FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE
BLUE CRAB
AUGUST 2026

STATUS OF THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Fishery Management Plan History

Original FMP Adoption:	December 1998	
Amendments:	Amendment 1	December 2004
	Amendment 2	November 2013
	Amendment 3	May 2020
Revisions:	Revision to Amendment 2	May 2016
	Revision to Amendment 3	May 2020 & May 2023
Supplements:	None	
Information Updates:	None	
Schedule Changes:	None	
Comprehensive Review:	2026	

The original North Carolina Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan (FMP) was adopted in December 1998 (NCDMF 1998). The plan adopted several management changes including: (1) requiring sinking lines to be used on all crab pot buoys, (2) prohibited commercial gears (except attended gill nets) in crab spawning sanctuaries March 1–August 31, (3) prohibited baiting peeler pots except with live legal-size male Blue Crabs, (4) repealed the exemption for culling peelers before reaching shore in the hard crab fishery, (5) prohibited the possession of white line peelers June 1–30, (6) changed the unattended pot rule from 10 days to 7 days, (7) prohibited setting pots in any navigation channel marked by State or Federal agencies, (8) modified crab pot area regulations to use depth instead of distance from shore, (9) implemented marking requirements for recreational pots, (10) defined collapsible traps as non-commercial gear, and (11) established a permit for shedding operations.

Amendment 1 was adopted in December 2004 (NCDMF 2004). The amendment implemented several management changes including: (1) established a 6.75-in maximum size limit for mature females from September 1 through April 30 if the spawner index fell below the threshold for two consecutive years, (2) established a 5.25-in maximum size limit for female peeler crabs from September 1 through April 30 if the spawner index fell below the threshold for two consecutive years, (3) prohibited the sale of white-line peelers but allow possession by licensed peeler operations and requiring white-line peelers to be kept separate from pink and red-line peelers, (4) extended the pot cleanup period by 9 days, (5) changed the unattended pot rule from 7 days to 5 days, (6) required a 4-in stretch mesh tail bag for crab trawls in western Pamlico Sound (including the Pamlico, Pungo, Bay, and Neuse rivers), (7) separated hard and peeler crab trawl landings on trip tickets, (8) modified channel net rule to incorporate limited Blue Crab bycatch provisions identical to those for shrimp trawls, (9) modified user conflict rule to resolve user conflicts on a regional basis, (10) allowed crab pots in all designated long haul areas in Hyde, Beaufort, and Pamlico counties, (11) modified the dates for designated crab pot areas from May 1–October 31 to June 1–November 30, (12) changed designated pot area boundary description to a standardized 6 ft depth contour in many areas, and (13) prohibited the use of trawls in designated pot areas.

Amendment 2 was adopted in November 2013 (NCDMF 2013). The amendment implemented several management changes including: (1) repealed the spawner index trigger (and associated maximum size limits for mature female and peeler Blue Crabs) and replaced it with adaptive management framework

based on the results of the annual Traffic Light Stock Assessment update, (2) opened long haul areas in the Pungo River to pots, (3) added Lower Broad Creek to non-pot areas in rule, (4) modified crab dredging rule to conform to current harvest management, (5) incorporated Pamlico Sound 4-in crab trawl line into rule, (6) redefined criteria for exempting escape rings in crab pots from the 1.5-in pot mesh size to un-baited pots and pots baited with a male crab, (7) repealed proclamation authority that allowed for the exemption of escape ring requirement to allow harvest of peeler crabs, (8) adopted the no trawl line in Pamlico Sound and Newport River boundary in rule as new boundary for areas where closure of escape rings to take small mature female crabs is allowed, (9) modified trawl nets rule to identify Pamlico, Back, and Core sounds as areas that can open to peeler trawling by proclamation, (10) modified rule to clearly state the intent of the exceptions, culling tolerance, and separation requirements for various crab categories, and (11) established proclamation authority to require terrapin excluders in crab pots and establish a framework for developing criteria and terrapin excluder specifications.

The North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) adaptive management strategy for Blue Crabs under Amendment 2 relied on the Traffic Light Stock Assessment to provide information on relative condition of the stock. The reference years (1987–2009) for assigning the signals in the Traffic Light Stock Assessment remained constant and the analysis was updated annually by July each year. The name of this analysis comes from assigning a color (red, yellow, or green) to categorize relative levels of different indicators for either a fish population or a fishery. The Traffic Light Stock Assessment effectively illustrates long-term trends in the population.

Based on results of the annual Traffic Light update with 2015 data, management action was required by the MFC. At its May 19, 2016, business meeting, the MFC was presented with several management options identified in the adaptive management framework in Amendment 2 to the N.C. Blue Crab FMP (NCDMF 2016). To improve the condition of the Blue Crab stock, the MFC adopted the following management measures: (1) require one additional escape ring in crab pots and one of the three escape rings must be located within one full mesh of the corner of the pot and within one full mesh of the bottom of the apron/stairs (divider) of the upper chamber of the pot; (2) eliminate the harvest of v-apron immature female hard crabs (excluding peeler crabs); and include v-apron immature female hard crabs in the culling tolerance; (3) prohibit the harvest of dark sponge crabs (brown and black) April 1–30 each year; and include dark sponge crabs in the culling tolerance; (4) lower the culling tolerance from 10% to 5% for all crabs, except mature females; and (5) prohibit the harvest of crabs with dredges except incidental to lawful oyster dredging as outlined in rule 15A NCAC 03L .0203(a)(2).

All adaptive management measures became effective June 6, 2016, except for the additional escape ring requirement which was postponed until January 15, 2017 (NCDMF 2016). This delay coincided with the annual pot closure period to allow fishermen time to modify pots. The above actions taken by the MFC are documented in the May 2016 Revision to Amendment 2 to the N.C. Blue Crab FMP (NCDMF 2016).

Comprehensive Review of the Blue Crab FMP was originally scheduled to begin in July 2018, but at its August 2016 business meeting, the MFC voted to begin the review immediately to assess the status of the Blue Crab stock and identify more comprehensive management strategies. Consequently, review of the Blue Crab FMP for development of Amendment 3 began in August 2016. The stock assessment was completed and accepted for management use, and Amendment 3 was adopted by the MFC at its February 19, 2020, business meeting (NCDMF 2020a). The amendment maintained measures implemented with the May 2016 Revision to the Blue Crab FMP and implemented several management changes including: 1) crab harvest and pot closure periods (January 1–31 north of the Highway 58 bridge to Emerald Isle and March 1–15 south of the Highway 58 bridge), 2), a 5-in minimum size limit for mature female crabs statewide, 3) replacing the annual Traffic Light Stock Assessment update with an adaptive management framework based on an interim update of the 2018 benchmark assessment, 4) removal of all cull ring exempted areas, 5) revised the boundaries for crab spawning sanctuaries in Drum Inlet and Barden Inlet and established new crab spawning sanctuaries in Beaufort, Bogue, Bear, Browns, New River, Topsail, Rich, Mason, Masonboro, Carolina Beach, Cape Fear River, Shallotte, Lockwoods Folly, and Tubbs inlets

with March 1–October 31 closure, 6) crab trawling prohibition in areas of the Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers where trawling for shrimp was prohibited, 7) crab bycatch allowance in oyster dredges reduced to 10% of the total weight of the combined oyster and crab catch or 100 lb, whichever is less, 8) adopted a framework to designate Diamondback Terrapin Management Areas, and 9) addressed water quality issues requiring partnering with other commissions and state agencies.

The Diamondback Terrapin Management Area (DTMA) framework in Amendment 3 contains the criteria required to identify areas of the state where terrapin excluder devices are required. Two DTMAs were established in May 2020 in Masonboro Sound and the lower Cape Fear River. This action, taken by the MFC, is documented in the May 2020 Revision to Amendment 3 to the N.C. Blue Crab FMP and implemented by Proclamation PT-1-2021 (NCDMF 2020b). These areas have documented terrapin populations and waterbody characteristics in which Diamondback Terrapins are susceptible to incidental capture. Beginning in March 2021, all pots in these areas are required to be modified with a North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) approved Diamondback Terrapin excluder device in each funnel March 1–October 31. The May 2023 revision to Amendment 3 to the Blue Crab FMP updated the approved list of terrapin excluder device types and sizes required or gear modifications to be used in crab pots fished within designated DTMAs implemented by proclamation PT-1-2024. The Blue Crab FMP, Amendments, and Revisions are available on the DMF website at: https://deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/managing-fisheries/fishery-management-plans#state-managed-species

Management Unit

The management unit includes the Blue Crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) and its fisheries in North Carolina coastal and joint waters.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of Amendment 3 to the North Carolina Blue Crab FMP is to manage the Blue Crab fishery to achieve a self-sustaining population that provides sustainable harvest using science-based decision-making processes. The following objectives will be used to achieve this goal:

- Implement management strategies that maintain/restore the Blue Crab spawning stock with multiple cohorts and adequate abundance to prevent recruitment overfishing.
- Restore, enhance, and protect habitat and environmental quality necessary to maintain or increase growth, survival, and reproduction of the Blue Crab population.
- Use biological, environmental, habitat, fishery, social, and economic data needed to effectively monitor and manage the Blue Crab fishery and its ecosystem impacts.
- Promote stewardship of the resource through increased public awareness regarding the status and management of the Blue Crab fishery, including practices that minimize bycatch and discard mortality.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STOCK

Biological Profile

The Blue Crab is common to all North Carolina coastal waters but are most abundant in the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds and their tributaries. Blue Crabs mature at approximately 12–18 months of age and have an average lifespan of 3 years with some living as long as 8 years (Fischler 1965; Johnson 2004; Rugolo et al. 1997). Mating occurs in brackish areas of the estuary and lower portions of rivers from late spring to early fall, and spawning occurs in high-salinity waters near ocean inlets from early summer to fall (Forward et al. 2003; Whitaker 2006). The first larval stage is carried offshore by ocean currents where several stages of development occur (Van Engel 1958; Epifanio 1995). Settlement of larval Blue Crabs occurs in the estuaries after winds and tides transport them through the inlets from the ocean. Once within the estuary, larval Blue Crabs settle in beds of submerged aquatic vegetation and other complex habitats, like salt marsh

and oyster shell, where they become juvenile Blue Crabs. Juvenile Blue Crabs gradually migrate to lower salinity waters in the upper estuaries and rivers to grow (molt) and mature (Etherington and Eggleston 2000). Molting is a process of growth in Blue Crabs that requires shedding the hard exoskeleton. Following each molt, the shell is soft for several hours until it hardens, during this time the crab is more vulnerable to predators. Juvenile and adult Blue Crabs typically eat what is available to them such as dead and live fish, crabs, shrimp, and shellfish (Laughlin 1982; Williams 1984; Hines et al. 1990; Cordero and Seitz 2014) and serve as food for predator species such as Striped Bass and Red Drum (Binion-Rock 2018). Male and female Blue Crabs are easily identified by the shape of the apron on their abdomen. A mature male crab is called a "jimmy" and is easily recognized by the blue shading on its shell and claws and a T-shaped apron on its underside. Female crabs are called "sooks" as adults and "she-crabs" when immature. The immature female apron is triangular-shaped and held tightly against the abdomen. The mature female's apron becomes rounded and can be easily pulled away from the body after the final molt. The "sponge crab" is a female that has an egg mass on its abdomen.

Stock Status

Results of the 2018 benchmark Blue Crab stock assessment (2016 terminal year) indicate the stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring (NCDMF 2018).

Stock Assessment

The 2018 benchmark Blue Crab stock assessment used a sex-specific two-stage model applied to available data to assess the status of North Carolina's Blue Crab stock for 1995–2016 (NCDMF 2018). Data were available from commercial fishery monitoring and several fishery-independent surveys (Program 100, Program 120, Program 195). Only hard crab landings were incorporated in the model, neither recreational nor soft/peeler landings were included, primarily due to their minimal contribution to the overall harvest. The two-stage model was developed based on the catch-survey analysis designed for species lacking information on the age structure of the population. The model synthesized information from multiple sources, tracked population dynamics of male and female recruits and fully recruited animals, estimated critical demographic and fishery parameters such as natural and fishing mortality, and thus, provided a comprehensive assessment of Blue Crab status in North Carolina. The hierarchical Bayesian approach was used to estimate model parameters, which can incorporate uncertainty associated with the data and model assumptions.

The model estimated an overall declining trend in catch, relative abundance indices, population size of both male and female recruits and fully recruited crabs, with a rebound starting in 2007 (Figure 1). Females had higher natural mortality estimates than males. The estimated fishing mortality remained high before 2007 and decreased by approximately 50% afterward (Figure 1).

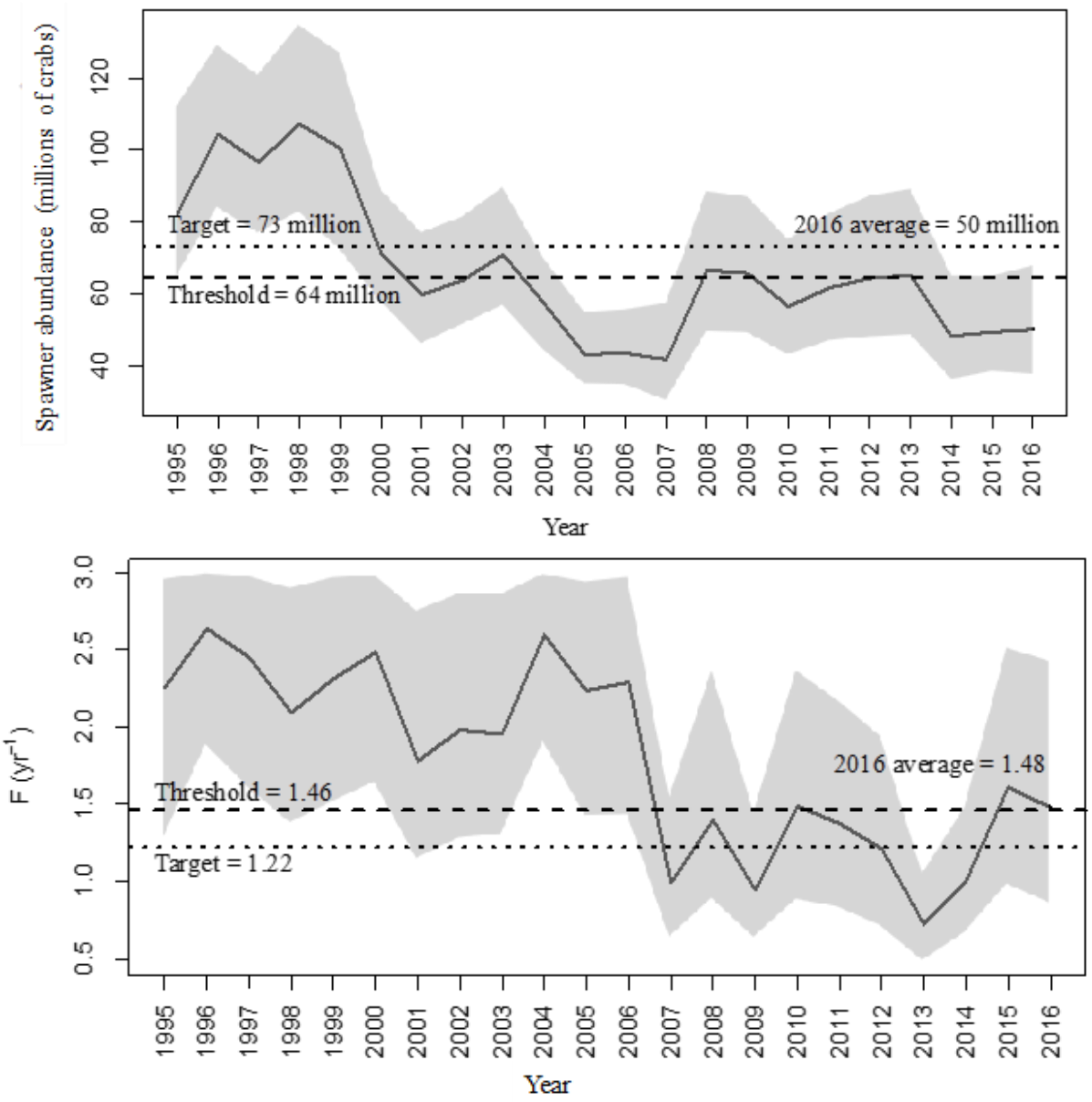


Figure 1. Estimated spawner abundance (mature female Blue Crabs; top) and fishing mortality (*F*; bottom) from the 2018 Blue Crab stock assessment (NCDMF 2018). The solid lines represent the posterior mean and the shaded area represents the 95% credible interval. The threshold and target values are the posterior means (dashed lines).

The status of the Blue Crab stock was evaluated using biological reference points (BRPs) based on maximum sustainable yield (MSY). The MSY-based BRPs have been widely used in fishery stock assessments including Blue Crabs, e.g., Chesapeake Bay 2001 (Miller et al. 2011), Florida 2007 (Murphy et al. 2007), and Gulf of Mexico 2013 assessments (VanderKooy 2013).

The fishing mortality that maximizes the total yield (FMSY) was set to be the threshold for overfishing, and 0.75 FMSY was set to be the target fishing mortality. The spawner abundance at FMSY (SPMSY) and 0.75 FMSY were set to be the threshold and target for an overfished population, respectively. In the stock assessment, the population is determined to be overfished if the average spawner abundance in 2016 falls below SPMSY and is determined to be undergoing overfishing if the average *F* in 2016 is above FMSY.

An update to the 2018 benchmark stock assessment for Blue Crab in North Carolina was completed in October 2023 (2022 terminal year). In the update, the magnitude and trends for estimated recruitment, female spawner abundance and fishing mortality were similar to those in the benchmark stock assessment. However, the estimated maximum sustainable yield-based reference points for both female spawner abundance and fishing mortality drastically changed. Given concerns with model specifications and results identified by the division and external peer reviewers, the 2023 stock assessment update is not being used to provide guidance on the level of harvest reduction needed to achieve sustainable harvest. A benchmark stock assessment is currently being conducted with an estimated completion date for late 2026.

The 2018 benchmark stock assessment report is available on the DMF website here.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

General Statutes

All management authority for North Carolina's Blue Crab fishery is vested in the State of North Carolina. Statutes that have been applied to the Blue Crab fishery include:

- Definitions relating to resources. G.S. 113-129
- Definitions relating to activities of public. G.S. 113-130
- Jurisdiction of fisheries agencies. G.S. 113-132
- It is unlawful for any person without the authority of the owner of the equipment to take fish from said equipment. G.S. 113-268(a)
- It is unlawful for any vessel in the navigable waters of the State to willfully, wantonly, and unnecessarily do injury to any seine, net or pot. G.S. 113-268(b)
- It is unlawful for any person to willfully destroy or injure any buoys, markers, stakes, nets, pots, or other devices or property lawfully set out in the open waters of the state in connection with any fishing or fishery. G.S. 113-268(c)

Marine Fisheries Commission Rules

The MFC has established several rules that directly govern the harvest of Blue Crabs. Below are rules and excerpts from rules that directly affect the Blue Crab fishery. The rules below do not cover all gear, area, or other rules which may impact the Blue Crab fishery. As regulations may change, please contact the DMF for the most current regulations.

Definitions

Blue crab shedding: The process whereby a Blue Crab emerges soft from its former hard exoskeleton. A shedding operation is any operation that holds peeler crabs in a controlled environment. A controlled environment provides and maintains throughout the shedding process one or more of the following: (i) food, (ii) predator protection, (iii) salinity, (iv) temperature controls, or (v) water circulation, utilizing technology not found in the natural environment. A shedding operation does not include transporting pink or red-line peeler crabs to a permitted shedding operation. 15A NCAC 03I .0101(2)(c).

Peeler crab: A Blue Crab that has a soft shell developing under a hard shell and having a white, pink, or red-line or rim on the outer edge of the back fin or flipper. 15A NCAC 03I .0101(2)(f).

Commercial fishing equipment or gear: All fishing equipment used in coastal fishing waters except: (i) cast nets; (ii) collapsible crab traps, a trap used for taking crabs with the largest open dimension no larger than 18 in and that by design is collapsed at all times when in the water, except when it is being retrieved from or lowered to the bottom; (iii) dip nets or scoops having a handle not more than 8 ft in length and a hoop or

frame to which the net is attached not exceeding 60 in along the perimeter; (iv) gigs or other pointed implements which are propelled by hand, whether or not the implement remains in the hand; (v) hand operated rakes no more than 12 in wide and weighing no more than 6 lb and hand operated tongs; (vi) hook and line and bait and line equipment other than multiple hook or multiple bait trotline; (vii) landing nets used to assist in taking fish when the initial and primary method of taking is by the use of hook and line; (viii) Minnow traps when no more than two are in use; (ix) seines less than 30 ft in length; (x) spears, Hawaiian slings or similar devices, that propel pointed implements by mechanical means, including elastic tubing or bands, pressurized gas or similar means. 15A NCAC 03I .0101(3)(c).

Mesh length: The diagonal distance from the inside of one knot to the outside of the other knot, when the net is stretched hand tight. 15A NCAC 03I .0101(3)(k).

Crab Harvest Restrictions

Hard crab minimum size limit of 5 in measured from tip of spike to tip of spike for all hard Blue Crabs. It is unlawful to possess mature female hard crabs with a dark (brown or black) sponge from April 1 through April 30 statewide. Juvenile female hard crabs may not be harvested. Soft crabs shall be separated where taken and placed in a separate container. Peeler crabs shall be separated where taken and placed in a separate container. White-line peeler crabs shall be separated from pink and red-line peeler crabs where taken and placed in a separate container. Male crabs to be used as peeler bait are exempt from the 5-in size limit from March 1 through October 31 and shall be placed in a separate container. A culling tolerance of not more than 5% by number shall be allowed for white-line peelers in the pink and red-line peeler container. It is unlawful to sell white-line peelers, possess white-line peelers unless they are to be used by the harvester in the harvester's permitted Blue Crab shedding operation, possess male white line peelers from June 1 through September 1. It is unlawful to possess more than 50 crabs per person per day not to exceed 100 Blue Crabs per vessel per day for recreational purposes. To comply with management measures in the N.C. Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan, the Director of the DMF, may by proclamation, close the harvest of Blue Crabs and may impose any or all the following restrictions on the commercial and recreational harvest of Blue Crab: specify, areas, season; time periods, means and methods, culling tolerance, and limit harvest based on size, quantity, sex, reproductive stage, or peeler stage. 15A NCAC 03L .0201.

From January 1 to January 31, it is unlawful to possess Blue Crabs taken from all Coastal Fishing Waters of the state north and east of a line extending southeast from the Highway 58 Bridge to a point offshore at 34° 36.3292’N, 77° 2.5940’W to the North Carolina/Virginia state line (15A NCAC 03R .0118(1)). From March 1 to March 15, it is unlawful to possess Blue Crabs taken from all Coastal Fishing Waters of the state south and west of a line extending southeast from the Highway 58 Bridge to a point offshore at 34° 36.3292’N, 77° 2.5940’W to the North Carolina/South Carolina state line (15A NCAC 03R .0118(2)). 15A NCAC 03L .0201 (a) and (b).

Spawning Sanctuaries

It is unlawful to set or use trawls, pots, and mechanical methods for oysters or clams or take crabs with the use of commercial fishing equipment from crab spawning sanctuaries from March 1 through August 31 for the crab spawning sanctuaries described in 15A NCAC 03R .0110(1) and from March 1 through October 31 for the crab spawning sanctuaries described in 15A NCAC 03R .0110(2). During the remainder of the year the Director may, by proclamation, close these areas and may impose any or all the following restrictions: areas, time periods, means and methods, and limit harvest based on size, quantity, sex, reproductive stage, or peeler stage. 15A NCAC 03L .0205. Proclamation M-13-2024 prohibits the use of trawls year-round within all Crab Spawning Sanctuaries in accordance with Amendment 2 to the N.C. Shrimp Fishery Management Plan.

Peeler and Soft Crabs

It is unlawful to possess more than 50 Blue Crabs in a shedding operation without first obtaining a Blue Crab Shedding Permit from the DMF. 15A NCAC 03O .0503(c).

Recreational Harvest

- Blue Crabs may be taken without a commercial license if the following gears are used; cast nets, collapsible crab traps with the largest open dimension no larger than 18 in, a dip net having a handle not more than 8 ft in length and a hoop or frame to which the net is attached not exceeding 60 in along the perimeter; single bait-and-line equipment, or seines less than 30 ft. 15A NCAC 03I .0101(3)(c)(i), (ii), (iii), (vi), and (ix).
- Recreational crab pot buoys must be any shade of hot pink in color, be no less than 5 in in diameter and length and be engraved with the owner's last name and initials. If a vessel is used the buoy must also be engraved with the gear owner's current motorboat registration number or owner's U.S. vessel documentation name. 15A NCAC 03J .0302(a)(1) and (2).
- It is unlawful for a person to use more than one crab pot attached to the shore along privately owned land or to a privately-owned pier without possessing a valid Recreational Commercial Gear License. 15A NCAC 03J .0302(b).
- Up to five crab pots may be used by holders of the Recreational Commercial Gear License. 15A NCAC 03O .0302(a)(3).
- Peeler pots are not permitted to be used by holders of the Recreational Commercial Gear License. 15A NCAC 03O .0302(a)(3).
- One multiple hook or multiple bait trotline up to 100 ft in length may be used to harvest Blue Crabs. 15A NCAC 03O .0302(a)(4).
- Trotlines must be marked at both ends with any shade of hot pink in color, be no less than 5 in in diameter and length, and be engraved with the owner's last name and initials. If a vessel is used the buoy must also be engraved with the gear owner's current motorboat registration number or owner's U.S. vessel documentation name. 15A NCAC 03J .0302.

Trawls

- It is unlawful to use trawl nets in designated pot areas opened to the use of pots within an area bound by the shoreline to the depth of 6 ft. 15A NCAC 03J .0104(b)(6).
- It is unlawful to use shrimp trawls for the taking of Blue Crabs in internal waters, except that it shall be permissible to take or possess Blue Crabs incidental to commercial shrimp trawling provided the weight of the crabs shall not exceed; 50% of the total weight of the combined crab and shrimp catch; or 300 lb, whichever is greater. For individuals using shrimp trawls authorized by a Recreational Commercial Gear License, 50 Blue Crabs, not to exceed 100 Blue Crabs if two or more Recreational Commercial Gear License holders are on board may be possessed. The Fisheries Director may, by proclamation, close any area to trawling for specific time periods in order to secure compliance with this rule. 15A NCAC 03J .0104(f)(1), (f)(2)(A), and (B), and (g).
- From December 1 through March 31, it is unlawful to possess finfish caught incidental to shrimp and crab trawling in the Atlantic Ocean unless the weight of the combined catch of shrimp and crabs exceeds the weight of finfish; except that trawlers working south of Bogue Inlet may keep up to 300 lb of kingfish, regardless of their shrimp or crab catch weight. 15A NCAC 03J .0202(5).
- It is unlawful to take or possess crabs aboard a vessel in internal waters except in areas and during such times as the Fisheries Director may specify by proclamation. 15A NCAC 03L .0202(a).
- It is unlawful to take crabs with crab trawls with a mesh less than 3 in, except in areas of western Pamlico Sound where the minimum mesh length is 4 in. The Director may, by proclamation, specify other areas for trawl mesh length and increase the minimum mesh length to no more than 4 in. 15A NCAC 3L .0202(b)(1) and (2).

- It is unlawful to use trawls with a mesh length less than 2 in or with a combined total headrope length exceeding 25 ft for taking soft or peeler crabs. 15A NCAC 03L .0202(c).
- It is unlawful to use trawl nets for any purpose in any of the special secondary nursery areas, except that the Fisheries Director, may, by proclamation, open any or all of the special secondary nursery areas, or any portion thereof to crab trawling from August 16 through May 14. 15A NCAC 03N .0105(b), 03R .0105, 03L .0100 and .0200.
- It is unlawful to use trawl nets in areas listed in 15A NCAC 03R .0106, except that certain areas may be opened to peeler trawling for single-rigged peeler trawls or double-rigged boats whose combined total headrope length does not exceed 25 ft. 15A NCAC 03J .0104(b)(4) and 03R .0106(1).

Crab Pots

- It is unlawful to leave pots in any coastal fishing waters for more than five consecutive days, when such pots are not being employed in fishing operations, except upon a timely and sufficient showing of hardship. 15A NCAC 03I .0105(b)(1), (b)(2)(A) and (B), (b)(3), and (c).
- From January 1–31, it is unlawful to use crab pots in Coastal Fishing Waters of the state north and east of a line extending southeast from the Highway 58 Bridge to a point offshore at 34° 36.3292'N, 77° 2.5940'W to the North Carolina/Virginia state line (15A NCAC 03R .0118(1)). From March 1–15, it is unlawful to use crab pots in Coastal Fishing Waters of the state south and west of a line extending southeast from the Highway 58 Bridge to a point offshore at 34° 36.3292'N, 77° 2.5940'W to the North Carolina/South Carolina state line (15A NCAC 03R .0118(2)). 15A NCAC 03J .0301 (a)(1)(a) and (b).
- From June 1 through November 30 the use of crab pots is restricted in certain areas north and east of the Highway 58 Bridge at Emerald Isle. These areas are described in 15A NCAC 03R .0107(a). To allow for the variable spatial distribution of crustacea and finfish, the Fisheries Director may, by proclamation, specify time periods for or designate the areas described in 15A NCAC 03R .0107(b); or any part thereof, for the use of pots. From May 1 through November 30 in the Atlantic Ocean and west and south of the Highway 58 Bridge at Emerald Isle in areas and during time periods designated by the Fisheries Director by proclamation.15A NCAC 03J .0301(a)(2)(A) and (B), (a)(3), and 03R .0107(a) and (b).
- It is unlawful to use pots in any navigation channel maintained and marked by State or Federal agencies. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(b)(1).
- It is unlawful to use pots in any turning basin maintained and marked by the North Carolina Ferry Division. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(b)(2).
- It is unlawful to use pots in a commercial fishing operation unless each pot is marked by attaching a floating buoy which shall be of solid foam or other solid buoyant material no less than 5 in in diameter and no less than 5 in in length. Buoys may be any color except any shade of yellow or any shade of hot pink, or any combination of colors that include any shade of yellow or any shade of hot pink. The pot owner's last name and initials shall be engraved on the attached buoy or identified by attaching engraved metal or plastic tags to the buoy. If a vessel is used, the identification shall include either the pot owners current motor boat registration number or vessel documentation name. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(c)(1) and (2)
- It is unlawful to use crab pots in coastal fishing waters unless each pot contains no less than three unobstructed escape rings that are at least 2 $^{5}/_{16}$ in inside diameter and two must be located in the opposite outside panels of the upper chamber of the pot and at least one must be located within one full mesh of the corner and one full mesh of the bottom of the divider in the upper chamber of the pot except: unbaited pots, pots baited with a male crab 15A NCAC 03J .0301(g).
- It is unlawful to use more than 150 pots per vessel in the Newport River. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(i).

- It is unlawful to remove crab pots from the water or remove crabs from pots between 1 h after sunset and 1 h before sunrise. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(j).
- It is unlawful to use pots to take crabs unless the line connecting the pot to the buoy is non-floating. 15A NCAC 03J .0301(k).

Crab Dredging

- It is unlawful to take Blue Crabs with dredges except incidental to lawful oyster dredging operations provided the weight of the crabs does not exceed 10% of the total weight of the combined oyster and crab catch or 100 lb, whichever is less. 15A NCAC 03L .0203 (1) & (2)

Diamondback Terrapin Management Areas

- For areas described in Proclamation PT-1-2024 including the Masonboro Island and Bald Head Island areas, from March 1 through October 31 it is unlawful to set or use crab pots without the correct use of Division of Marine Fisheries Approved Diamondback Terrapin Bycatch Reduction Devices. PT-1-2024.

Miscellaneous

- It is unlawful to possess, sell, or purchase fish under 4 in in length except for use as bait in the crab pot fishery in North Carolina with the following provision: such crab pot bait shall not be transported west of U.S. Interstate 95 and when transported, shall be accompanied by documentation showing the name and address of the shipper, the name and address of the consignee, and the total weight of the shipment. 15A NCAC 03M .0103(1).

Wildlife Resources Commission Rules

Blue Crab 15A NCAC 10C .0413

- Blue Crabs shall have a minimum carapace width (CW) of 5 in (point to point) and it is unlawful to possess more than 50 crabs per person per day or to exceed 100 crabs per vessel per day. 15A NCAC 10C .0413(a)(b).
- There is no closed season. 15A NCAC 10C .0413(c)
- Blue Crabs shall not be sold. 15A NCAC 10C .0413 (d).

Taking Nongame Fishes By Special Device For Bait Or Personal Consumption 15A NCAC 10C .0402

- A single, multiple bait line for taking crabs not to exceed 100 ft in length, marked on each end with a solid float no less than 5 in in diameter, bearing legible identification of the user's name and address, and under the immediate control and attendance of the person using the device, with a limit of one line per person and no more than one line per vessel. 15A NCAC 10C .0402(b)(12).
- A collapsible crab trap with the largest open dimension not greater than 18 in, and that by design is collapsed at all times when in the water, except when being retrieved or lowered to the bottom, with a limit of one trap per person. 15A NCAC 10C .0402(b)(13).
- It is unlawful to sell nongame fishes or aquatic animals. 15A NCAC 10C .0402(c).

Special Devices 15A NCAC 10C .0404

- It is unlawful to use crab pots in inland fishing waters, except by persons owning property adjacent to the inland fishing waters of coastal rivers and their tributaries who are permitted to set two crab pots to be attached to their property and not subject to special device license requirements. 15A NCAC 10C .0404(e).

Commercial Fishery

Since 1994, the North Carolina Trip Ticket Program (NCTTP) has collected data on the commercial harvest of Blue Crab. Commercial Blue Crab landings (hard, soft, and peeler crabs) averaged 36.6 million lb for the period 1995–2016 (benchmark stock assessment years; Table 1). Generally, commercial Blue Crab landings have been lower since around 1996 with a high of 67.1 million lb harvested to a low of 9.5 million lb in 2022. In 2025 the commercial landings decreased to 15.8 million lb. The 2025 landings were 17.2% lower than 2024s 19 million lb and 51.6% lower than the 39-year average (Table 1; Figure 2A). The number of trips recorded in 2025 decreased to 30,029, which is 5.21% lower than in 2024 but 55.4% lower than the 39-year average (Figure 2B). Crab pots account for nearly all commercial Blue Crab landings (98.32% in 2025) followed by crab/peeler trawls (0.92% in 2025), peeler pots (0.75% in 2025), and other gears, including gill nets and shrimp trawls (<0.1% in 2025; Figure 3). Most crabs landed in 2025 were hard crabs (98.24%), followed by peeler (1.5%) and soft (0.26%) crabs (Figure 4).

Table 1. Blue Crab recreational harvest and releases (Recreational Mail Survey) and commercial harvest (North Carolina Trip Ticket Program), 1987–2025. Recreational harvest weight is calculated using a standard conversion of three crabs per pound. *2023–2024 recreational data not available.

Year	Recreational			Commercial	
	Number Landed	Number Released	Weight Landed (lb)	Weight Landed (lb)	Total Weight Landed (lb)
1987				32,423,604	32,423,604
1988				35,604,423	35,604,423
1989				34,724,673	34,724,673
1990				38,070,328	38,070,328
1991				41,829,676	41,829,676
1992				41,068,374	47,068,374
1993				43,672,732	43,672,732
1994				53,513,124	53,513,124
1995				46,443,653	46,443,541
1996				67,080,200	67,080,200
1997				56,090,109	56,090,109
1998				62,076,170	62,076,171
1999				57,545,843	57,546,676
2000				40,638,384	40,638,384
2001				32,179,345	32,180,390
2002				37,736,319	37,736,319
2003				42,769,797	42,769,797
2004				34,130,739	34,130,608
2005				25,430,119	25,430,119
2006				25,343,158	25,343,158
2007				21,424,960	21,424,960
2008				32,916,691	32,916,691
2009				29,707,232	29,707,232
2010				30,683,011	30,683,011
2011	114,426	81,763	38,142	30,035,392	30,073,534
2012	120,979	79,072	40,326	26,785,669	26,825,995
2013	94,174	61,452	31,391	22,202,623	22,234,014
2014	100,597	67,413	33,532	26,231,112	26,264,644
2015	71,587	60,135	23,862	32,099,633	32,150,905
2016	72,645	82,781	24,215	25,462,943	25,491,033
2017	72,645	67,667	24,215	19,263,758	19,297,371
2018	47,766	57,024	15,922	17,015,659	17,028,276
2019	81,815	78,784	27,272	23,027,008	23,014,642
2020	78,646	78,742	26,215	13,548,381	13,575,299
2021	48,675	42,561	16,225	12,819,840	12,806,644
2022	72,910	37,768	24,303	9,509,242	9,531,991
2023*				15,738,994	15,738,994
2024*				19,080,864	19,080,864
2025	71,109	24,182	23,703	15,791,563	15,815,266
Mean	80,613	63,026	26871.13	32,608,086	32,770,097

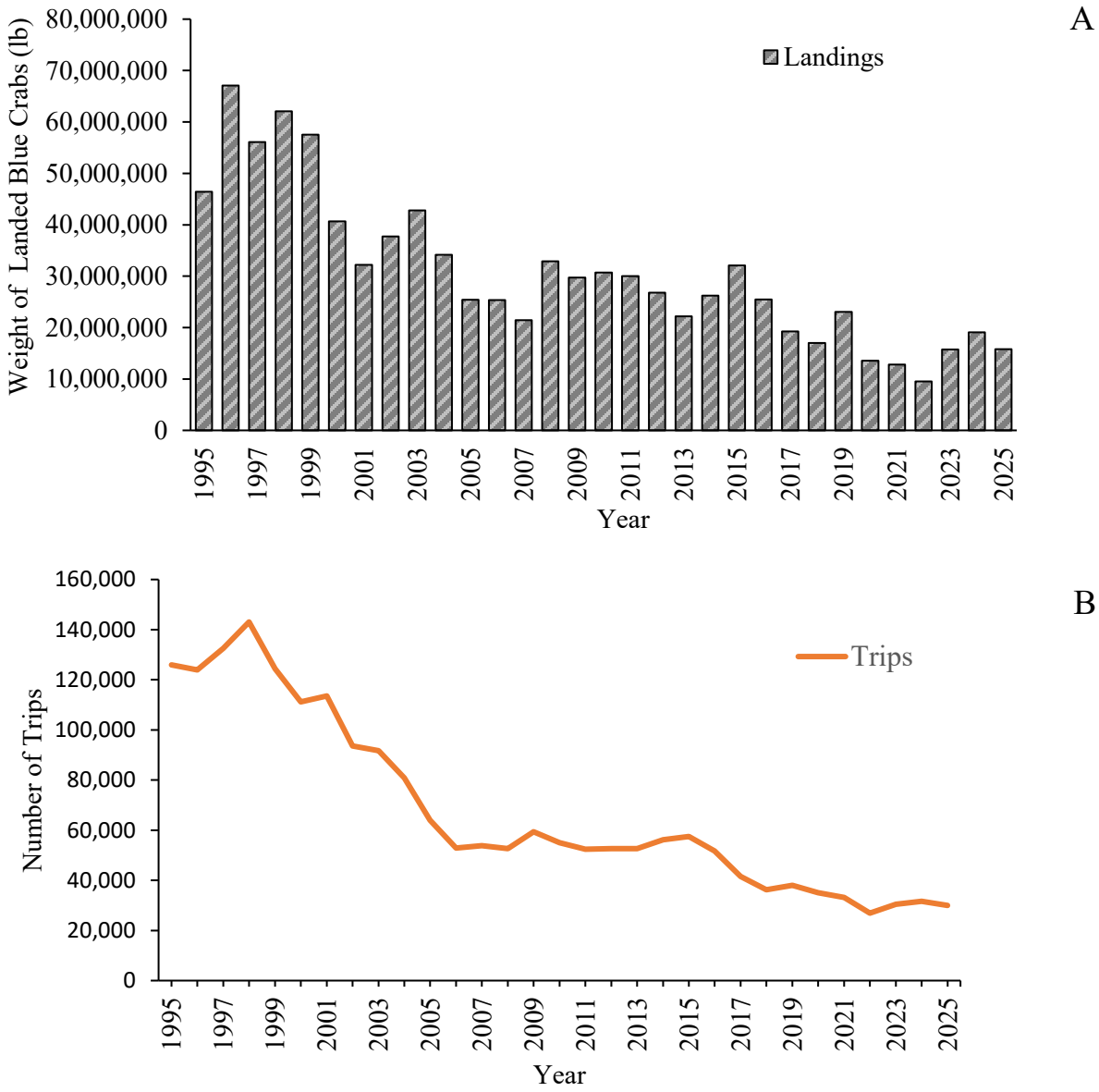


Figure 2. Annual Blue Crab commercial landings include combination of hard, soft, and peeler crabs (A) and number of trips (B), 1995–2025. Information derived from North Carolina Trip Ticket Program.

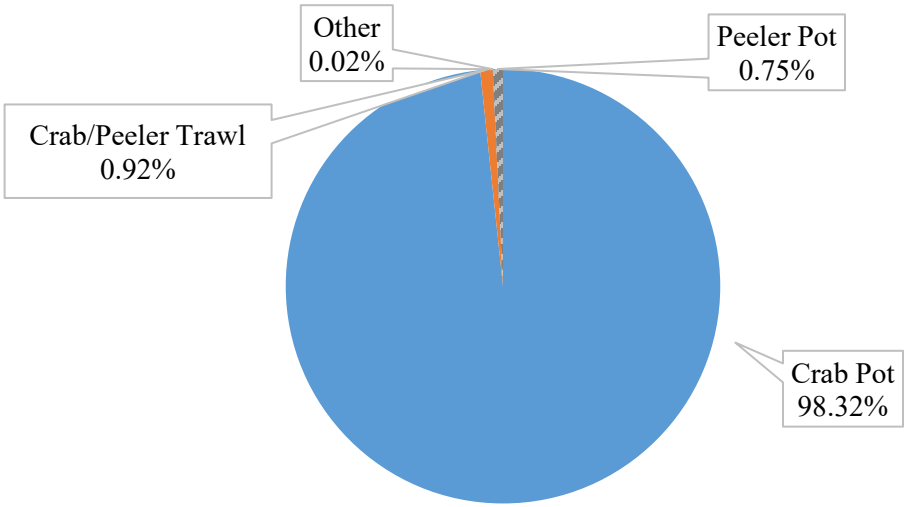


Figure 3. Commercial harvest (lb) of Blue Crab by gear, 2025.

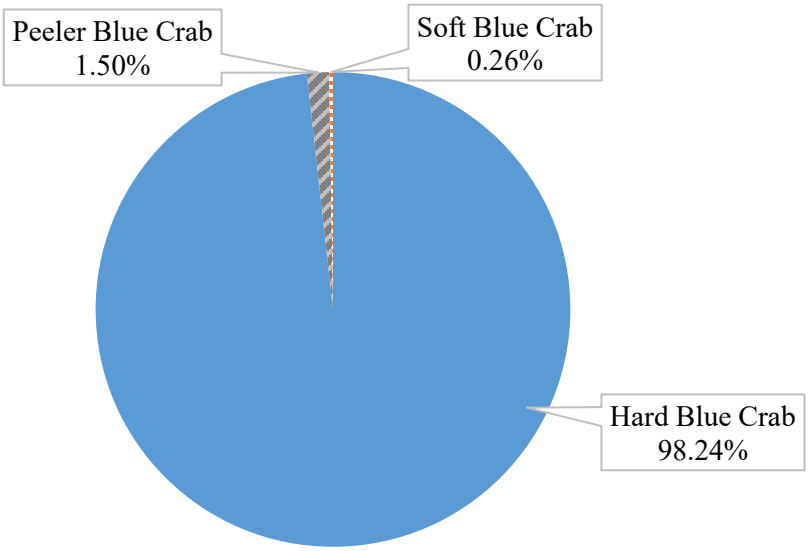


Figure 4. Commercial harvest (lb) of Blue Crab by crab type, 2025.

Recreational Fishery

A survey of Recreational Commercial Gear License (RCGL) holders conducted during 2002–2008 by the division indicated Blue Crabs were the most abundant species landed (by weight) by RCGL participants. During this time, on average, Blue Crabs accounted for 20% (116,797 lb) of the total poundage (587,172 lb) of all species landed by RCGL holders. This survey was discontinued in 2009 due to lack of funding; meaning more recent estimates of RCGL harvest are unavailable. The harvest of RCGL exempted shore and pier-based pots, as well as other non-commercial gear is unknown.

The Marine Recreational Information Program is primarily designed to sample anglers using rod and reel as the mode of capture. Since Blue Crab are also harvested recreationally throughout coastal North Carolina, primarily by pots, this program does not provide precise estimates of recreational harvest. To address this, the division began a mail survey of Coastal Recreational Fishing License (CRFL) holders in the fall of 2010

to generate recreational harvest estimates for Blue Crab. One weakness of the survey is that a CRFL is not required to harvest Blue Crab, so harvest from the recreational sector is likely underestimated. Full year results from this survey are available for 2011–2022 and 2025 (Table 1; Figure 5). In 2023, a new licensing system was implemented and the license database was restructured. This disrupted the division's ability to query the full license dataset to establish a sampling frame of eligible anglers for the mail surveys. As a result, the division was unable to administer the mail surveys and expand potential responses for 2023 and 2024. Survey results were able to be obtained for 2025 with estimated recreational landings of 71,109 Blue Crabs (approximately 23,703 lb, using an average of three crabs per pound). Generally, recreational Blue Crab harvest estimates are low, ranging from 47,766 Blue Crabs (approximately 15,922 lb) in 2018 to 120,979 Blue Crabs (approximately 40,326 lb) in 2012. During 2011–2025, the average annual recreational harvest of Blue Crab was 80,613 Blue Crabs (approximately 26,871 lb).

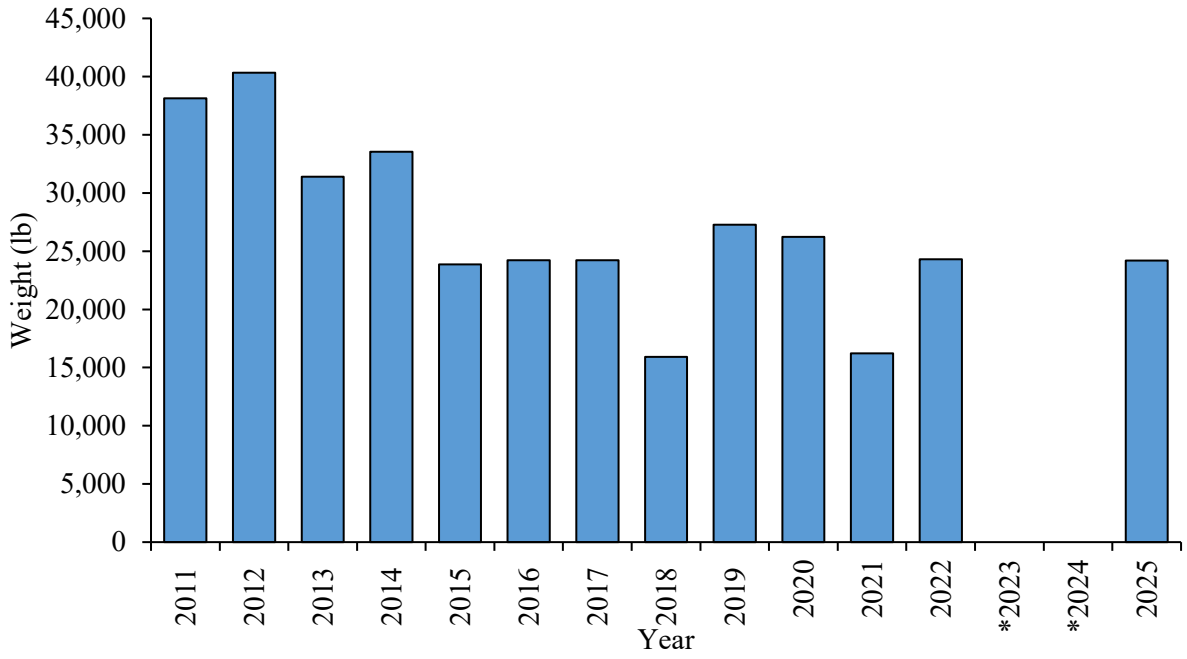


Figure 5. Annual Blue Crab recreational harvest, 2011–2025. Recreational mail survey began in October 2010 with the first full year of data available for 2011. *2023–2024 Recreational data not available.

MONITORING PROGRAM DATA

Fishery-Dependent Monitoring

The number of Blue Crab lengths obtained from fishery-dependent sources from 2015 through 2025 ranged from 7,330 in 2020 to 14,711 in 2015 (Table 2). CW from 7,594 harvested Blue Crabs were measured in 2025, made up from hard (6,809) and peeler (785) crabs. Mean CW has varied little and ranged from 5.6 to 5.9 in. Minimum CW ranged from 1.9 to 3.9 in. Maximum CW ranged from 7.8 to 9.0 in. In general, the commercial fishery harvests a narrow size range of hard Blue Crabs, with most crabs ranging from 4.5 to 7 in CW. The length composition and modal length of hard Blue Crabs caught in the commercial fishery has varied little over time (Figure 6).

The annual length of 50% maturity is compared to the mean from the stock assessment years of 1995–2016 (113.4 mm CW [4.5 in]). In 2025, the length of 50% maturity was 128.7 mm CW (5.07 in), and remaining above the mean for the stock assessment years (Figure 7). With no P195 sampling occurring in 2025 it was not included in the L50 for this year.

Table 2. Blue Crab length (CW, in) data from commercial fish house samples, 2015–2025.

Year	Mean CW	Minimum CW	Maximum CW	Total Number Measured
2015	5.8	2.2	9.0	14,711
2016	5.8	3.5	9.0	13,456
2017	5.8	3.6	8.1	10.105
2018	5.8	3.7	8.1	7,771
2019	5.7	3.9	8.4	11,844
2020	5.6	1.9	7.9	7,832
2021	5.7	3.3	7.8	10,438
2022	5.9	3.6	8.7	7,330
2023	5.9	2.6	8.3	8,660
2024	5.9	2.6	8.3	8,841
2025	5.8	2.9	8.3	7,594

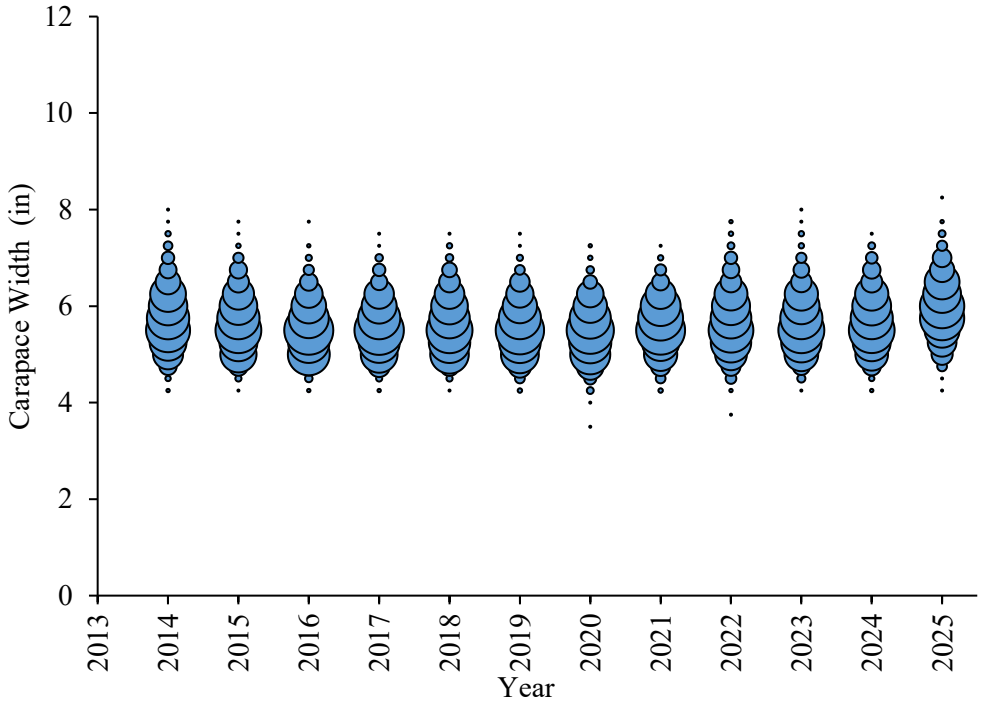


Figure 6. Commercial length frequency of hard Blue Crab harvested, 2015–2025. Bubbles represent crabs at length and the bubble size is proportional to the number of crabs at that length.

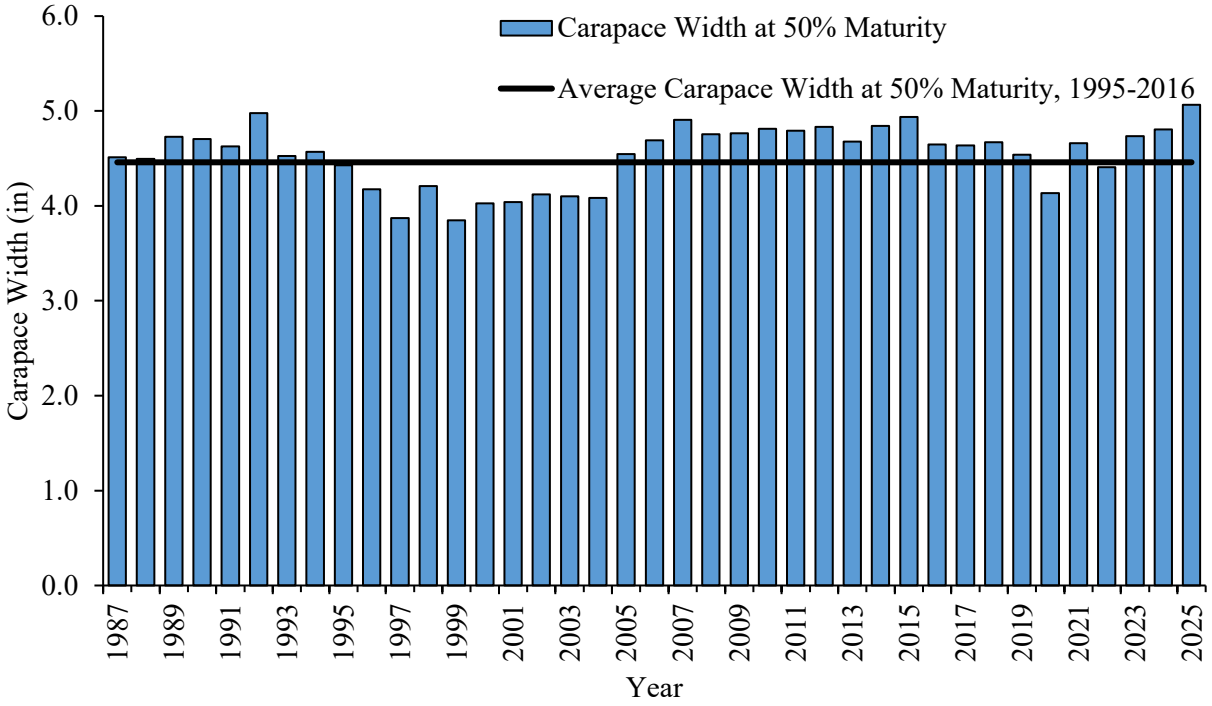


Figure 7. Length at 50% maturity for female Blue Crabs, 1987–2025, compared to stock assessment years, 1995–2016. Fishery-dependent and independent data were included in the analysis.

Fishery-Independent Monitoring

The Blue Crab stock assessment uses several fishery-independent indices for the recruit and fully recruited indices, including the Estuarine Trawl Survey (Program 120), the Pamlico Sound Survey (Program 195), and the Juvenile Anadromous Trawl Survey (Program 100). The base years used for the 2018 Blue Crab stock assessment were 1995–2016.

Recruit Abundance

The recruit indices use data from the Estuarine Trawl Survey (Program 120) and the Pamlico Sound Survey (Program 195) to monitor Blue Crab recruit abundance. Each index consists of Blue Crabs less than 127-mm CW (5.0 in). Two indices are derived from Program 120: a male recruit index and a female recruit index (Figure 8). Four recruit indices are derived from Program 195: June indices by sex and September indices by sex (Figures 9 and 10).

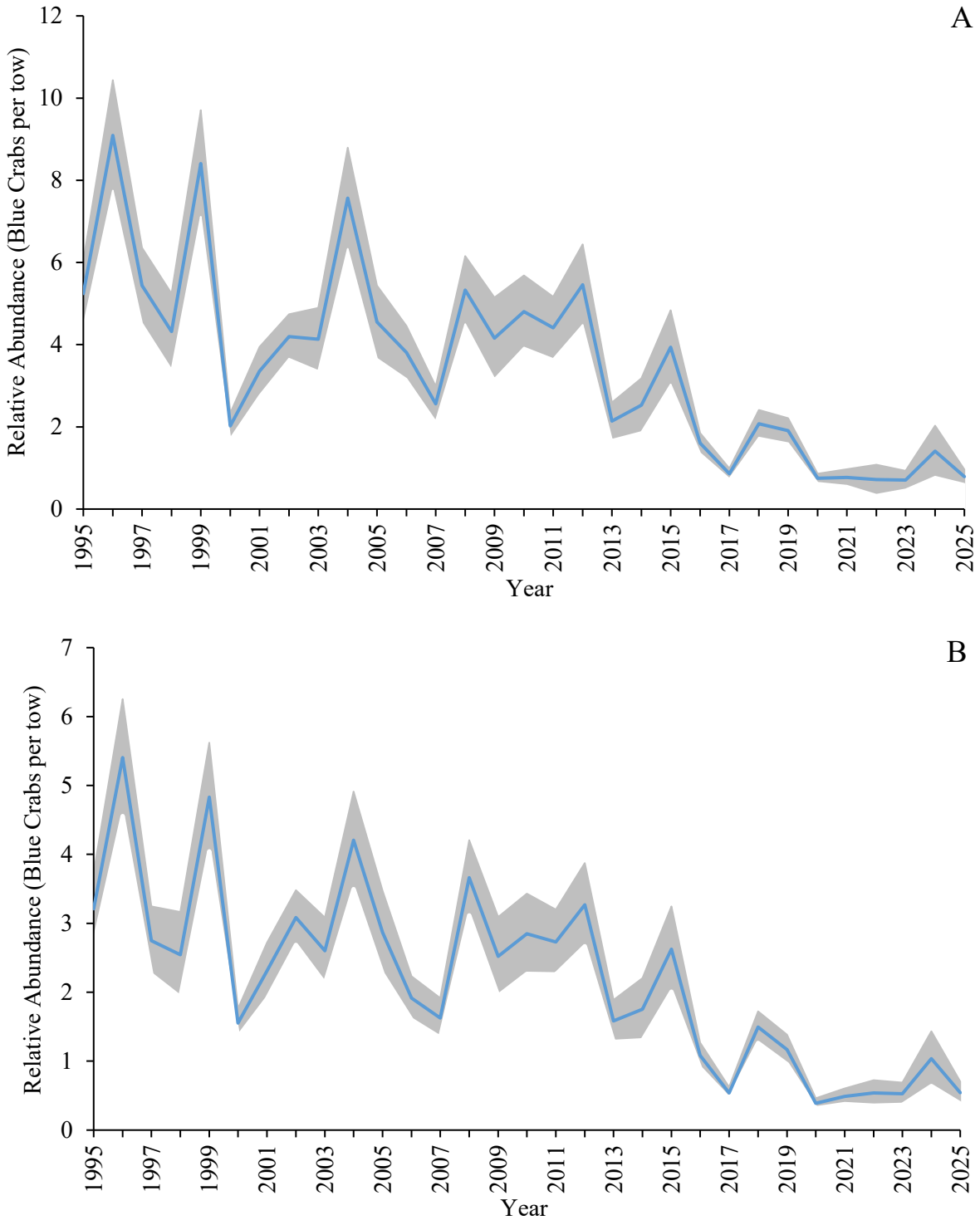


Figure 8. Nominal index of recruit Blue Crab relative abundance (<127 mm CW) captured in Program 120 in May and June by male (A) and female (B), 1995–2025.

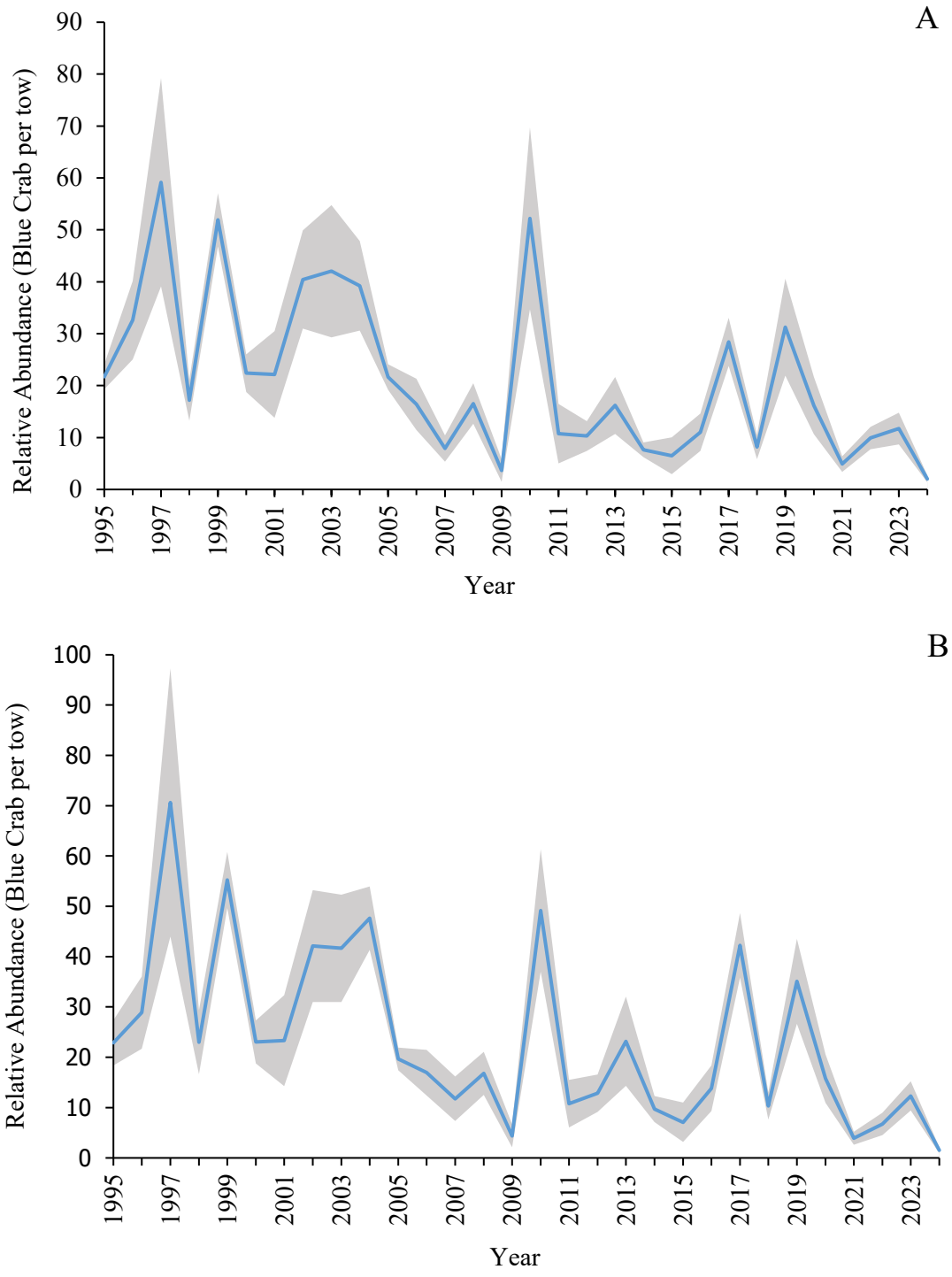


Figure 9. Nominal index of recruit Blue Crab relative abundance (<127 mm, 5 in, CW) captured in Program 195 by June male (A), June female (B), 1995–2024 for all strata combined [Note: in 2020 and 2021 less than 54 stations were sampled and in 2025 no sampling occurred].

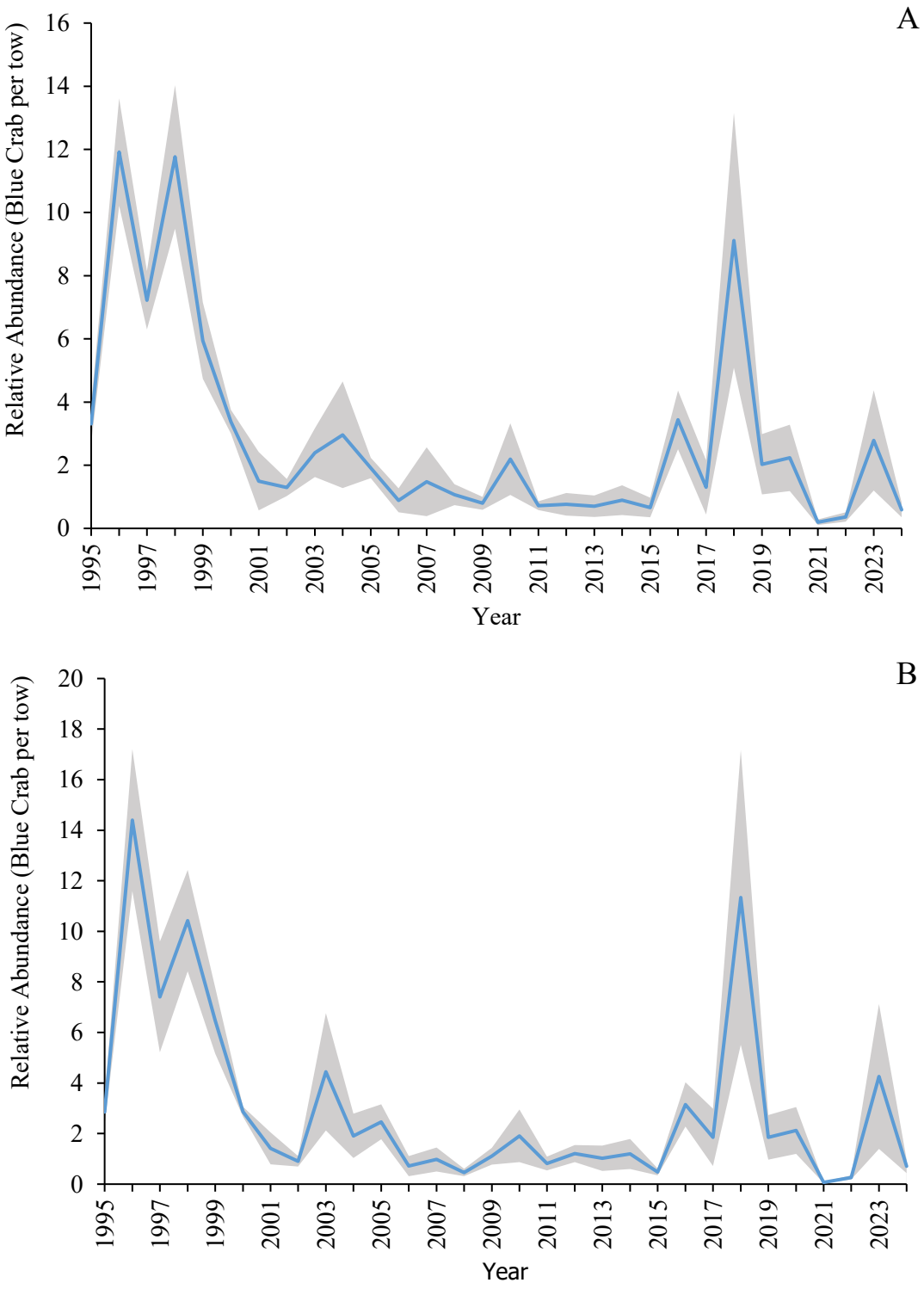


Figure 10. Nominal index of recruit Blue Crab relative abundance (<127 mm, 5 in, CW) captured in Program 195 by September male (A), September female (B), 1995–2024 for all strata combined [Note: 2018 September sampling was conducted in October, in 2020 and 2021 less than 54 stations were sampled in both months, and in 2025 no sampling occurred].

Male recruit abundance in Program 120 has been below the stock assessment years' mean (4.5 crabs/tow) since 2012 when relative abundance was 5.5 crabs/tow (Figure 8A). Female recruit abundance has also been below the stock assessment years' mean (2.8 crabs/tow) since 2012 (3.3 crabs/tow; Figure 8B). In 2025, male recruit abundance decreased from 2024 to 0.8 crabs/tow. The lowest female recruit abundance was in 2020 at 0.4 crabs/tow. In 2025, female recruit abundance decreased to 0.5 crabs/tow.

Recruit abundance for Program 195 varies greatly from year to year. In 2025, DMF's research vessel the Carolina Coast was ruled disabled and sampling for Program 195 did not occur in either the summer or fall. In June 2024, male recruit abundance was observed at 2.0 crabs/tow becoming the lowest in the time series (Figure 9A). In June 2024, female recruit abundance was 1.5 crabs/tow, also the lowest level of the time series (Figure 9B).

In September 2024, both male and female recruit abundance decreased compared to previous years sampling, however abundance remained higher than the time series lows in 2021. Male recruit abundance decreased to 5.9 crabs/tow and female recruit abundance decreased to 0.7 crabs/tow in 2024. It should be noted the COVID pandemic impacted sampling in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, sampling was limited to 28 stations sampled in June and 35 stations sampled in September. A total of 35 stations were sampled in June 2021, and 32 stations were sampled in September 2021. Limited sampling likely impacted abundance indices calculated from Sound Survey data in these years in addition to no 2025 sampling being conducted for P195.

Fully Recruited Abundance

The adult indices include data from the Juvenile Anadromous Trawl Survey (Program 100) and the Pamlico Sound Survey (Program 195). Indices consist of Blue Crabs greater than or equal to 127 mm CW (5.0 in). Four indices are derived from Program 100, a male fully recruited index and a female fully recruited index by season (summer and fall; Figures 11 and 12). Program 195 is also used to derive June fully recruited indices by sex and September fully recruited indices by sex (Figures 13 and 14).

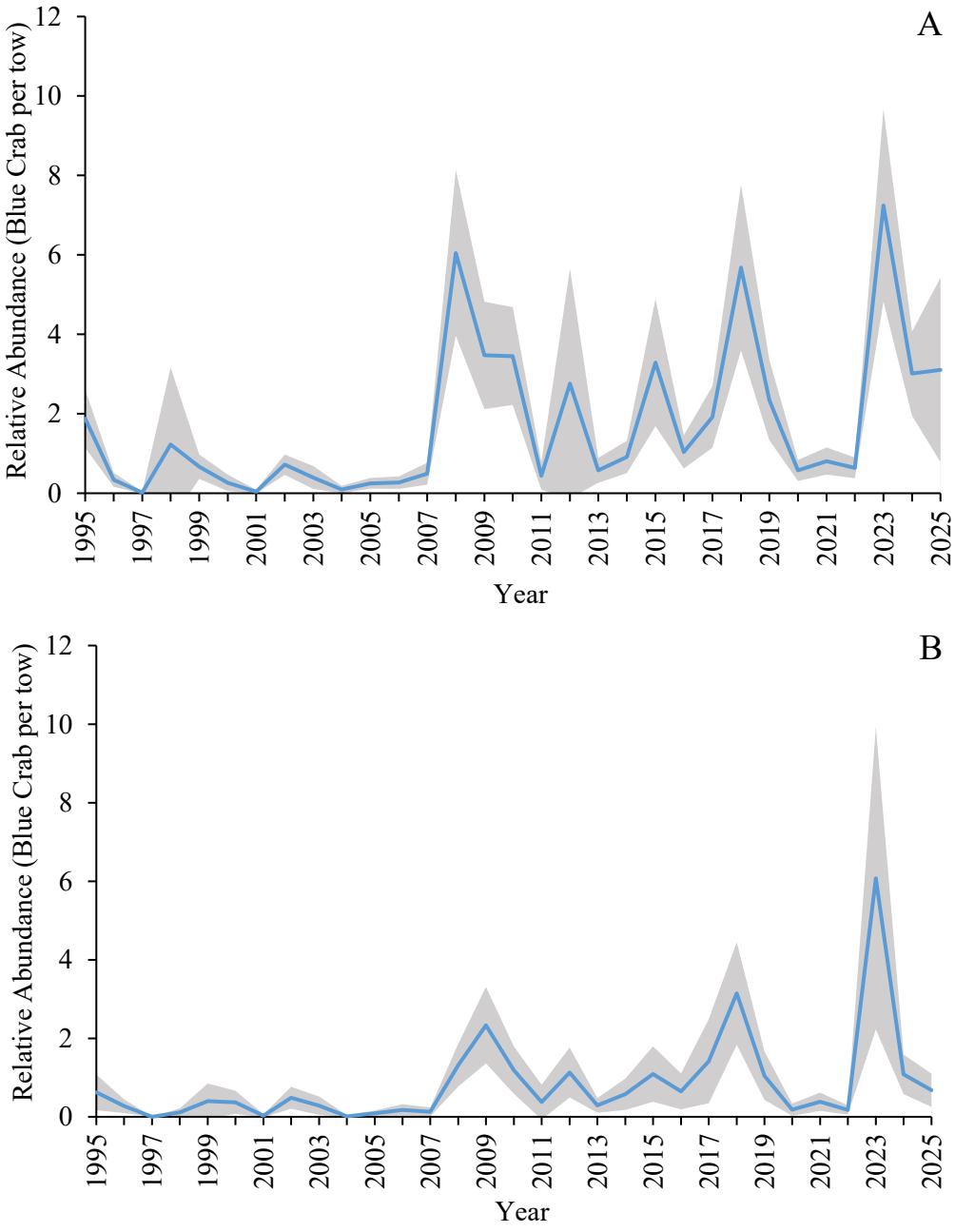


Figure 11. Nominal index of fully recruited Blue Crab relative abundance (≥127 mm, 5 in; CW) captured in Program 100 in summer for male (A) and female (B), 1995–2025.

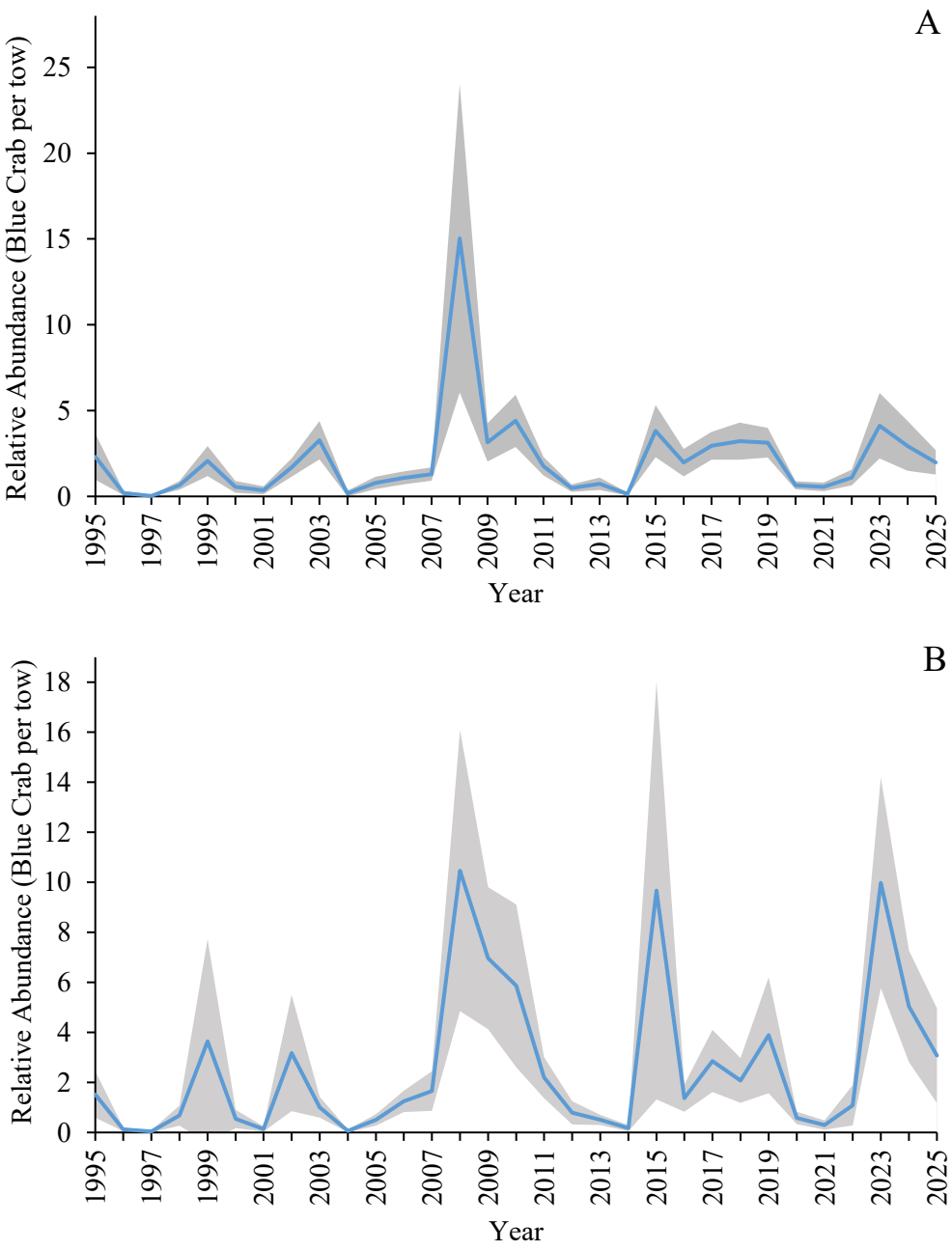


Figure 12. Nominal index of fully recruited Blue Crab relative abundance (≥127 mm, 5 in; CW) captured in Program 100 in fall for male (A) and female (B), 1995–2025.

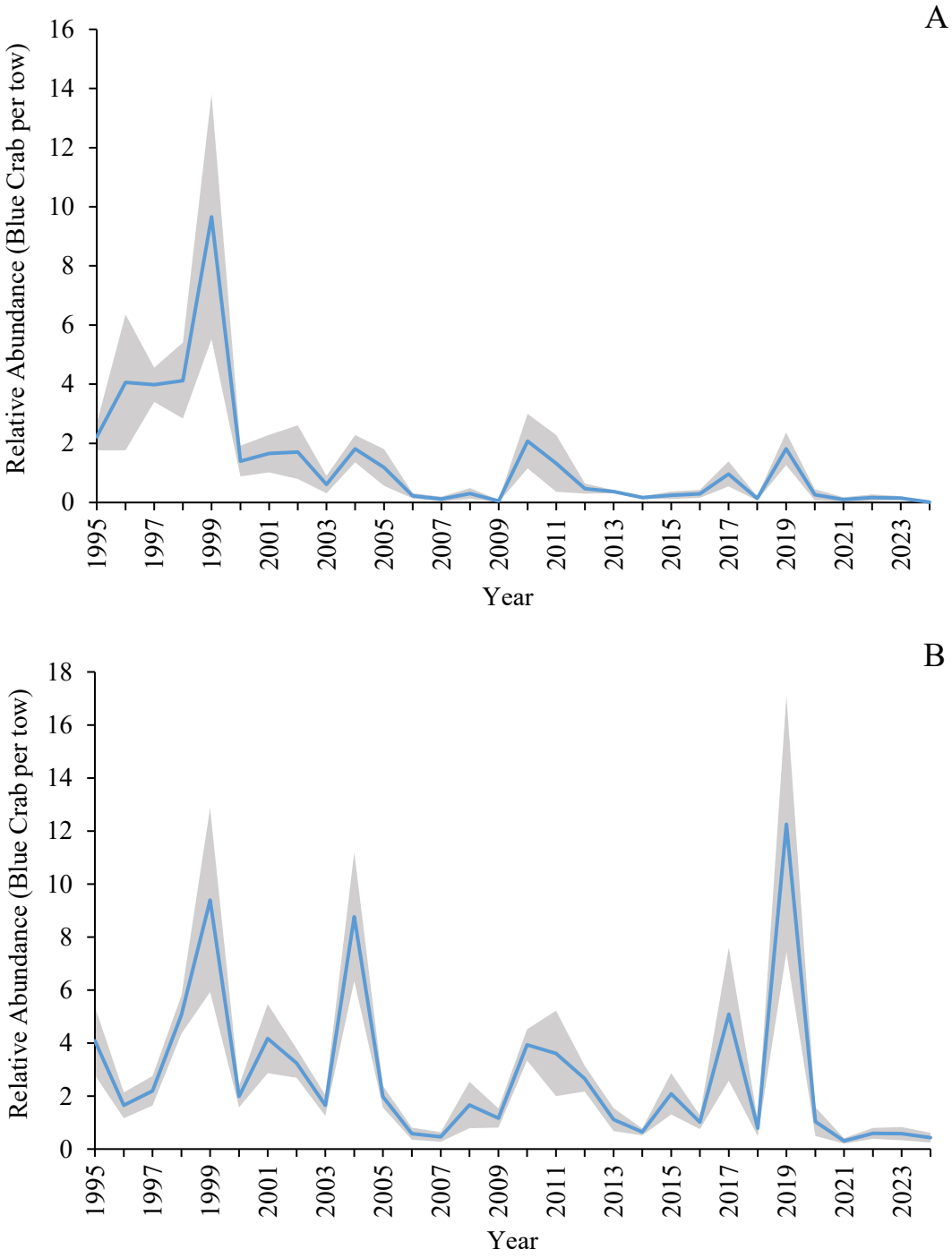


Figure 13. Nominal index of fully recruited Blue Crab relative abundance (≥127 mm, 5 in, CW) captured in Program 195 for June male (A) and female (B), 1995–2024 for all strata combined [Note: in 2020 and 2021 less than 54 stations were sampled in both months and in 2025 no sampling occurred].

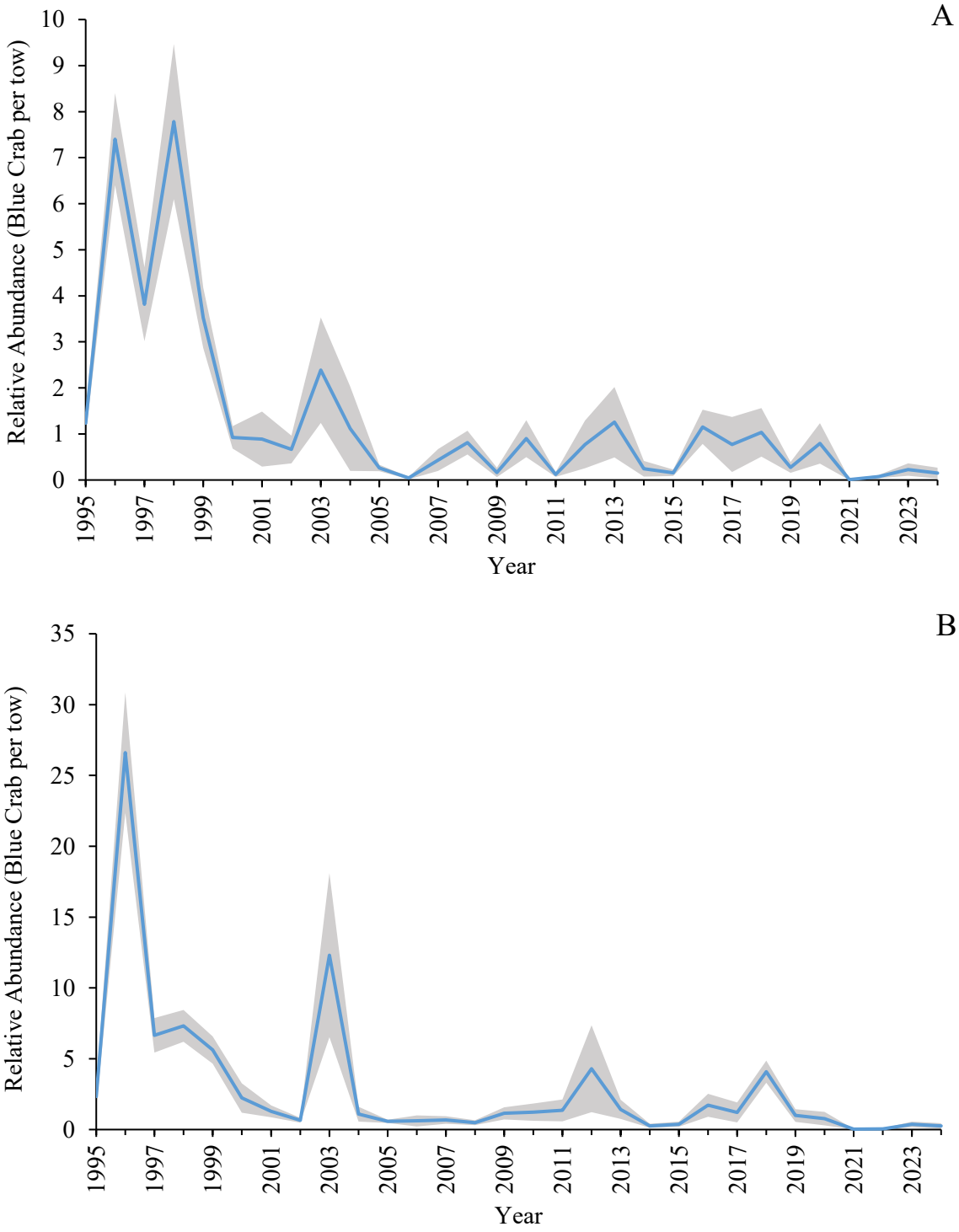


Figure 14. Nominal index of fully recruited Blue Crab relative abundance (≥127 mm, 5 in, CW) captured in Program 195 for September male (A) and female (B), 1995–2024 for all strata combined [Note: 2018 September sampling was conducted in October, in 2020 and 2021 less than 54 stations were sampled in both months, and in 2025 no sampling occurred].

In 2025, male fully recruited summer abundance in Program 100 slightly increased to 3.11 crabs/tow which is above the stock assessment years' mean (1.3 crab/tow) and female fully recruited summer abundance was 0.68 crabs/tow which is above the stock assessment years' mean (0.5 crabs/tow; Figure 11). In 2025, male fully recruited fall abundance slightly decreased from 2024 (2.93 crabs/tow) to 1.98 crabs/tow and remained below the stock assessment years' mean (2.1 crabs/tow). Female fully recruited fall abundance decreased from 2024 (5.04 crabs/tow) to 3.07 crabs/tow, which is still above the stock assessment years' mean (2.4 crabs/tow; Figure 12).

Program 195 fully recruited abundance is more variable in June compared to September for female Blue Crabs. Due to DMF's research vessel the Carolina Coast being ruled disabled in 2025, no sampling occurred for Program 195 during the summer or fall. In 2024, male fully recruited June abundance was <0.1 crabs/tow which is below the stock assessment years' mean (1.6 crabs/tow; Figure 13A). Female fully recruited June abundance was 0.4 crabs per/tow in 2024 which is below the stock assessment years' mean (3.2 crabs/tow; Figure 13B). In 2024, male fully recruited September abundance was 0.2 crabs/tow which is below the stock assessment years' mean (1.6 crabs/tow; Figure 14A). The female fully recruited September abundance was 0.3 crabs/tow in 2024 which is below the stock assessment years' mean (3.4 crabs/tow; Figure 14B).

RESEARCH NEEDS

Several research needs were identified in N.C. Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan Amendment 3. In 2026, the research needs were reevaluated in anticipation for the next benchmark stock assessment; the bulleted list below outlines the specific needs and highlights the priority of each management and research need. Some previous recommendations have been removed because they have been or are being actively researched.

- Develop statewide fishery-independent survey(s) to monitor the abundance of all Blue Crab life stages.
- Expand time and area coverage of existing fishery-independent surveys for juveniles.
- Develop better estimates of life-history parameters, especially growth and natural mortality.
- Research the impact of increased predator abundance on the Blue Crab stock.
- Evaluate the genetic stock structure of Blue Crabs within North Carolina and the magnitude of mixing between populations.

MANAGEMENT

Following full implementation of Amendment 3 management measures in 2021, division monitoring programs continued to observe historically low commercial landings, coupled with continued low abundance of all Blue Crab life stages (e.g., male and female juveniles, male and female adults, mature females). In response to stock concerns expressed by commercial crabbers and continued poor trends in abundance since adoption of Amendment 3, the division began updating the stock assessment with data through 2022, adding 6 years of data to the benchmark assessment. Results of the model update indicate the magnitude and trends for estimated recruitment, female spawner abundance, and fishing mortality were similar to the prior benchmark assessment, however, the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) based reference points used to determine stock status for both female spawner abundance and fishing mortality both drastically changed with the updated timeseries. All available information suggests the Blue Crab stock has continued to decline since adoption of Amendment 3 management measures.

The Amendment 3 adaptive management framework can be used to immediately address the overall declining trends in the Blue Crab stock. In 2025, the division developed a draft revision with management options to further address the requirements to end overfishing and achieve sustainable harvest, but the MFC did no vote on adoption of the revision. A benchmark stock assessment is underway with completion tentatively scheduled for late 2026

MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE AND FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN SCHEDULE RECOMMENDATIONS

With the latest stock assessment used for management being from 2018 with a terminal data year of 2016 and a lack of recent adaptive management action under Amendment 3, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of current Blue Crab management at a state level. Landings, trips, and fishery-independent abundance indices mostly show declines. Fishery-independent indices from P120 and P195 continue to support the findings of the last stock assessment (2018) that recruitment is in decline and has remained low in recent years. Fully-recruited crabs show a slight increase in the P100 survey in contrast to decreases observed in P120 and P195 data, possibly due to a greater proportion of sampling sites falling within Albemarle Sound. A benchmark stock assessment is underway with completion tentatively scheduled for late 2026 and should provide a clearer view of Blue Crab stock status and population trends in North Carolina waters.

Comprehensive review of the Blue Crab FMP began in July 2026. The Amendment 3 adaptive management framework allows for management changes between comprehensive plan reviews. The MFC did not vote on adoption of a draft revision in 2025 that would have implemented additional management measures to reduce harvest. Given the current adaptive management timeline and the start of the comprehensive review, no schedule change is recommended.

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