INTERSTATE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Cobia

Species Range
Coastwide, most abundant in U.S. waters from the Chesapeake Bay south through the Gulf of Mexico.

Management Unit
Rhode Island – Georgia

Stock Status
Two cobia stocks are found off the U.S. Atlantic coast: Atlantic cobia and Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group (Gulf cobia). Gulf cobia occur throughout the Gulf of Mexico and extend to Florida's east coast, while Atlantic cobia occur from Georgia north. As of 2019, the Atlantic cobia stock is managed solely by the Commission.

In 2020, SEDAR 58 was approved by the Board for management use for Atlantic cobia. This new benchmark stock assessment provided new reference points and determined that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The new estimates yielded much higher estimates of the biomass and spawning stock biomass compared to the previous stock assessment. The increase in biomass led to increased quotas for both the recreational and commercial fisheries, and initiated the development of Addendum I to Amendment 1.

The next stock assessment for the Atlantic cobia stock is underway with an expected completion date of mid-2027. The terminal year will be 2025, including the revised MRIP time series, and the assessment will likely be available to inform 2028 management measures.

Involved States and Jurisdictions
RI, NJ, DE, MD, PRFC, VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, NMFS, SAFMC

Active Boards/Committees
Coastal Pelagics Management Board, Cobia Technical Committee, Cobia Plan Review Team, Cobia Plan Development Team, Cobia Stock Assessment Subcommittee, South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel

Chairs
Board, Chair – Erika Burgess (5/2026); Vice-Chair – Jason McNamee
Technical Committee, Chair – Angela Giuliano (7/19); Vice-Chair – Vacant
Advisory Panel, Chair – Craig Freeman (10/2019)

Staff Lead
Emilie Franke, efranke@asmfc.org

Management Plan History

[Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Migratory Group (AMG) (November 2017)]
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 South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board (Board). Through the FMP, regulations for states with a declared interest were required to reflect several measures established federally through the CMP FMP.

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

Amendment 1 (August 2019)
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 are 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.

Addendum I (October 2020)
In response to revised MRIP numbers and the updated stock assessment in 2020, the Board initiated Addendum I. The Addendum changes the allocation of the resource between the recreational and commercial fisheries from 92% and 8% respectively to 96% and 4% respectively. The Addendum also modified the calculation of the commercial trigger, which determines when the commercial season closes. The new trigger calculates the closure trigger based on the recent 5 years of harvest, whereas the prior trigger was dependent on recent harvests. Changes to *de minimis* measures changed the set aside 4% of the commercial quota exclusively for *de minimis* states, and increased the minimum size of recreationally caught cobia to 33 inches fork length.

Addendum II (August 2024)
Approved in 2024, Addendum II modifies the recreational allocation framework, allows the Board to update allocations quickly if the underlying data are revised, expands the range of data used in harvest evaluations, and allows the Board to set management measures for a longer period of time. Notably, Addendum II changes both the geographic scope of the recreational allocation framework and the timeframe of data used as the basis for allocations. The Addendum changes the recreational allocation framework from a state-by-state to a regional framework, with a northern region of Rhode Island through Virginia and a southern region of North Carolina through Georgia. The new regional allocation framework is intended to reduce uncertainty by using harvest estimates based on a larger sample size combining multiple states in a region, instead of individual state-level harvest estimates. Each region is allocated part of the recreational quota based on each region's percentage of the coastwide harvest in number of fish over the last ten years, combining 50% of 2014-2023 data and 50% of 2018-2023 data. This results in 68.7% of the recreational quota available to the northern region and 31.3% of the quota available to the southern region. Using the more recent data, as compared to previously using 2006-2015 data, accounts for changes in harvest and potential range expansion of the species in recent years. This new recreational allocation framework will be used to set recreational measures for 2025 and beyond.

Annual Events

- Cobia compliance reports are due July 1 each year.