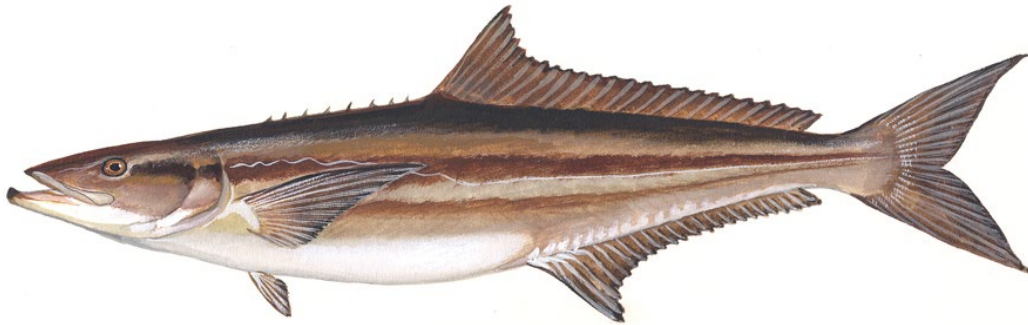


DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

**ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION**  
**REVIEW OF THE INTERSTATE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**FOR ATLANTIC COBIA**  
*(Rachycentron canadum)*

**2023 FISHING YEAR**



Prepared by the Atlantic Cobia Plan Review Team

**For Board Review**

July 2024



*Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries*

**DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW**

**Table of Contents**

I.	Status of the Fishery Management Plan.....	1
II.	Status of the Stock .....	3
III.	Status of the Fishery .....	4
IV.	Status of Assessment Advice .....	6
V.	Status of Research and Monitoring .....	6
VI.	Status of Management Measures and Issues.....	6
VII.	Implementation of FMP Compliance Requirements for 2023 .....	8
VIII.	Recommendations of the Plan Review Team.....	8
IX.	References .....	10
X.	Figures.....	11
XI.	Tables .....	15

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

### I. Status of the Fishery Management Plan

<u>Date of FMP Approval:</u>	Original FMP – November 2017
<u>Amendments &amp; Addenda:</u>	Amendment 1 – August 2019 Addendum 1 – October 2020
<u>Management Areas:</u>	The distribution of the Atlantic stock of cobia from Georgia through Rhode Island
<u>Active Boards/Committees:</u>	Coastal Pelagics Management Board; Cobia Technical Committee, Plan Development Team, and Plan Review Team; South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted an [Interstate Fishery Management Plan \(FMP\)](#) for the Atlantic Migratory Group of cobia (Atlantic cobia) in 2017 (ASMFC, 2017). Prior to the FMP, federal management was through the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources (CMP FMP), while New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina had regulations for their respective state waters.

The FMP established a complementary management approach between the ASMFC and SAFMC. Under the ASMFC, Atlantic cobia are managed as part of the Coastal Pelagics Board (Board). Through the FMP, regulations for states with a declared interest were required to reflect several measures established federally through the CMP FMP.

In March, 2019, [Regulatory Amendment 31](#) to the CMP FMP became effective (SAFMC, 2018). This removed Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, resulting in management solely through the ASMFC.

In August, 2019, the Board approved [Amendment 1](#) to reflect removal of Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, assume management responsibilities previously accomplished through the SAFMC and CMP FMP, and establish recommendations for measures in federal waters. Amendment 1 stated requirements were to be implemented by July, 2020.

Amendment 1 maintains many regulations of the original Commission FMP and previous CMP FMP. These include a 36-inch fork length (or 40-inch total length) recreational minimum size limit, 1 fish per person recreational bag limit, a recreational daily vessel limit not to exceed 6 fish per vessel, a 33-inch fork length (or 37-inch total length) commercial minimum size limit, and a commercial possession limit of 2 cobia per person not to exceed 6 cobia per vessel.

There are four plan objectives:

- 1) Provide a flexible management system to address future changes in resource abundance, scientific information, and fishing patterns among user groups or areas.

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

- 2) Promote cooperative collection of biological, economic, and social data required to effectively monitor and assess the status of the cobia resource and evaluate management efforts.
- 3) Manage the cobia fishery to protect both young individuals and established breeding stock.
- 4) Develop research priorities that will further refine the cobia management program to maximize the biological, social, and economic benefits derived from the cobia population.

In February, 2020, the Board approved an annual total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for 2020-2022, based on results from the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 58 stock assessment for Atlantic cobia, allocated to the recreational and commercial sectors based on the Amendment 1 allocation of 92% recreational and 8% commercial. However, states with commercial harvest had an agreement to harvest a smaller portion of that amount in 2020. SEDAR 58 used updated recreational catch estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) 2018 transition and calibration to the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey effort estimates, which replaced those of the Coastal Household Telephone Survey.

Given the increased recreational catch estimates used in the SEDAR 58 assessment, the total annual quota approved by the Board also increased, resulting in increases to both the recreational and commercial quotas. As this increase in recreational harvest did not truly reflect a change in previous effort, only the estimate of that effort, [Addendum I to Amendment 1](#) was approved by the Board in October 2020 to reconsider the percent allocations to the commercial and recreational sectors to better reflect the observed harvest. The Addendum changed the allocation of the resource between the recreational and commercial fisheries from 92% and 8%, respectively, to 96% and 4%, respectively. The calculation of the commercial trigger, which determines when an in season coastwide commercial closure occurs, was also revised. The Addendum established a commercial *de minimis* set aside of 4% of the commercial quota with a maximum cap of 5,000 pounds to account for potential landings in *de minimis* states not tracked in-season against the quota. The Addendum also allowed states that are *de minimis* for their recreational fisheries to choose to match the recreational management measures implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if none are adjacent) or limit their recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or an equivalent total length of 37 inches). Based on maturity data from the SEDAR 58 assessment, this latter regulatory option was updated from 29 inches fork length to 33 inches fork length in Addendum I to allow a greater number of females to spawn before being susceptible to harvest. Addendum I measures were effective January 1, 2021.

In May 2022, the Board changed the cobia quota timeframe from 2020-2022 to 2021-2023, thereby, maintaining the total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for the 2023 fishing season. For the 2024-2026 fishing seasons, the total harvest quota for both sectors combined is 80,112 fish, which is the same harvest quota that has been in place since 2020.

Per the Addendum I allocation of 4% to the commercial sector, the commercial fishery has a coastwide commercial quota of 73,116 pounds (3,204 fish) annually for the 2021-2023 fishing seasons. The current management measures for the commercial fishery include a 33" FL minimum

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

size limit and 2 fish limit per person, with a 6 fish maximum vessel limit. The commercial Atlantic cobia fishery will close once the commercial quota is projected to be reached.

Per the Addendum I allocation of 96% for the recreational sector, the coastwide recreational harvest target for 2021-2023 and 2024-2026 fishing seasons is 76,908 fish. This results in the following state-specific soft targets through 2024:

Georgia - 7,229 fish

South Carolina - 9,306 fish

North Carolina - 29,302 fish

Virginia - 30,302 fish

*De minimis* - 769 fish

Allocation of the coastwide recreational harvest quota (i.e., state soft targets) may change in 2025 based on Draft Addendum II, which is being considered for final approval in August 2024. Draft Addendum II presents options for Atlantic cobia management, including a framework for recreational allocation, ways to account for data uncertainty and respond to quota overages, and an extended multi-year specification setting. For the recreational allocation framework, Draft Addendum II considers options for the data timeframe to form the basis for allocations, and options for the geographic scope of allocations (state-by-state, regional, or coastwide)

When the Board set the total harvest quota for 2024-2026, the Board would typically consider changes to state recreational management measures by comparing each state's recent harvest to state harvest targets. However, the Board considered a Technical Committee analysis reviewing the impacts of maintaining status quo recreational management measures, and ultimately, the Board chose to maintain status quo state waters recreational management measures for the 2024 fishing season while a new addendum was drafted to possibly change current management of the recreational fishery. For 2025, the Board will consider state recreational management measures based on state harvest target evaluations, which will follow implementation of any updates to the allocation framework being considered through Draft Addendum II.

## II. Status of the Stock

### SEDAR 58

In 2020, the Board approved the SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) 58 Atlantic Cobia benchmark assessment for management use which continued to use the Beaufort Assessment Model (BAM), a forward-projecting statistical catch-at-age model used in the prior assessment, SEDAR 28 (SEDAR 2013). SEDAR 58 provided new reference points and determined that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring (Figures 1 and 2). This assessment had a terminal year of 2017, and used the recalibrated recreational catch data from MRIP, which yielded much higher biomass and spawning stock biomass estimates as compared to SEDAR 28 (Figure 3). Even with the large changes in biomass estimates, the trends of abundance, recruitment, and relative status were very similar between the two assessments. Stock structure also remained unchanged

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

from the SEDAR 28 assessment which established the stock boundary between Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico cobia at the FL/GA border with the Atlantic stock extending northward to Rhode Island.

The assessment proposed updated reference points of  $F_{40\%}$  and 75% of  $SSB_{F_{40\%}}$  as the threshold reference points (Figures 4 and 5). The reference points were selected as the fishing rate and SSB that allows the population to reach 40% of the maximum spawning potential the stock would have obtained in the absence of harvest. These reference points serve as proxies for maximum sustainable yield-derived relationships due to insufficient data for cobia.

Spawning stock biomass showed little overall trend throughout the estimated time series, but the terminal year is the lowest in the time series. Age structure estimated by the base run indicated a slight decline in the number of younger fish in the last decade, but the rest of the age structure was above the expected values in 2017. The estimated fishing mortality rates have generally increased through the assessment time frame, peaking in 1996, with the recreational fleet as the largest contributor to total F ( $F_{2015-2017}/F_{40\%} = 0.29$ ).

### SEDAR 95

The SEDAR process has initiated a benchmark stock assessment for Atlantic cobia to be completed in the fall of 2025. The goal of the assessment is to evaluate the health of Atlantic cobia stock and inform the Commission's management of this species.

### III. Status of the Fishery

Regulations, by state, for the 2023 fishing year are presented in Table 1. Total Atlantic cobia landings (commercial and recreational) are estimated at about 2.8 million pounds in 2023, which is a 45% increase from 2022 and similar to the 2021 harvest level (Figure 6, Tables 2 and 3). This increase was driven by an increase in recreational landings, while commercial landings slightly decreased. The commercial and recreational fisheries harvested 2.3% and 97.7% of the 2023 total, respectively.

Commercial landings of Atlantic cobia in 2023 span from Rhode Island through South Carolina (Table 2). Coastwide commercial landings show an increasing trend since low harvests in the 1970s and early 1980s, but comprise a small portion of the total harvest due, in part, to the current 4% allocation of the total annual harvest quota since 2021 (Figure 6); the commercial allocation was 8% prior to 2021. Coastwide cobia commercial landings in 2023 were estimated at 64,547 pounds, which is a 14% decrease from 2022 commercial landings and similar to landings in 2021. The commercial quota of 73,116 pounds was not exceeded in 2023. North Carolina (48%) and Virginia (46%) harvested the majority of the commercial landings (Table 2). The total non-*de minimis* commercial landings did not reach the commercial trigger level for fishery closure, so the commercial fishery in state waters did not close under the Interstate FMP.

Recreational harvests have fluctuated widely throughout the time series, often through rapid increases and declines. Average recreational harvest for the time series is about 40,500 fish (1.1 million pounds) (Figures 6-7, Table 3-4). This fishery has grown noticeably over the time series, with

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

average harvests over the last 10 years of about 79,500 fish (2.3 million pounds). The 2023 recreational harvest was 98,311 fish (2.8 million pounds), which is above the coastwide recreational harvest target of 76,908 fish. 2023 harvest increased by 41% in number of fish from the 2022 recreational harvest level, and is the second highest harvest in the time series. The highest recreational harvest of 113,939 fish occurred in 2018.

From 2018-2023, Virginia has harvested the majority of the coastwide recreational cobia, with an average of 70.1% of the total fish by count (average of 60,894 fish/year). North Carolina has the second highest recreational harvest with an average of 14.5% of the total fish by count (average of 12,403 fish) for the same timeframe. South Carolina and Georgia have averaged 7.1% and 5.6% of the total coastwide harvest annually for the same timeframe (6,058 and 4,838 fish respectively), and the *de minimis* states made up the remainder (2.6% on average annually, 2,134 fish). Over the last several years, recreational landings have increased in some Mid-Atlantic states while remaining relatively stable in southern states, indicating a range expansion is more likely than a stock shift. Virginia has harvested above its state recreational target each year since the current state-by-state targets were implemented in 2020. Georgia harvested above their state target in 2021 and 2023. South Carolina has been harvesting just at or under their target each year, while North Carolina has been under their harvest target each year. *De minimis* states (currently from Maryland northward) harvested 361 fish in 2023, which is less than the *de minimis* set-aside of 769 fish. *De minimis* harvest decreased in 2023 from the 2022 *de minimis* harvest of 4,173 fish, which was well above the *de minimis* set-aside.

The PRT notes that changes in harvest can be attributed to multiple factors, including stock distribution, fish availability in nearshore or offshore waters, state regulatory changes, and level of effort.

It should be noted that North Carolina's estimated recreational harvest in 2023 was very low at 629 fish, as compared to the 12,403 average harvest from the previous five years (2018-2022). North Carolina noted in their compliance report that this decline in recreational harvest is likely due to weather conditions, including persistent winds in the 2023 cobia season which hindered fishing effort by reducing the number of fishable days. The North Carolina cobia fishery is a pulse fishery, with the primary wave of fish historically arriving in late May and being available for about 6 weeks. In recent years, anecdotal observations suggest the cobia are migrating to Chesapeake Bay much earlier, in April and May, and are residing in North Carolina for a shorter period of time. The PRT notes the very low 2023 harvest estimate for North Carolina may be an anomaly and is not necessarily indicative of harvest in future years.

Recreational releases of live fish have generally increased throughout the time series (Figure 7, Table 5). In 2023, 248,890 recreationally-caught fish were released, a 31% increase from 2022. This coincides with the increase in recreational landings in 2023 from 2022. From 2018-2023, an average 76% of cobia caught recreationally were released alive each year. This is higher than the average 65% released alive during the period of 2013-2017.

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

### IV. Status of Assessment Advice

Current stock status information comes from SEDAR 58 (SEDAR, 2020), which determined the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. Results of this assessment were approved for management use by the Board at their February 2020 meeting, and, as such, have been incorporated into ASMFC's FMP.

The stock assessment could be improved by developing a fishery-independent sampling program for abundance of cobia and other coastal migratory pelagic species. The currently used fishery-dependent index causes notable uncertainty in part due to the lack of an effective sampling methodology. In addition, while the terminal year of the assessment was 2017, due to federal water closures, the index could only be calculated through 2015. The assessment could also benefit from improved characterization of age, reproductive, genetic, and migratory characteristics, tag-based information on natural mortality, and more precise recreational catch estimates.

The next stock assessment for the Atlantic cobia stock is a benchmark (SEDAR 95) scheduled for completion in late 2025. The terminal year would likely be 2023 or 2024 and the assessment would likely be available to inform 2026 or 2027 management.

### V. Status of Research and Monitoring

There are no monitoring or research programs required annually of the states except for the submission of a compliance report. Fishery-dependent data collections (other than catch and effort data) are conducted in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Data collected includes length, age, and sex data. Fishery-independent monitoring programs conducted by states that may encounter cobia are conducted in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia.

### VI. Status of Management Measures and Issues

#### Fishery Management Plan

No management changes were required or implemented in 2023. States maintained the same management measures as 2021-2022.

In January 2024, New York declared an interest in the Atlantic Cobia FMP and its management measures meet the requirements of the FMP. New York is requesting *de minimis* status for the recreational fishery and has implemented the default *de minimis* measures of 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 37 inches total length with no seasonal restrictions. For the commercial sector, New York is a non-*de minimis* state and has implemented in-season monitoring of cobia commercial landings.

For the 2024 fishing season, the Board chose to maintain status quo state recreational management measures instead of adjusting measures based on each state's harvest target evaluation while a new draft addendum was developed. For the 2025 fishing season, the Board will consider changes



## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

to state recreational management measures based on each state's harvest target evaluation and after implementing any updates to the allocation framework being considered through Draft Addendum II.

The last management changes were in 2021 when some states implemented new recreational cobia measures based on Addendum I. As approved by the Board, Virginia and North Carolina changed their measures after evaluation of previous landings against their new Addendum I recreational harvest targets. Virginia's 2021 measures were designed to reduce recreational harvest by 42% by lowering the vessel limit from 3 fish to 2 fish, and shortening the season by 30 days (changed to June 15-September 15).

North Carolina liberalized their measures in 2021 based on their harvest target, and the vessel limit was increased for private anglers only to allow 2 cobia per vessel per day in June (previously only allowed in May).

Some *de minimis* states also adjusted their 2021 recreational measures based on the updated *de minimis* requirement in Addendum I. Maryland and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) adjusted their vessel limit and season to maintain consistency with Virginia's, the nearest non-*de minimis* state to them.

New Jersey, Delaware, and Rhode Island have implemented the standard *de minimis* measures (1 fish per vessel/minimum size of 37 inches total length/no seasonal restrictions) rather than using the nearest non-*de minimis* state regulations. Rhode Island's measures were effective January 1, 2022 after joining the Board and declaring an interest in the cobia fishery in 2021.

In 2020, the South Carolina legislature codified the federal regulations for Cobia into the South Carolina Code of Laws. Prior to this, Cobia regulations (outside of the SCMZ) were covered by legal adherence to federal regulations for any species that did not have specific regulations in South Carolina law.

### De Minimis

For the recreational sector, the FMP requires adherence to state harvest targets, allocated to non-*de minimis* states from the total harvest quota allocated to the recreational sector. One percent of the quota is designated to account for harvest in *de minimis* states.

The FMP allows states to request recreational *de minimis* status if their recreational landings in two of the previous three years are less than 1% of annual coastwide recreational landings during that time period. If a state qualifies for *de minimis*, the state may choose to match all FMP-related recreational management measures (including seasons and vessel limits) implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if none are adjacent) or the state may choose to limit its recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or 37 inches total length) with no seasonal restrictions. Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Florida requested recreational *de minimis* status through the annual reporting process. All of these states meet the recreational *de minimis* qualifications.

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

*De minimis* status for commercial fisheries may be granted to states if their commercial landings for 2 of the previous 3 years were less than 2% of the coastwide commercial landings for the same time period. Commercial regulations in *de minimis* states are also limited to a minimum size of 33 inches FL with 2 fish per person for a total of 6 fish per vessel (the same requirements as non-*de minimis* states). Commercial *de minimis* states are not required to monitor their in-season harvests. Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida requested *de minimis* status for commercial fisheries through the annual reporting process. All of these states except New Jersey meet the commercial *de minimis* qualifications.

In its compliance report, New Jersey acknowledges that its commercial cobia landings exceeded the 2% threshold in 2021 and 2023 but is requesting a waiver from the in-season commercial reporting requirements. The commercial landings in 2021 and 2023 are considered to be anomalously high compared to the past decade of landings which have qualified New Jersey for *de minimis* status for the commercial fishery. New Jersey will reevaluate its *de minimis* request in the next compliance report based on the finalized 2024 commercial landings. Additionally, New Jersey will continue to work towards implementing mandatory in-season reporting of commercial cobia landings so that, should New Jersey's commercial cobia landings continue to consistently exceed the 2% threshold, the mechanism will be in place to maintain compliance with the FMP requirements.

### VII. Implementation of FMP Compliance Requirements for 2023

The PRT finds no inconsistencies among states in regards to the Fishery Management Plan.

### VIII. Recommendations of the Plan Review Team

#### Management

The PRT recommends that the Board approve the 2024 FMP Review, state compliance, and all *de minimis* requests from Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida.

The PRT agrees with the rationale provided by New Jersey for their commercial fishery to continue under *de minimis* status until 2024 harvest can be evaluated next year.

The PRT emphasizes that multiple states could exceed *de minimis* thresholds over the next few years if cobia landings continue to increase in Mid-Atlantic states due to cobia potentially becoming more available in those areas. The PRT notes the management implications of this, including requiring commercial in-season monitoring in more states and, if state-by-state allocations are maintained, adding new states to the allocation framework. In general, these management challenges reflect why Draft Addendum II was initiated, particularly the challenges with the geographic scope of the recreational allocation. Additionally, completion of the recently initiated stock assessment (expected completion in late 2025) will provide new data from which sector quotas will be determined, and the status of the stock and management will be reevaluated.

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

### Research

The current stock assessment (SEDAR 95) is facing data limitation challenges for cobia. To support future assessments and management, it is important consider long-term monitoring and data collection for cobia. The following are important research recommendations the PRT continues to highlight:

- Define, develop, and monitor adult and juvenile abundance estimates through the expansion of current or development of new fishery independent surveys. This recommendation is especially relevant as it is uncertain that the current abundance index will be able to be updated for the upcoming Atlantic cobia stock assessment scheduled to be completed in fall of 2025.
- Continue to collect and analyze current life history data from fishery independent and dependent programs, including size, age, maturity, histology workups and information on spawning season timing and duration. Increase spatial and temporal coverage of age samples collected regularly from fishery dependent and independent sources.
- Continue collection of genetic material to continue to assess the stock identification and any Distinct Population Segments that may exist within the management unit relative to recommendations made by the SEDAR 58 Stock ID Process.
- Expand existing fishery independent surveys in time and space to better define and cover cobia habitats, including conducting otolith microchemistry studies to identify regional recruitment contributions and new and ongoing satellite tagging programs to help identify spawning and juvenile habitat use and regional recruitment sources.
- Additional work to better understand the impacts of climate change on cobia habitat and range expansion.

Additional research recommendations can be found in Section 2.8 of the [SEDAR 58 stock assessment](#).

## DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

### IX. References

ASMFC. 2017. Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Migratory Group Cobia. ASMFC, Arlington, VA. 85 p.

SAFMC. 2018. Amendment 31 to the Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagics Resources in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Region. NOAA Award # FNA10NMF441001. Charleston, SC. 209 pp.

SEDAR. 2013. SEDAR 28 – South Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 420 pp. available online at:  
[http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/Sedar\\_Workshops.jsp?WorkshopNum=28](http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/Sedar_Workshops.jsp?WorkshopNum=28)

SEDAR. 2020. SEDAR 58 – Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 500 pp. available online at: <http://sedarweb.org/sedar-58>

X. Figures

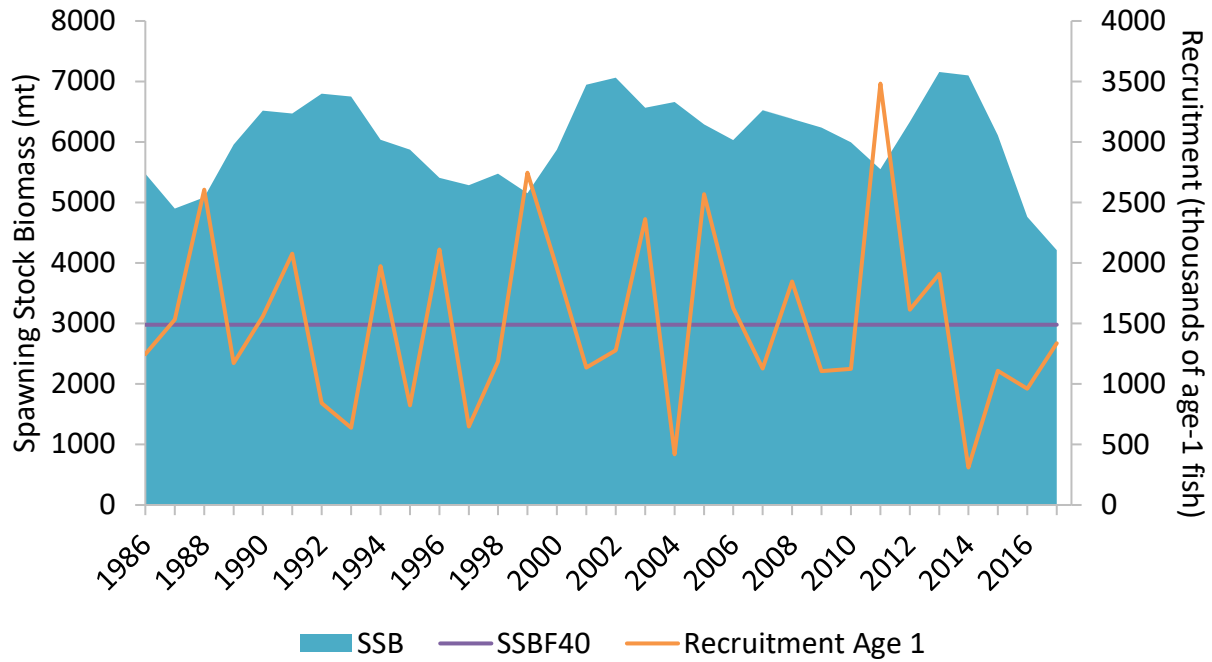


Figure 1. Atlantic Cobia spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment of year 1 fish. (SEDAR, 2020)

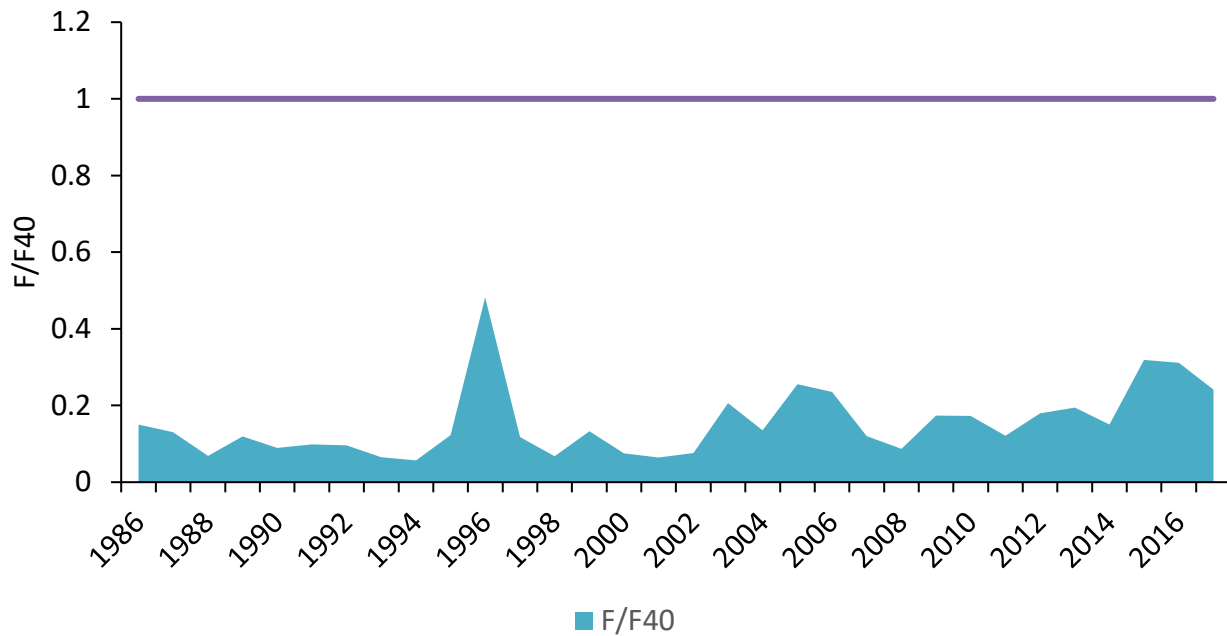


Figure 2. Atlantic Cobia fishing mortality (F) relative to the F40 reference point from 1986-2017. (SEDAR, 2020)

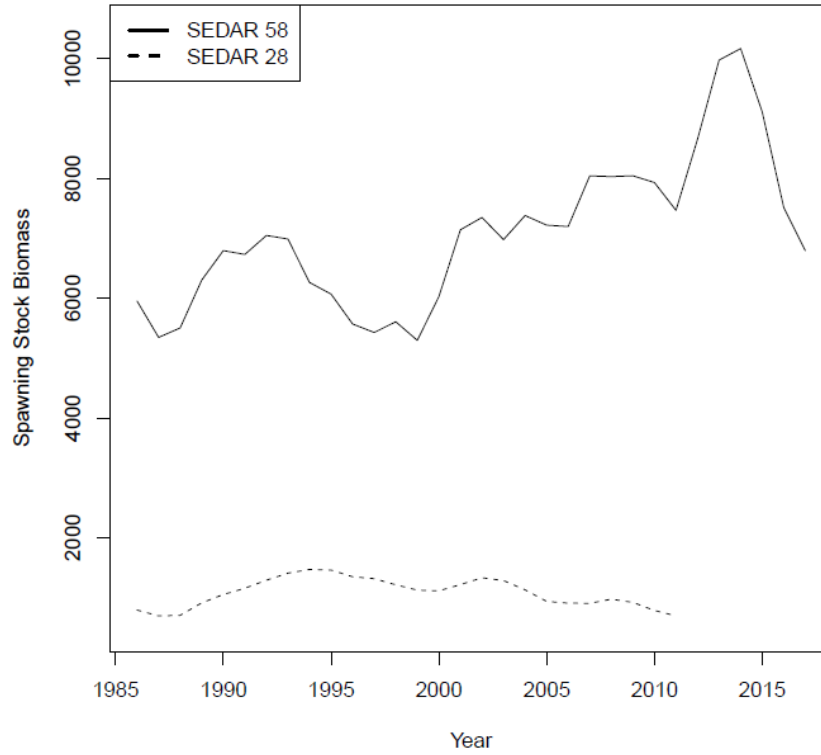


Figure 3. Comparing spawning stock biomass from the current assessment (SEDAR 58) to the last assessment (SEDAR 28). (SEDAR, 2020)

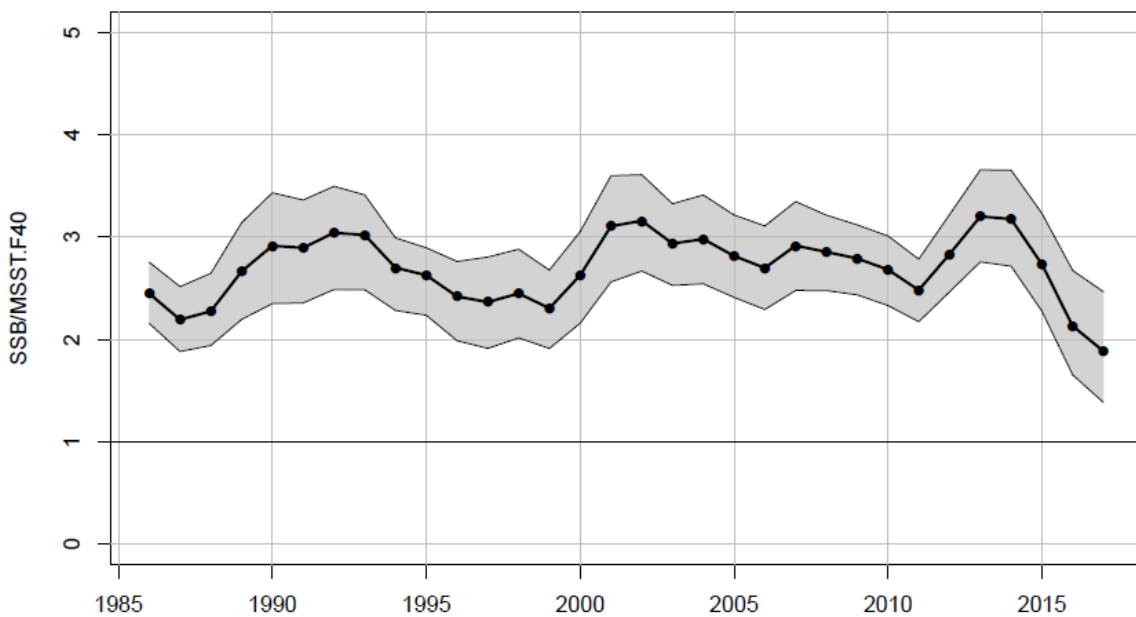


Figure 4. Estimated time series of Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) relative to the Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST) (SEDAR, 2020).

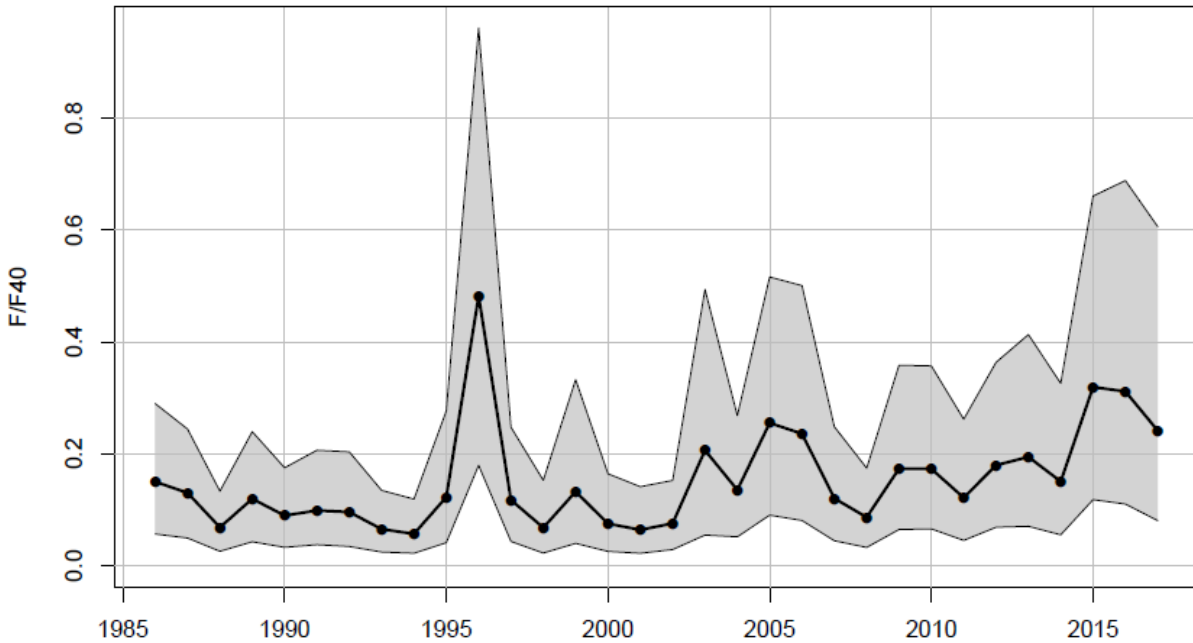


Figure 5. Estimated time series of Fishing Mortality (F) relative to F at Maximum Sustainable Yield ( $F_{40\%}$ ) (SEDAR, 2020).

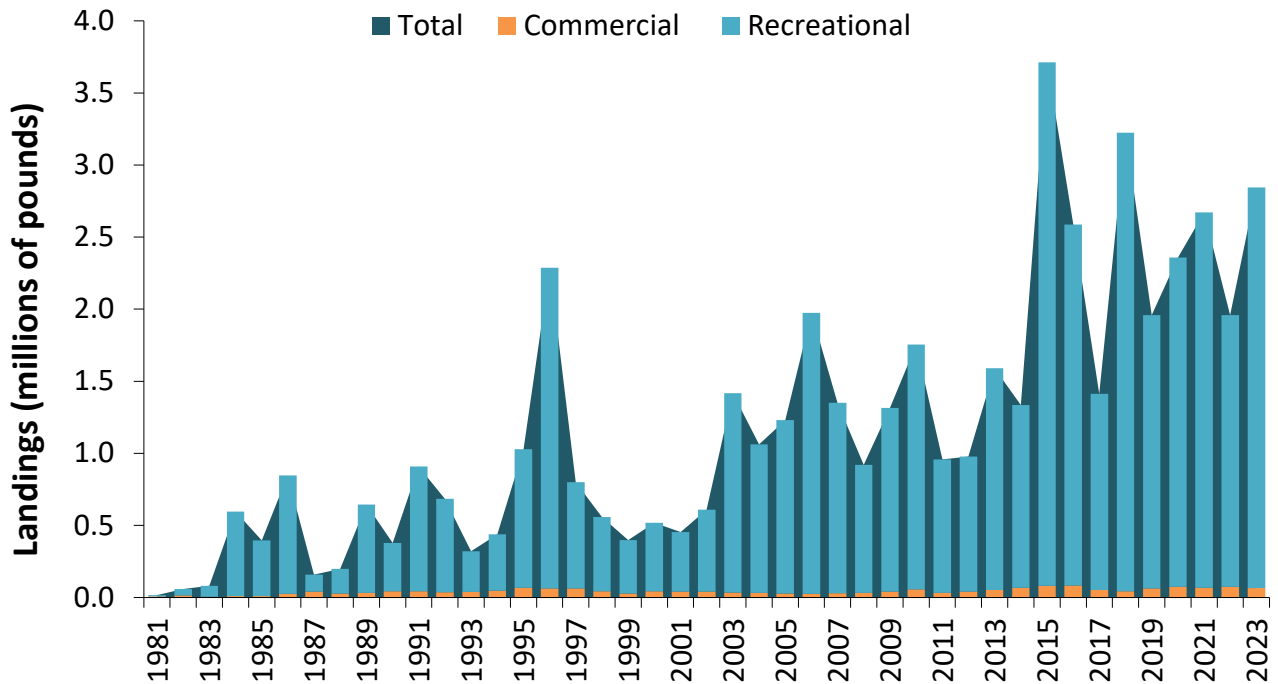


Figure 6. Commercial and recreational landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia. Recreational data not available prior to 1981. See Tables 2 and 3 for data sources and values from the last ten years.

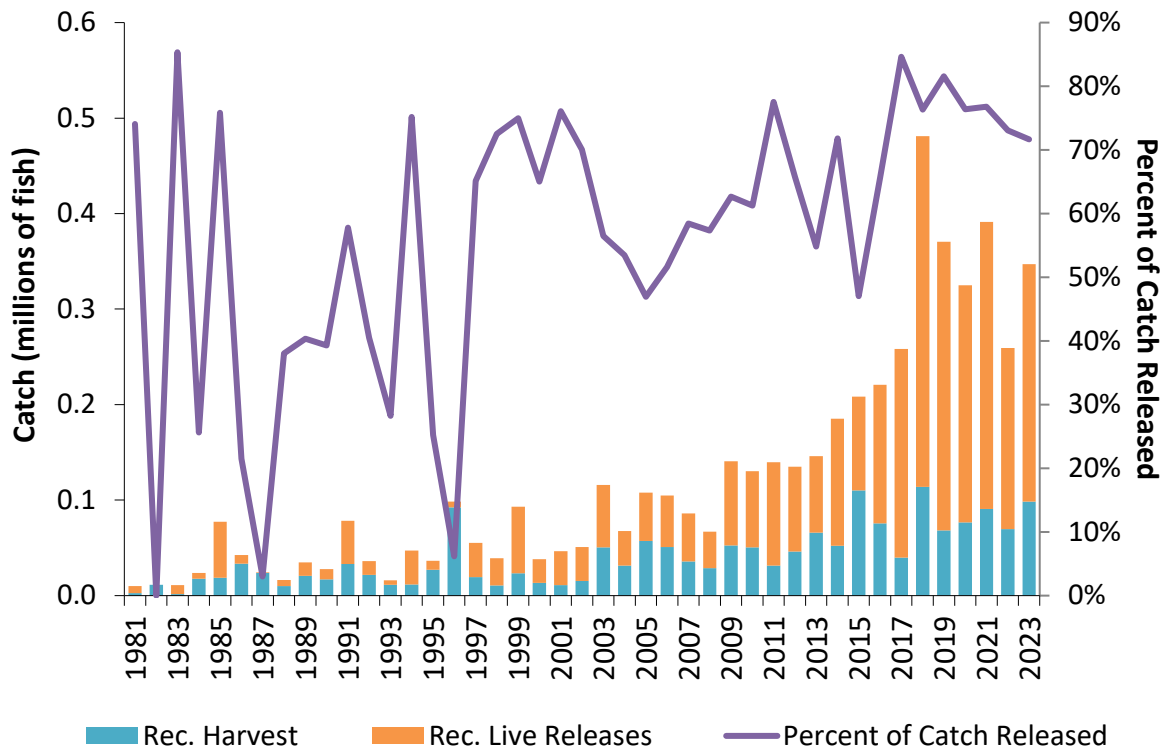


Figure 7. Recreational catch (harvest and live releases) of Atlantic cobia (numbers) and the proportion of catch that is released. See Tables 4 and 5 for data sources and values from the last ten years.



**DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW**

**XI. Tables**

**Table 1. Atlantic cobia regulations for 2023.**

<b>State</b>	<b>Recreational Measures</b>	<b>Commercial Measures</b>
RI	<i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	<u>Coastwide</u> Possession Limit: 2 fish per person Minimum Size: 33 in fork length or 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 6 fish
NY	<i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	If commercial fishing in state waters is closed, commercial fishing in federal waters will be recommended to mirror state closures
NJ	<i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	<u>Deviations</u> -Rhode Island and New York possession limit is 2 fish per vessel -Virginia possession limit is per licensee rather than per person
DE	<i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per vessel Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel	-North Carolina has 36 minimum fork length -No commercial harvest in South Carolina state waters -Georgia possession limit is 1 fish per person (not to exceed 6 per vessel) and minimum size is 36 in fork length
MD	<i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 40 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	
PRFC	Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50" per vessel) Bag limit: 1 per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	
VA	Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50" per vessel) Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	

**DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW**

<p>NC</p>	<p>Minimum Size: 36 in fork length          Bag Limit: 1 fish per person          Season: May 1-December 31  <u>Private Vessel Limit</u>          May 1- June 30: 2 fish          July 1-Dec 31: 1 fish   <u>For-Hire Vessel Limit</u>          May 1-Dec 31: 4 fish</p>	
<p>SC</p>	<p>Bag Limit: 1 fish per person          Minimum Size: 36 in fork length          Vessel Limit: 6 fish          Season: Open year-round   <u>Southern Cobia Management Zone:</u>          Minimum Size: 36 in FL          Season: June 1-April 30 (closed in May)          Bag Limit: 1 fish per person          Vessel Limit: 3 fish           -If recreational fishing in federal waters is closed, recreational fishing in all SC state waters is also closed.</p>	
<p>GA</p>	<p>Bag Limit: 1 fish per person          Minimum Size: 36 in fork length          Vessel Limit: 6 fish          Season: March 1-October 31</p>	
<p><b>*Florida has a declared interest in the Atlantic Coastal Migratory Group, but their cobia fisheries are managed as part of the Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group due to cobia stock boundaries.</b></p>		

**DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW**

**Table 2. Commercial landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2014-2023.** Sources: 2024 state compliance reports for 2023 fishing year; for years prior to 2023, personal communication with Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program [ACCSP].

<b>Year</b>	<b>RI</b>	<b>CT*</b>	<b>NY</b>	<b>NJ</b>	<b>DE</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>PRFC</b>	<b>VA</b>	<b>NC</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>GA</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2014</b>	C		311	359		C		21,255	41,798	3,492	C	68,076
<b>2015</b>	C		235	C		C		25,352	52,684	2,487	C	82,117
<b>2016</b>	183		114	282	C	C		29,459	48,244	4,064	C	83,583
<b>2017</b>	115		80	C	C	C		26,748	16,890	4,261	C	52,376
<b>2018</b>	290	C	388	707		C		21,355	16,578	2,723	C	42,711
<b>2019</b>	352		1,191	C	C	C	2,375	33,496	21,553	2,673	C	63,467
<b>2020</b>	844	C	5,183	851	C	C	378	27,768	38,344	1,588	C	75,303
<b>2021</b>	797	C	1,581	2,273		C	816	29,425	29,301	2,067	C	66,752
<b>2022</b>	83		1,509	C		C	147	38,666	32,686	1,386		75,418
<b>2023</b>	139	C	436	1,328		C		29,842	31,301	1,501	0	64,547

C: confidential landings.

\*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

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**Table 3. Recreational harvest (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2014-2023.** Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried April 2024.

<b>Year</b>	<b>RI</b>	<b>CT*</b>	<b>NY</b>	<b>NJ</b>	<b>DE</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>VA</b>	<b>NC</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>GA</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2014</b>							499,218	645,427	79,171	42,481	1,266,297
<b>2015</b>							1,166,000	1,925,762	434,899	102,917	3,629,578
<b>2016</b>						307	1,505,528	838,363	159,345		2,503,543
<b>2017</b>							488,287	872,861		390	1,361,538
<b>2018</b>		4,136			15,053	4,647	2,259,661	685,962	205,647	6,081	3,181,187
<b>2019</b>							1,573,485	254,963	64,937	1,632	1,895,017
<b>2020</b>		1,595				38,991	1,541,393	407,883	247,250	44,976	2,282,088
<b>2021</b>				6,060		131,129	1,722,619	356,340	217,129	170,356	2,603,633
<b>2022</b>			144,715	20,970			1,129,258	306,411	139,599	142,606	1,883,559
<b>2023</b>							2,467,557	12,523	87,486	212,679	2,780,245

\*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

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**Table 4. Recreational harvest (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2014-2023.**  
**Coastwide harvest shaded in red if coastwide harvest target for 2020-2024 was exceeded.**

Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried April 2024.

<b>Year</b>	<b>RI</b>	<b>CT*</b>	<b>NY</b>	<b>NJ</b>	<b>DE</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>VA</b>	<b>NC</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>GA</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2014</b>							21,585	24,601	3,883	2,168	52,237
<b>2015</b>							38,672	47,110	15,575	8,934	110,291
<b>2016</b>						56	43,780	26,421	5,437		75,694
<b>2017</b>							14,613	25,025		19	39,657
<b>2018</b>		569			581	206	80,679	25,331	6,340	233	113,939
<b>2019</b>							55,770	10,090	2,381	72	68,313
<b>2020</b>		219				1,360	50,287	15,067	7,650	2,203	76,786
<b>2021</b>				250		5,084	57,135	10,970	8,858	8,510	90,807
<b>2022</b>			3,462	711			39,668	12,330	6,988	6,641	69,800
<b>2023</b>	361						81,824	629	4,129	11,368	98,311
<b>Soft Target 2020-2024</b>	769 <i>de minimis</i> set-aside						30,302	29,302	9,306	7,229	76,908

\*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

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**Table 5. Recreational live releases (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2014-2023.**

Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried April 2024.

<b>Year</b>	<b>MA*</b>	<b>RI</b>	<b>CT*</b>	<b>NY</b>	<b>NJ</b>	<b>DE</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>VA</b>	<b>NC</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>GA</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2014</b>								58,092	32,184	42,811		133,087
<b>2015</b>					416			40,689	44,254	12,369	283	98,011
<b>2016</b>							1,075	81,482	39,237	20,255	2,917	144,966
<b>2017</b>								77,184	125,251	11,359	4,830	218,624
<b>2018</b>					2,879		12,090	194,865	68,219	71,020	18,056	367,129
<b>2019</b>					10,166	30	251	184,716	38,285	59,724	9,080	302,252
<b>2020</b>				2,979		564	8,233	146,913	51,158	23,384	15,091	245,343
<b>2021</b>						197	12,344	187,872	40,136	39,341	20,578	300,468
<b>2022</b>				722	0	0	0	84,150	46,777	43,131	14,828	189,608
<b>2023</b>	1,554	450			3,582	0	0	141,956	32,590	39,864	28,894	248,890

\*MA and CT do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.



# Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Coastal Pelagics Management Board

**FROM:** South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel

**DATE:** July 30, 2024

**SUBJECT:** Advisory Panel Recommendations on Cobia Draft Addendum II Options

The South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on July 25, 2024 to discuss AP recommendations on the proposed options in Atlantic Cobia Draft Addendum II to Amendment 1. ASMFC staff provided the AP with an overview of the draft addendum background, proposed options, and a summary of public comments. The following is a summary of the AP's recommended options and rationale.

### AP Members in Attendance

Craig Freeman (AP Chair, VA for-hire/rec./comm.)  
Tom Powers (VA recreational)  
Mary Ellon Ballance (NC commercial)  
Bernie McCants (NC recreational)  
Glenn Skinner (NC commercial)

ASMFC Staff: Emilie Franke, Tracy Bauer

Public Attendees: Chris Batsavage (NC Board Member), Alan Bianchi (NC staff)

### ***Section 3.1 Recreational Allocation Framework***

4 AP members noted support for status quo Option A: Status quo state allocations based on 2006-2015 data for the following reasons:

- Management should not change while a stock assessment is ongoing. Allocations can be reevaluated after the current stock assessment.
- Based on the last stock assessment, overfishing was not occurring so there is no reason to change management before the next assessment.
- Changing management now and then changing it again after the next assessment (i.e., constantly changing management) is what the Board was trying to avoid, and would be hard on stakeholders, especially given the uncertain data.
- There is concern about the relatively short six-year data timeframe (2018-2023) proposed in the updated allocations with more recent data. For a pulse fishery like cobia

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with a low number of MRIP angler intercepts, bad weather could result in low harvest estimates for some years which could distort the average. With all the data uncertainty, a longer time period should be used for allocations. There is particular concern about the effects of weather on North Carolina effort and harvest.

1 AP member noted support for state allocations between Option A. status quo and Option B. state allocations with more recent data for the following reasons:

- Virginia's allocation could increase by some amount, but not to the full extent proposed in Option B. In any case, Virginia's measures should be not be loosened at this point.
- There is concern that under a coastwide allocation framework (i.e., no state or regional allocations), Virginia harvest may increase even more.

### ***Section 3.2 Future Updates to Allocations***

No specific AP comments on options in this section.

### ***Section 3.3 Data Uncertainty in Recreational Landings Evaluations***

2 AP members noted support for Option B: 5-year average used for harvest target evaluations. They noted more data are better, and the additional data years would balance years affected by weather conditions and related changes in effort, especially for states like North Carolina when cobia are only available for a short period of time.

1 AP member also noted support for the confidence interval approach in the future.

### ***Section 3.4 Overage Response for Recreational Landings Evaluations***

1 AP member noted he would typically support Option B (no reduction for overage state if another state is under and coastwide harvest is under), but is not sure whether this should be supported for cobia due to data uncertainty. It makes sense to account for how other states perform and if the coastwide harvest is sustainable, but it is questionable whether we can determine how close harvest is to the targets due to uncertainty.

### ***Section 3.5 Timeline for Setting Management Measures***

1 AP member noted support for Option B: set measures for up to 5 years in order to align management with the stock assessments. It requires resources to do these evaluations, and the evaluations should be done at this longer time interval to match when the most assessment information is available.

### ***General Comments***

As noted under Section 3.1, there was general AP concern and questions about why the Board is considering changing recreational allocation in 2025 before the current stock assessment is complete, which will result in another management change in 2026 or 2027. AP members noted that changing management multiple times within a few years is difficult for stakeholders, and it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of management measures that are only in place for a short period of time, especially given the high uncertainty.



There is ongoing concern about the high uncertainty around MRIP data, and the low number of angler intercepts for cobia and very few anglers being interviewed. Virginia had mandatory cobia harvest reporting for a few years, but the program was ended because it was difficult to implement and could not be used in the stock assessment.

AP members also noted interest in understanding the release component of the fishery, including how many cobia are released and the need for information on release mortality rates (e.g., is the release mortality rate higher during the summer?). The release mortality rate used in the previous stock assessment was 5%.