FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
BLACK SEA BASS NORTH OF CAPE HATTERAS
AUGUST 2025

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

Original FMP Adoption:	Incorporated into the Summer Flounder FMP through Amendment 9 in 1996	
Amendments:	Amendment 9	1996
	Amendment 10	1997
	Amendment 11	1998
	Amendment 12	1999
	Framework 1	2001
	Addendum IV	2001
	Addendum VI	2002
	Amendment 13	2003
	Framework 5	2004
	Addendum XII	2004
	Addendum XIII	2004
	Addendum XVI	2005
	Amendment 16	2007
	Framework 7	2007
	Addendum XIX	2007
	Addendum XX	2009
	Amendment 15	2011
	Addendum XXI	2011
	Addendum XXII	2012
	Amendment 19	2013
	Addendum XXIII	2013
	Addendum XXV	2014
	Amendment 17	2015
	Framework 8	2015
	Amendment 18	2015
	Addendum XXVII	2016
	Amendment 20	2017
	Framework 10	2017
	Addendum XXX	2018
	Framework 11	2018
	Framework 13	2018
	Addendum XXXI	2018
	Addendum XXXII	2018
	Framework 14	2019
	Framework 15	2020
	Framework 16	2020
	Addendum XXXIII	2021
	Amendment 22	2022
	Framework 17 & Addendum XXXIV	2022/2023
	Addendum XXXVI	2025

Comprehensive Review: 2024

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 black sea bass (*Centropristis striata*) north of Cape Hatteras 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. Black sea bass went through preliminary FMP development from 1978–1993 by the MAFMC. In 1996 NMFS requested that black sea bass regulations be incorporated into another FMP to reduce the number of separate fisheries regulations. As a result, the black sea bass FMP was incorporated into the summer flounder FMP as Amendment 9.

Specific details for each Amendment include:

Amendment 9 incorporated black sea bass into the Summer Flounder FMP; established black sea bass management measures including commercial quotas, recreational harvest limits, size limits, gear restrictions, permits, and reporting requirements.

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 the 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 equivalency 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.

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.

Addendum VI provided a mechanism for initial possession limits, triggers, and adjusted possession limits to be set during the annual specification setting process without the need for further Emergency Rules.

Amendment 13 revised black sea bass commercial quota system; addressed other black sea bass management measures; established multi-year specification setting of quota for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass; established region-specific conservation equivalency measures for summer flounder; built flexibility into process to define and update status determination criteria for each plan species. Amendment 13 also removed the necessity for fishermen who have both a Northeast Region (NER) black sea bass permit and a Southeast Region (SER) snapper/grouper permit to relinquish their permits for a six-month period prior to fishing south of Cape Hatteras during the northern closure.

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

Addendum XII continued the use of a state-by-state allocation system, managed by the ASMFC on an annual coastwide commercial quota.

Addendum XIII modified the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass FMP so that Total Allowable Landings for summer flounder, scup, and/or black sea bass can be specified for up to three years.

Addendum XVI established guidelines for delayed implementation of management strategies.

Amendment 16 standardized bycatch reporting methodology.

Framework 7 built flexibility into process to define and update status determination criteria for each plan species.

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.

Addendum XX set policies to reconcile commercial quota overages to address minor inadvertent quota overages; streamlined the quota transfers process and established clear policies and administrative protocols to guide the allocation of transfers from states with underages to states with overages; allowed for commercial quota transfers to reconcile quota overages after a year's end.

Amendment 15 established annual catch limits and accountability measures.

Addendum XXI allowed more flexibility in setting recreational measures for the 2011 fishing year and proposed state-by-state or regional management measures for the 2011 black sea bass fishery.

Addendum XXII divided the recreational black sea bass coastwide allocations into state-by-state management for 2012 only.

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

Addendum XXIII established regional management for the 2013 recreational black sea bass fishery.

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

Amendment 17 implemented standardized bycatch reporting methodology.

Framework 8 allowed the black sea bass recreational fishery to begin on May 15 of each year, instead of May 19, to provide additional fishing opportunities.

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.

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.

Addendum XXX established 2018 recreational black sea bass management with options for regional allocations that require uniform regulations and other alternatives to the current North/South regional delineation (MA-NJ/DE-NC).

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 Council 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.

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.

Addendum XXXIII modifies the allocation of the coastwide black sea bass commercial quota among the states, which were originally implemented in 2003 through Amendment 13 and extended indefinitely through Addendum XIX. The revised allocation addresses the significant change in the distribution of black sea bass that have occurred since the original allocations were implemented in 2003.

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 and addendum 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 Cape Hatteras northward to the U.S.-Canadian border.

Goal and Objectives

The objectives for the Black Sea Bass FMP are to:

- Reduce fishing mortality in the black sea bass fisheries to assure that overfishing does not occur.
- Reduce fishing mortality on immature black sea bass to increase spawning stock biomass.
- Improve the yield from these fisheries.
- Promote compatible management regulations between state and federal jurisdictions.
- Promote uniform and effective enforcement of regulations.
- Minimize regulations to achieve the management objectives stated above.

The 2011 Omnibus Amendment contains Amendment 15 to the Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass FMP. The amendment is intended to formalize the process of addressing scientific and management uncertainty when setting catch limits for the upcoming fishing year(s) and to establish a comprehensive system of accountability for catch (including both landings and discards) relative to those limits, for each of the managed resources subject to this requirement. Specifically: (1) Establish allowable biological catch control rules, (2) Establish a MAFMC risk policy, which is one variable needed for the allowable biological catch control rules, (3) Establish annual catch limits, (4) Establish a system of comprehensive accountability, which addresses all components of the catch, (5) Describe the process by which the performance of the annual catch limit and comprehensive accountability system will be reviewed, (6) Describe the process to modify the above objectives (1–5) in the future.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

Black sea bass are split into two stocks but together are found along the Atlantic coast from the Gulf of Maine to the Florida Keys. The northern stock is located from the Gulf of Maine to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina while the southern stock is located from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to the Florida Keys. Black sea bass have a unique life history in that they are protogynous hermaphrodites which means they begin life as female and then change to male once they reach age 2 to 5 or when they reach 9 to 13 inches in total length. During the spawning season, dominant males develop a large nuchal (nape of the neck) hump, whereas subordinate males do not and are typically smaller in size. Spawning for the northern stock typically occurs offshore on the inner continental shelf during the months from May to July. Juveniles and adults move nearshore during the summer. Seasonal migration is common for black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras). Black sea bass have a maximum age of 12 years. They are likely to stay near rock pilings, wrecks and jetties and prey on fish, crabs, mussels, and razor clams (Steimle 1999).

Stock Status

A management track assessment was peer reviewed in July 2024. The assessment updated a Woods Hole Assessment Model (WHAM) framework developed during the 2023 research track assessment. The assessment found that the black sea bass stock status has not changed and was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring.

Stock Assessment

A management track stock assessment for black sea bass was peer reviewed in June 2024. Spawning stock biomass in 2023 was estimated at about 2.19 times the target level, fishing mortality in 2023 was estimated to be 23% below the threshold level that defines overfishing, and recruitment has fluctuated over time. The estimated number of age 1 fish in 2023 is higher than the prior several years. Stock assessment reports can be found on the black sea bass page on the ASMFC website for further information.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

Commercial: 11-inch total length minimum size limit in Atlantic Ocean and internal coastal waters north of Cape Hatteras. Harvest periods are set by proclamation with variable harvest limits by gear and time-period to prevent landings from exceeding North Carolina's commercial quota [see most recent North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) proclamation].

Recreational: 13-inch total length minimum size limit and a 15-fish creel limit in Atlantic Ocean and internal coastal waters north of Cape Hatteras. The season had two harvest periods which were May 15 – September 30 and October 10 – December 31.

Commercial Fishery

All black sea bass landings are reported through the North Carolina Trip Ticket Program. In 2024 the majority of black sea bass landings from north of Cape Hatteras were from flounder trawls. Other gears that contributed to black sea bass landings were pots and hook-n-line (Figure 1). Landings have been variable throughout the years with landings declining after 2005 through 2012, then seeing landings increase through 2017, and then gradually decreasing through 2023. Landings in 2024 significantly increased from 2023 (Table 1; Figure 2). The low landings in 2012 and 2013 were partly due to shoaling at Oregon Inlet making passage by large vessels (such as trawlers) unsafe and the consequent transfer of large portions of North Carolina's black sea bass quota allocation to Virginia and other states. From 2014 through 2022, more ocean trawl vessels returned to North Carolina to land catches rather than transferring quota 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 black sea bass.

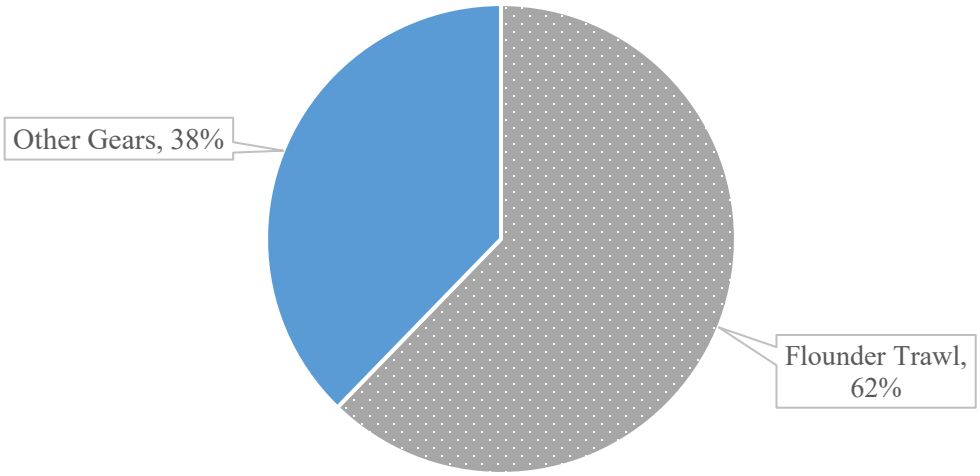

Figure 1. Commercial harvest of black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) in North Carolina by gear type in 2024. Note: data for Other Gears are confidential data.

Table 1. Recreational harvest (number of fish landed and weight in pounds) and releases (number of fish) and commercial harvest (weight in pounds) of black sea bass north of Cape Hatteras 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	2,955	149,347	6,224	241,538	247,762
2016	1,188	117,664	1,591	225,405	226,996
2017	23,720	152,491	33,421	388,865	422,286
2018	6,762	96,604	9,494	315,983	325,477
2019	6,268	159,129	11,638	279,008	290,646
2020	44,475	104,177	74,149	218,756	292,905
2021	4,171	252,992	6,564	200,565	207,129
2022	32,117	1,158,816	57,252	108,991	166,243
2023	79,355	447,190	132,616	61,906	194,522
2024	10,429	257,741	24,556	192,520	217,076
Mean	21,144	289,615	35,751	223,354	259,104

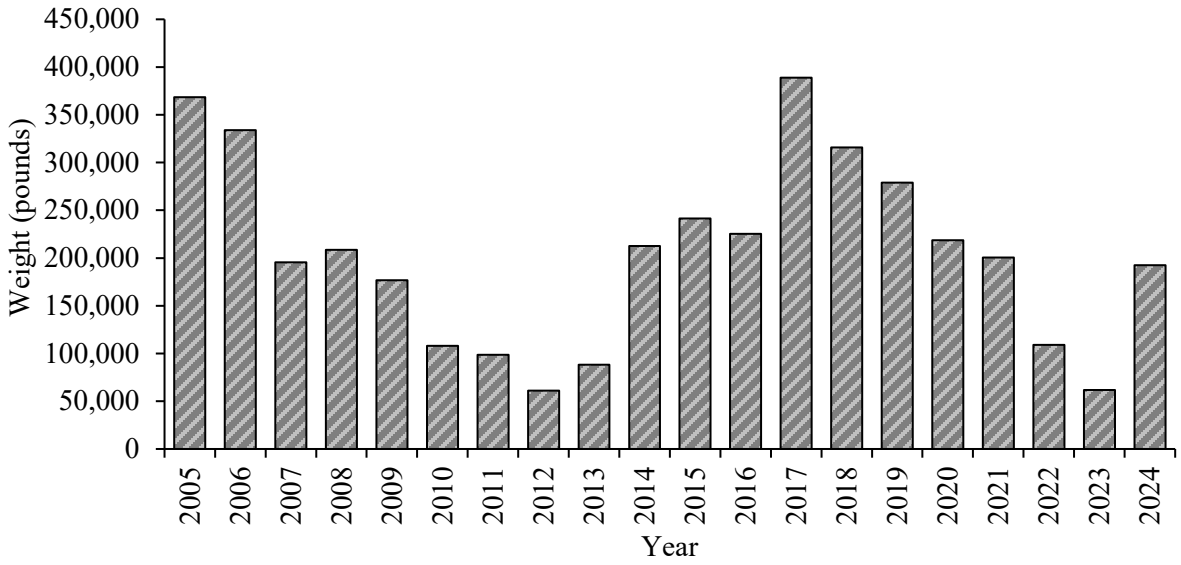

Figure 2. Annual commercial landings in pounds for black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) in North Carolina from 2005–2024.

Recreational Fishery

Recreational estimates across all years have been updated and are now based on the new National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey-based calibrated estimates. For more information on MRIP, see https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/recreational-fishing-data. All black sea bass harvest is reported through the NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program. Recreational harvest of black sea bass from north of Cape Hatteras has been variable since 1994 through 2019, above average harvest occurred in 2020, 2022, and 2023. Harvest in 2024 was lower and about average for the time series (2005–2024) (Table 1; Figure 3).

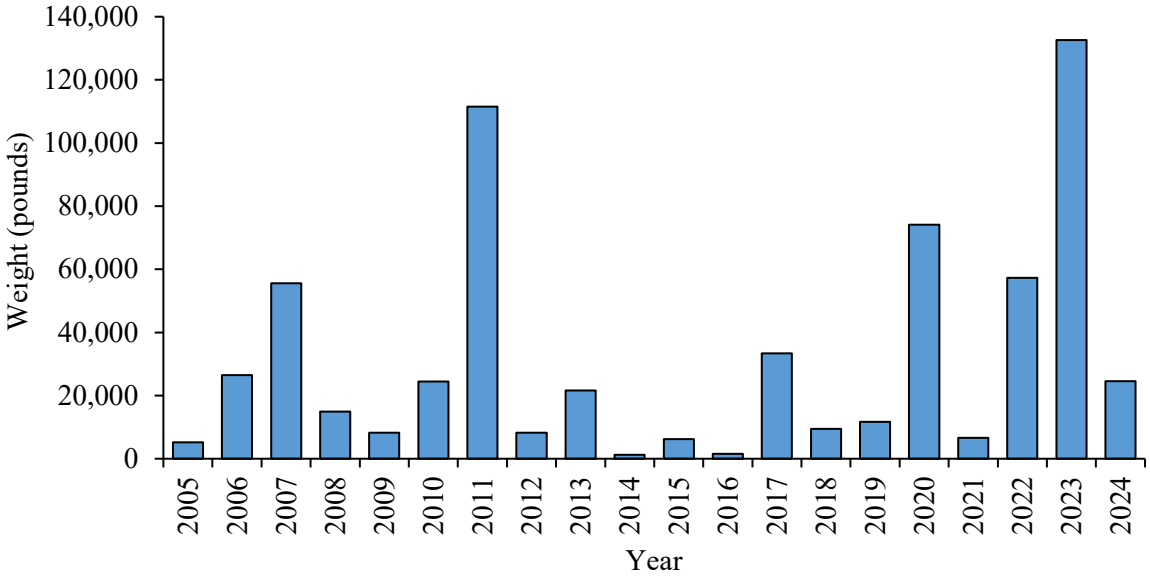

Figure 3. Annual recreational landings in pounds for black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) in North Carolina from 2005–2024.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

Two DMF sampling programs collect biological data on commercial and recreational fisheries that catch black sea bass north of Cape Hatteras. Program 433 (Ocean Trawl Fishery) is the primary program that collects harvest length data. Additionally, Program 438 (Offshore Live Bottom Fishery) collects harvest length data when black sea bass are landed from using pots, but this gear is not as prevalent as the flounder trawl. Other commercial sampling programs focusing on fisheries that do not target black sea bass rarely collect biological data. DMF sampling of the recreational fishery occurs through the NOAA Marine Recreational Information Program which collects harvest and length data.

There were no clear trends in commercial length data from 2014 through 2024. Annual mean lengths were fairly consistent for the time-series (1994–2024). The number of measurements collected totaled 2,977 in 2024 from the ocean trawl fishery (Table 2). Otoliths have been collected opportunistically from commercial fisheries since 2013, although these data are not currently used in the coastwide stock assessments.

Table 2. Black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) length (total length, inches) data from commercial fish house ocean trawl samples in North Carolina, 2015–2024.

Year	Mean Length	Minimum Length	Maximum Length	Total Number Measured
2015	15	9	24	7,192
2016	16	9	28	6,526
2017	16	10	24	5,372
2018	16	10	29	6,247
2019	15	9	24	4,124
2020	15	9	23	3,244
2021	16	10	24	3,542
2022	15	11	23	1,529
2023	16	12	24	707
2024	15	11	23	2,977

Length data in the recreational fishery was variable and sample size has been low through 2024. Mean lengths have been variable, ranging from 13 to 17 inches (Table 3). Age data were not collected for black sea bass north of Cape Hatteras from recreational fisheries.

Table 3. Black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) 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	17	13	17	5
2016	14	12	21	16
2017	13	12	17	11
2018	14	13	21	23
2019	17	12	21	32
2020	15	9	21	52
2021	16	13	20	22
2022	15	12	20	35
2023	14	12	22	25
2024	16	12	20	17

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

DMF independent sampling programs rarely encounter black sea bass north of Cape Hatteras and the few fish that are encountered are mostly from Program 120 (Estuarine Trawl Survey) and from Program 195 (Pamlico Sound Survey), which collect samples of black sea bass juveniles from inshore estuarine waters. However, it is not clear that samples collected inshore north of Cape Hatteras are from the northern or southern stock of black sea bass; this combined with the small sample numbers means that these data cannot be used in an abundance index. DMF currently does not have independent sampling programs in Atlantic Ocean waters north of Cape Hatteras.

RESEARCH NEEDS

- Expand on previous genetic studies with smaller spatial increments in sampling. — Progress unknown at this time
- Consider the impact of climate change on black sea bass, particularly in the Gulf of Maine. — Progress unknown at this time
- Evaluate population sex change and sex ratio, particularly comparing dynamics among communities. — Progress unknown at this time
- Study black sea bass catchability in a variety of survey gear types. — Progress unknown at this time
- Investigate and document social and spawning dynamics of black sea bass. — Progress unknown at this time
- Increase work to understand habitat use in sea bass and seasonal changes. — Progress unknown at this time
- Evaluate use of samples collected by industry study fleets. — Progress unknown at this time
- The panel recommended multiple age-structured models be evaluated for use in future models. Examples include a simple separable model with smoothing on F among years, a more complex, spatially structured model with 6-month time step within independent stock areas in spring and mixing in winter with natal homing, and tag return data in an age-structured assessment model. — Some progress has been made
- Continue and expand the tagging program to provide increased age information and increased resolution on mixing rates among putative populations. — Some progress has been made
- Continue and expand genetic studies to evaluate the potential of population structure north of Cape Hatteras. — Some progress has been made
- Continue research on rate, timing, and occurrence of sex-change in this species. Recent research findings discussed at the stock assessment review committee lead to the hypothesis that protogyny is not obligate in this species – some individuals may never have been female before maturing as a male. — Research is ongoing
- The validity of the age data used in the assessment requires further evaluation, in particular the reliability of scale-based ageing needs to be determined. A scale-otolith intercalibration exercise might be of utility. — Some progress has been made

MANAGEMENT

Management of black sea bass (north of Cape Hatteras) has been based on results from NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) stock assessments. Since 2023, revised allocations have been

implemented and transitioned to catch-based allocations with 45 percent being commercial and 55 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 state and regional basis in state waters and coastwide basis in federal waters. The commercial quota is divided into state-by-state quotas. Projections based on stock assessments are used to set the coastwide quota level each year. Amendments to the FMP are undertaken as issues arise that require action.

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