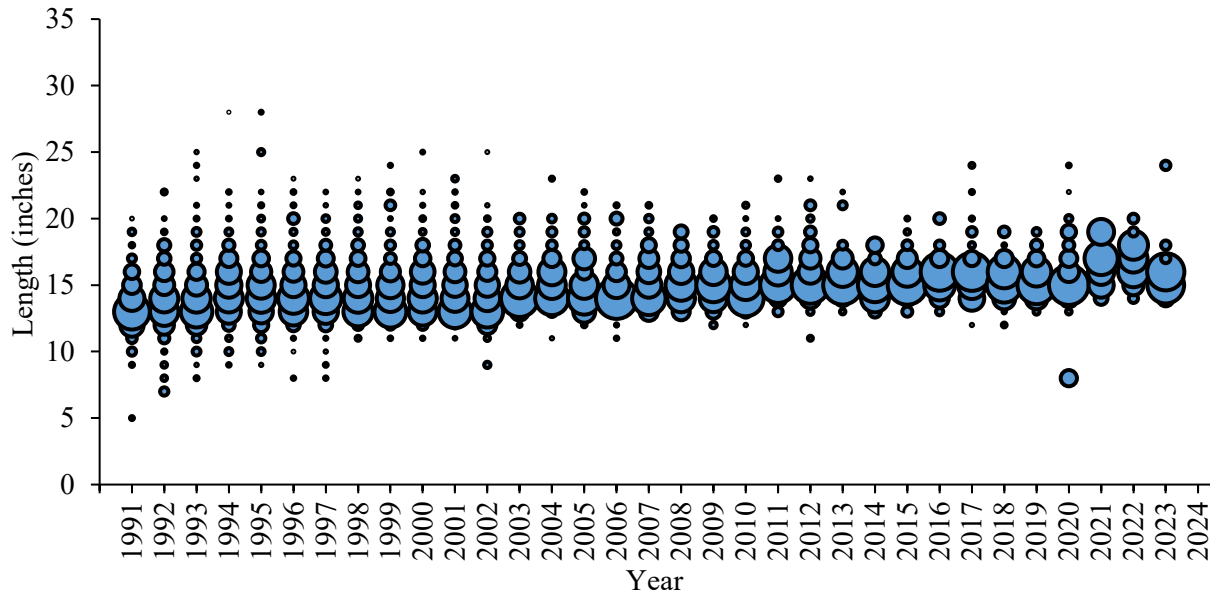


Figure 6. Recreational length frequency (total length, inches), of summer flounder harvested in North Carolina from 1991–2024*. Bubbles represent fish at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of fish at that length. *Note: No length data for 2024.

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

Several DMF independent sampling programs collect biological data on summer flounder. However, most surveys do not catch summer flounder regularly enough to provide consistent length, age, or abundance data. The main exception is Program 195 (the Pamlico Sound Trawl Survey), which employs a random stratified survey design in waters of Pamlico Sound and its major river tributaries. Stations are randomly selected from strata based upon depth and geographic location. Randomly selected stations are optimally allocated among the strata based upon all previous sampling in order to provide the most accurate abundance estimates (PSE <20). Tow duration is 20 minutes and use double rigged demersal mongoose trawls (9.1m headrope, 1.0m X 0.6m doors, 2.2-cm bar mesh body, 1.9-cm bar mesh cod end and a 100-mesh tail bag extension). The survey takes place in June and September with the samples collected in June serving as a juvenile abundance index (JAI) for summer flounder in North Carolina. Annual mean lengths ranged from 6 to 8 inches TL in the last 10-year time series (Table 3).

Table 3. Summer flounder length (total length, inches) data from Program 195 (Pamlico Sound Survey) samples in North Carolina, 2015–2024. *Note: Data for 2020 and 2021 not usable due to staffing issues and insufficient sampling during COVID-19.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
2015	7	3	17	477
2016	6	3	12	272
2017	6	3	14	559
2018	6	3	12	618
2019	6	3	15	400
2020*	7	4	13	56
2021*	8	3	14	30
2022	8	2	17	319
2023	6	1	14	880
2024	6	3	16	262

During 2020 and 2021, sampling was impacted during scheduled sampling months due to staffing issues and the COVID pandemic. During this time, sampling did not occur in 2020 and incomplete sampling in 2021. Data from 1999 is also excluded from the average due to sampling occurring in July instead of June (Figure 7).

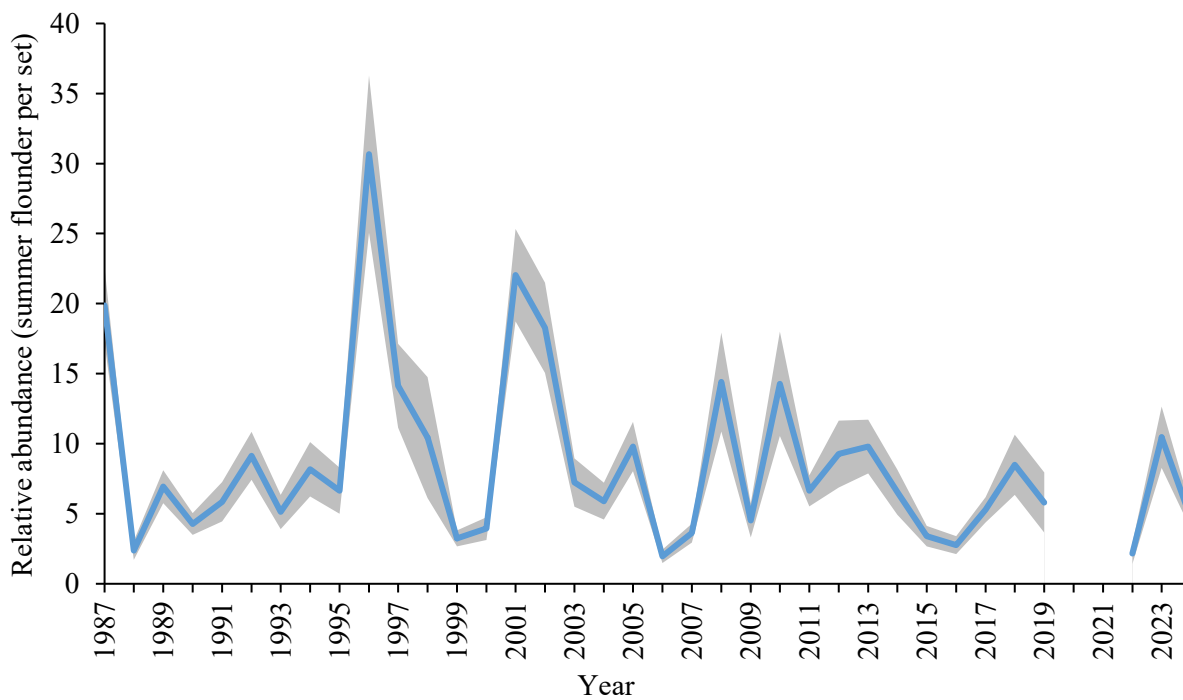


Figure 7. The annual summer flounder juvenile abundance index with standard error shaded in the gray from the North Carolina Program 195 (Pamlico Sound Survey) Survey for the period of 1987–2024. Data from 2020 and 2021 will not be used due to staffing issues and incomplete sampling corresponding with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The summer flounder JAI from the Pamlico Sound Survey is one of the recruitment indices provided for the annual coast-wide stock assessment of summer flounder and was used in the 2018 summer flounder benchmark stock assessment. The summer flounder CPUE in 2024 was 4.61 (Figure 7).

The Pamlico Sound Trawl Survey (Program 195) is suspended indefinitely starting in 2025. NCDMF lost use of the research vessel, RV Carolina Coast (used for the survey since its inception in 1987), when it was found to be structurally unsound following completion of 2024 sampling. Alternate survey designs and methods are being explored by the NCDMF to fulfill data needs provided by this survey. No implementation date has been determined. It is important to note that the Program 195 data time series, collected by the RV Carolina Coast and current gear, concluded with the completion of the 2024 survey (1987–2024). The JAI for summer flounder in North Carolina will not be estimated from the Pamlico Sound Survey in 2025.

To characterize age structure, summer flounder otoliths are primarily collected from the commercial ocean trawl fishery but are also collected from other dependent (recreational) and various independent (scientific surveys) sources throughout the year. While scales were used to determine the age of summer flounder historically, otoliths are now preferred and have been collected exclusively since 2016. In 2024, 768 summer flounder otoliths were aged yielding a range in age from 0 to 19 years. Maximum ages since 2010 were higher than previous years, suggesting expansion of the stock age structure. Modal age ranged from 2 to 7 during 1991 through 2024. From 2015 through 2024 modal age range increases from 4 to 7 (Table 4).

Table 4. Summer flounder age samples collected from both dependent (commercial and recreational fisheries) and independent (surveys) sources in North Carolina from 2015–2024.

Year	Modal Age	Minimum Age	Maximum Age	Total Number Aged
2015	6	0	17	890
2016	7	0	18	998
2017	4	0	19	1,179
2018	5	0	19	882
2019	5	0	19	925
2020	4	0	17	761
2021	4	1	12	628
2022	5	0	16	468
2023	5	0	15	606
2024	5	0	19	781

The age data suggests that summer flounder grow very quickly during their first year of life with an average TL of 13 inches at age 1. They continue to grow to an average TL of 27 inches by age 14 (Figure 8).

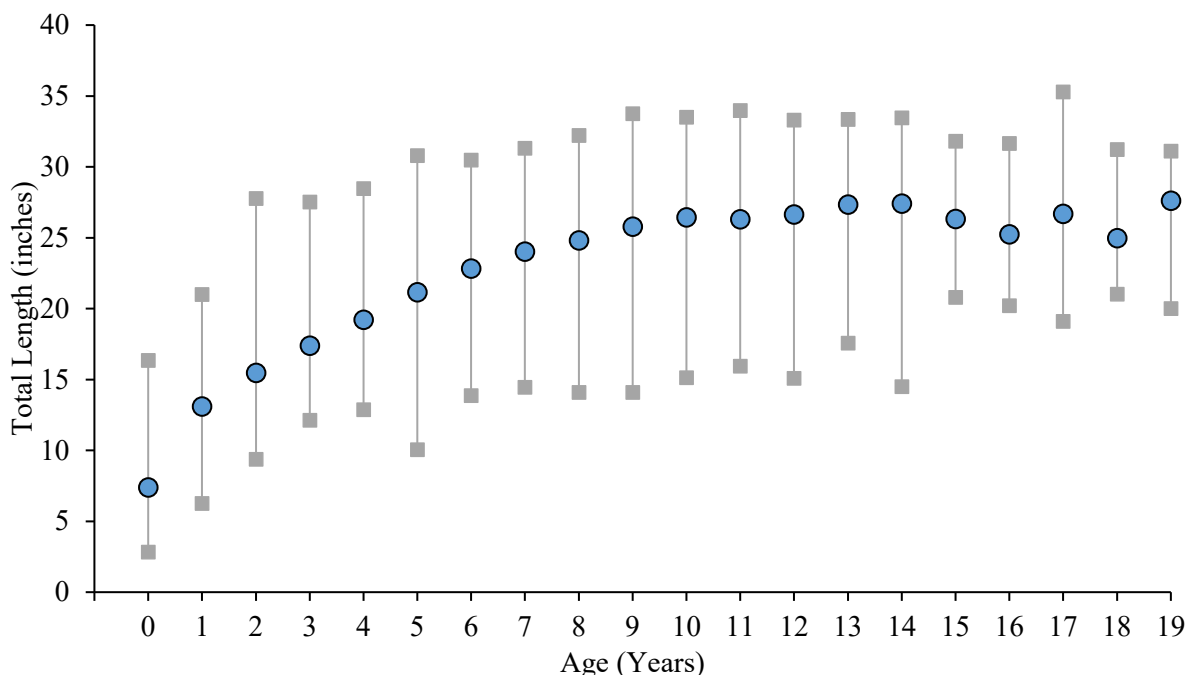


Figure 8. Summer flounder length at age based on age samples collected in North Carolina from 1991–2024. Blue circles represent the mean size at a given age while the gray squares represent the minimum and maximum observed size for each age.

RESEARCH NEEDS

Updated research needs from the 2018 summer flounder benchmark 66th Stock Assessment Workshop are provided below. The research needs listed below start with the most recent. Text in parenthesis indicates known progress made to address these needs.

- Continue to explore changes in the distribution of recruitment. Develop studies, sampling programs, or analyses to better understand how and why these changes are occurring, and the implications to stock productivity (progress unknown at this time).

- The reference points are internally consistent with the current assessment. It may be useful to carry uncertainty estimates through all the components of the assessment, biological reference points, and projections (progress unknown at this time).
- Explore the potential mechanisms for recent slower growth that is observed in both sexes (progress unknown at this time).
- Evaluate uncertainties in biomass to determine potential modifications to OFL CV employed (research is ongoing)
- Evaluate fully the sex- and size distribution of landed and discarded fish, by sex, in the summer flounder fisheries (research is ongoing).
- Incorporate sex-specific differences in size at age into the stock assessment (progress has been made and research is ongoing)
- Determine and evaluate the sources of the over-optimistic stock projections (progress has been made)
- Evaluate the causes of decreased recruitment and changes in recruitment per spawner in recent years (progress has been made)
- Further work examining aspects that create greater realism to the summer flounder assessment (e.g., sexually dimorphic growth, sex-specific F, differences in spatial structure [or distribution by size?]) should be conducted. This could include: (a) Simulation studies to determine the critical data and model components that are necessary to provide reliable advice and need to determine how simple a model can be while still providing reliable advice on stock status for management use and should evaluate both simple and most complex model configurations. (b) Development of models incorporating these factors that would create greater realism. (c) These first steps (a or b) can be used to prioritize data collection and determine if additional investment in data streams (e.g., collection of sex at age and sex at length and maturity data from the catch, additional information on spatial structure and movement, etc.) are worthwhile in terms of providing more reliable assessment results. (d) The modeling infrastructure should be simultaneously developed to support these types of modeling approaches (flexibility in model framework, MCMC/bootstrap framework, projection framework) (some progress has been made and research is ongoing).
- Develop an ongoing sampling program for the recreational fishery landings and discards (i.e., collect age, length, sex) to develop appropriate age-length keys for ageing the recreational catch (research is needed).
- Apply standardization techniques to all of the state and academic-run surveys, to be evaluated for potential inclusion in the assessment (progress has been made and research is ongoing).
- Continue efforts to improve understanding of sexually dimorphic mortality and growth patterns. This should include monitoring sex ratios and associated biological information in the fisheries and all ongoing surveys to allow development of sex-structured models in the future (research is ongoing).

MANAGEMENT

An update of the summer flounder stock assessment is completed every two years by NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC). Data are analyzed from the previous year based on decisions made for the previous benchmark assessment. Projections based on stock assessments are used to set the coast-wide quota each year. Amendments to the FMP are undertaken as issues arise that require action. The Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and amendments use output controls (catch and landings limits) as the primary management tool, with landings divided between the commercial (60 percent) and recreational (40 percent) fisheries. Since 2023, revised allocations have been implemented and transitioned to catch-based allocations with 55 percent being commercial and 45 percent being

recreational. The FMP also includes minimum fish sizes, bag limits, seasons, gear restrictions, permit requirements, and other provisions to prevent overfishing and ensure sustainability of the fisheries. Recreational bag and size limits and seasons are determined on a regional basis using conservation equivalency. The commercial quota is divided into state-by-state quotas. North Carolina has several specific management strategies for summer flounder (Table 5).

In 2024, the Board and Council jointly approved modifications to two exemptions from the summer flounder commercial minimum mesh size requirements, which require a minimum mesh size of 5.5-inch diamond mesh or 6.0-inch square mesh to retain more than 200 pounds of summer flounder from November through April, or 100 pounds of summer flounder from May through October. The Small Mesh Exemption Program provides an exemption from these requirements for authorized vessels fishing in a designated area from November 1 through April 30. Through this action, the Board and Council agreed to expand the exemption area by moving the boundary of the northern portion of the area approximately five miles west, then connecting the western boundary to the southern scup Gear Restricted Area. The Board and Council approved a revised definition of the term “flynet” as it relates to the flynet exemption from the summer flounder commercial minimum mesh size requirements. The revised definition encompasses similar high-rise net types which have very large mesh in the wings, with mesh size decreasing through the body of the net. These nets are not designed to catch flatfish and generally catch small amounts of summer flounder.

Table 5. Summary of management strategies by North Carolina for summer flounder.

Management Strategy	Outcome
14-inch total length (Atlantic Ocean waters) and 15-inch total length (internal coastal waters) minimum size limit for the commercial fishery	Size limit accomplished by rule 3M.0503(a)
Minimum trawl stretched mesh size of $\geq 5 \frac{1}{2}$ -inches (diamond) or ≥ 6 -inches (square) throughout the body, extensions and tailbag required to possess more than 100 pounds of flounder May 1 through October 31 or more than 200 pounds of flounder November 1 through April 30 (flynets are exempt from minimum trawl mesh requirements)	Rules 3M.0503(b) 3M.0503(f) 3M.0503(g) 3M.0503(h)(1-3)
Owner of a vessel required to possess a Licenses to Land flounder from the Atlantic Ocean and in order for a dealer to purchase or offload ≥ 100 pounds of flounder from the Atlantic Ocean.	Rules 3M.0503(c)(1-4)
Commercial seasons that allocate 80 percent of the quota to the winter season (starting January 1), a bycatch trip limit of 100 pounds during the closed season and the remaining quota allocated to the fall season (starting no earlier than November 1)	Rules 3M.0503(i)(1-3). Rule suspended for 2013 and 2014 fishing seasons.
Trip limits established for the open seasons	Rule 3M.0503(j) Specific trip limits by Proclamation Authority
15-inch total length (Atlantic Ocean and internal coastal waters) minimum size and 4 fish creel limit for recreational fishery in all joint and coastal waters	Proclamation FF-4-2017

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