



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board

FROM: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee

DATE: January 27, 2026

SUBJECT: Recommendations for Distribution of 20% Liberalization for Black Sea Bass Recreational Management Measures

Background

In December 2025, the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) met jointly to set 2026 and 2027 recreational management measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. The Board and Council approved a 20% liberalization for black sea bass in 2026. In 2027, recreational management measures for black sea bass will remain status quo from 2026. Summer flounder and scup recreational management measures will remain status quo in 2026 and 2027. Status quo recreational management measures for summer flounder and scup may be found in Tables 6 and 7.

For black sea bass, the Board and Council opted to proceed with the regional conservation equivalency processes as outlined in [Addenda XXXI](#) and XXXII, as opposed to implementing uniform coastwide measures. [Addendum XXXII](#) established a three-region approach to setting recreational management measures for black sea bass where regions are defined as Massachusetts-New York, New Jersey, and Delaware-North Carolina (North of Cape Hatteras). Each time recreational management measures are set, the Board may specify how a liberalization or reduction in harvest is distributed among the regions (resulting in de facto regional harvest targets), based on factors including (but not limited to) resource distribution and expected availability, angler effort, prior year fishery performance, and Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee (TC) recommendations. The regions will then develop recreational measures that achieve the coastwide recreational harvest target. Additionally, states within a region will work together to develop recreational management measures that aim to achieve but not exceed the regional recreational harvest targets. However, states within a region do not need to propose or implement identical recreational management measures. In the event that a region is allowed to liberalize harvest, states will develop their measures in a manner that collectively reduces intraregional disparities (e.g. states with relatively restrictive measures, as determined by the TC based on performance, should be allowed a larger liberalization, while states with relatively liberal measures should take a smaller liberalization or remain at status quo). Addendum XXXII also states the Board should reduce interregional differences between measures when possible, taking into account regional differences in availability.

The TC met on January 6, 2026 and January 22, 2026 to review available data and develop recommendations for on how the 20% black sea bass liberalization could be distributed among regions. In addition, the TC reviewed a proposed method to estimate harvest in previously closed MRIP waves, which was developed with assistance from Northeast Fishery Science Center staff.

Technical Committee Considerations and Recommendations

Due to a lack of consensus, the TC recommends the Board consider the following possible options for how to distribute the 20% liberalization among the regions:

- a) The liberalization is distributed equally between regions, i.e., each region will work separately to achieve but not exceed a 20% liberalization.
- b) The Board assigns a percent liberalization to a region or regions, and the other regions' percent liberalizations are adjusted accordingly to achieve the 20% coastwide liberalization.
- c) The Board assigns one or more management measures to a region or regions, resulting in de facto percent liberalization(s), and the other regions' percent liberalizations are adjusted accordingly to achieve the 20% coastwide liberalization.

When considering how a 20% liberalization could be distributed, it is important to note that the percent liberalizations are not equivalent between regions due to the different scale of harvest in each region. For example, if the southern region's proposed measures are only estimated to increase harvest within their region by 10%, that does not raise the other regions' allowed liberalizations by an equivalent 10%. If the Board is considering either options B or C, and starts with a focal region, it would be helpful to calculate the resulting percent change in the other two regions to understand the implications of that choice coastwide before making a final decision.

As a part of their discussion, the TC reviewed several analyses, which are included in this memo to be considered by the Board to assist in the determination of how the 20% liberalization will be distributed. These analyses include the following:

1. Estimated Liberalizations Achieved from Example Management Measures

The median¹ coastwide 2026 harvest estimated by the Recreation Demand Model (RDM) if management measures are held status quo is 5,860,833 pounds (Table 1). Coastwide harvest liberalized by 20%, calculated using the median coastwide value, is 7,033,000 pounds, an increase of 1,172,167 pounds. Tables 2 and 3 provide examples of the impacts of specific management measures on harvest, including the degree of liberalization in harvest, as estimated by the RDM. These are only examples that were preliminarily discussed by the TC for the sake of understanding the degree of the resulting liberalization and are not a list of the changes being considered by the states. Black sea bass management measures from 2025 (i.e., status quo management measures) can be found in Table 5.

Table 1. RDM-estimated harvest in pounds by state in 2026 under status quo management measures. The individual median harvest estimates calculated by state do not add up to the total coastwide median harvest because coastwide median harvest is calculated by summing the coastwide harvest by RDM draw and taking the median of all of those draws.

State	Status Quo Median Harvest (lbs)
MA	554,158
RI	529,332
CT	449,579
NY	628,441
NJ	2,453,967
DE	236,211

¹ All estimates of harvest in this memo are provided as the median of the range of values produced by the RDM.

State	Status Quo Median Harvest (lbs)
MD	258,229
VA	157,639
NC	237,562
Coastwide	5,860,833 ²

Table 2. The percent liberalizations and median harvest in pounds of black sea bass by state in the northern region (MA-NY) resulting from **a region-wide minimum size limit of 16 inches and a region-wide minimum size limit of 15.5 inches**, as estimated by the RDM. In addition, **the increased season included for CT is for the private and shore modes, for 5/18-11/28**. In 2025, the minimum size limit was 16.5 inches in Massachusetts, New York, and for the private/shore mode in Rhode Island; the minimum size limit was 16 inches in Connecticut and for the for-hire mode in Rhode Island. Connecticut's status quo season for private and shore modes is 5/17-6/23 and 7/8-11/25. All other management measures in the northern region are held status quo.

	Region-wide 16-inches minimum size and an increased season for CT		Region-wide 15.5-inches minimum size and an increased season for CT	
State	Percent Liberalization	Median Harvest (lbs)	Percent Liberalization	Median Harvest (lbs)
MA	11.2%	618,423	23.6%	690,884
RI	12.4%	576,565	22.2%	627,123
CT	6.5%	468,493	11.7%	494,056
NY	25.4%	777,968	57.1%	991,949
Region-wide	13.9%	2,488,961 ²	29.1%	2,901,998 ²

Table 3. The percent liberalizations and median harvest in pounds of black sea bass by state in the southern region (DE-NC) resulting from **a region-wide minimum size limit of 12.5 inches and season from 5/1 through 12/31** and **a region-wide minimum size limit of 12.5 inches and season from 4/19 through 12/31**, as estimated by the RDM and adjusted by proposed methodology (Section "Additional Proposed Methodology" below). In 2025, the minimum size limit was 13 inches in the southern region; the season was 5/15 through 9/30 and 10/10 through 12/31. All other management measures in the southern region are held status quo.

	Region-wide 12.5-inches minimum size and 5/1-12/31 season		Region-wide 12.5-inches minimum size and 4/19-12/31 season	
State	Percent Liberalization	Median Harvest (lbs)	Percent Liberalization	Median Harvest (lbs)
DE	14.1%	271,224	15.4%	275,046
MD	11.2%	286,263	13.1%	292,464
VA	18.3%	190,303	20.8%	192,527
NC	21.8%	290,701	28.5%	306,706
Region-wide	16.5%	1,077,131 ²	19.9%	1,109,552 ²

² Individual state median harvest estimates do not add up to this value because the coastwide harvest is calculated by summing each state harvest estimate by draw from the RDM and taking the median of those values.

2. Angler Satisfaction

Angler satisfaction, as estimated by the RDM, is a measure of compensating variation, or the amount of money you would need to give to or take from a person after a change to keep them just as well off as they were before the change. This metric integrates changes in angler satisfaction due to regulations and changes in availability of fish in the system, and is based on changes in expected trip-level harvest and discards of all three species. For example, if fish are less available, compensating variation is how much money someone could be paid to offset the loss. If fish are more available, compensating variation is how much money could be taken away while leaving them no worse off. It measures the angler welfare impact of a change, not just how spending changes. If fish are no more or less available and management measures do not change, the compensating variation, or angler satisfaction, would be zero.

The TC reviewed angler satisfaction values for the status quo scenario by state, which looks at comparing the difference of the compensating variation between the 2024 and 2026 fishing years, if regulations were to remain the same (Figure 1). Angler satisfaction values from the RDM generally indicate anglers in NJ-NC will have improved satisfaction and anglers in MA-NY will have worse satisfaction in 2026 under status quo management measures for all three species.

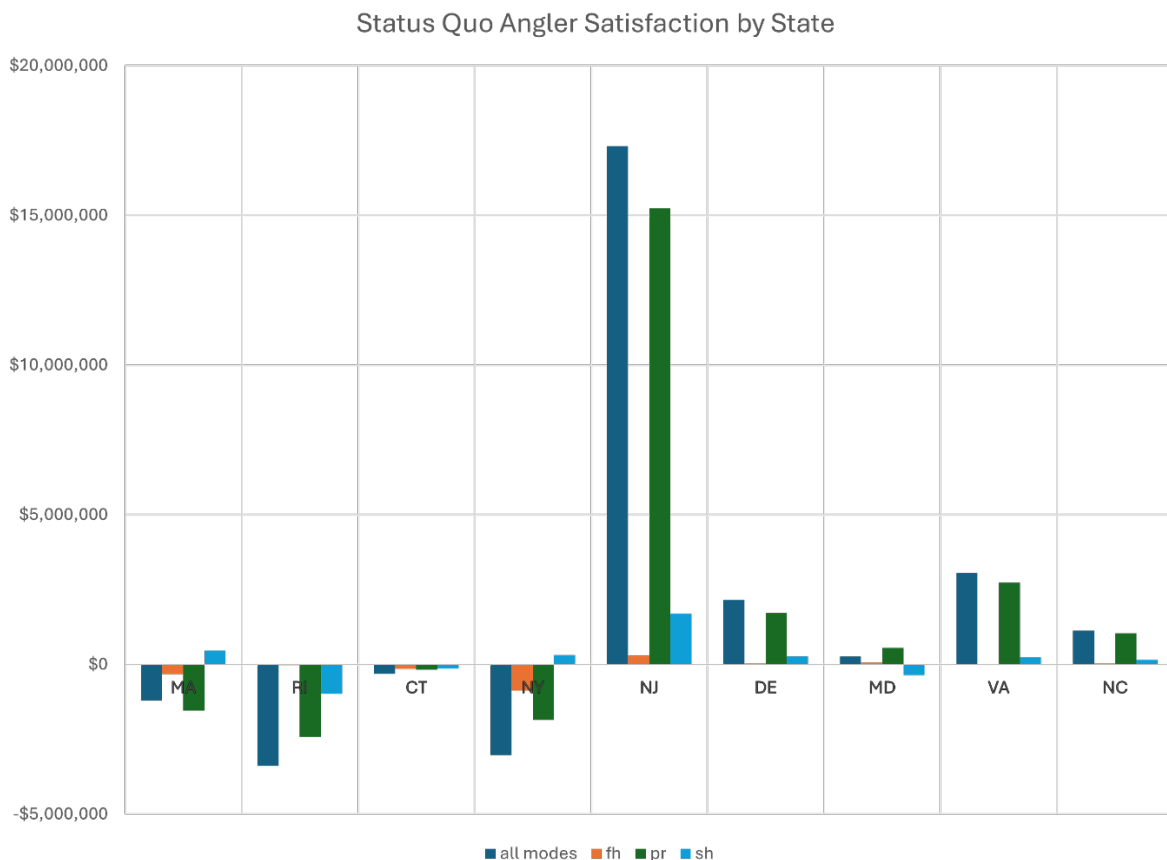


Figure 1. Angler satisfaction if 2024 regulations were to remain the same in 2026, as estimated by the RDM by state for all modes, the for-hire mode (fh), private mode (pr), and shore-based mode (sh). Negative values indicate that anglers would need to be paid to offset a loss, while positive values indicate that anglers could lose money and still be better off than they were in 2024.

3. Discard-to-Catch Ratios

Figures 2 and 3 provide information on black sea bass discards relative to overall catch by state and region, as calculated by the RDM for 2026 under status quo measures. New York, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Connecticut would have the highest black sea bass discard rates. For example, in New York, 93% of the black sea bass catch is estimated to be discarded. Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey would have the lowest discard rates. When analyzing discards by region, the northern region would have the highest overall percentage of discards, followed by the southern region and New Jersey. Values from North Carolina include the entire state's estimated landings and discards.

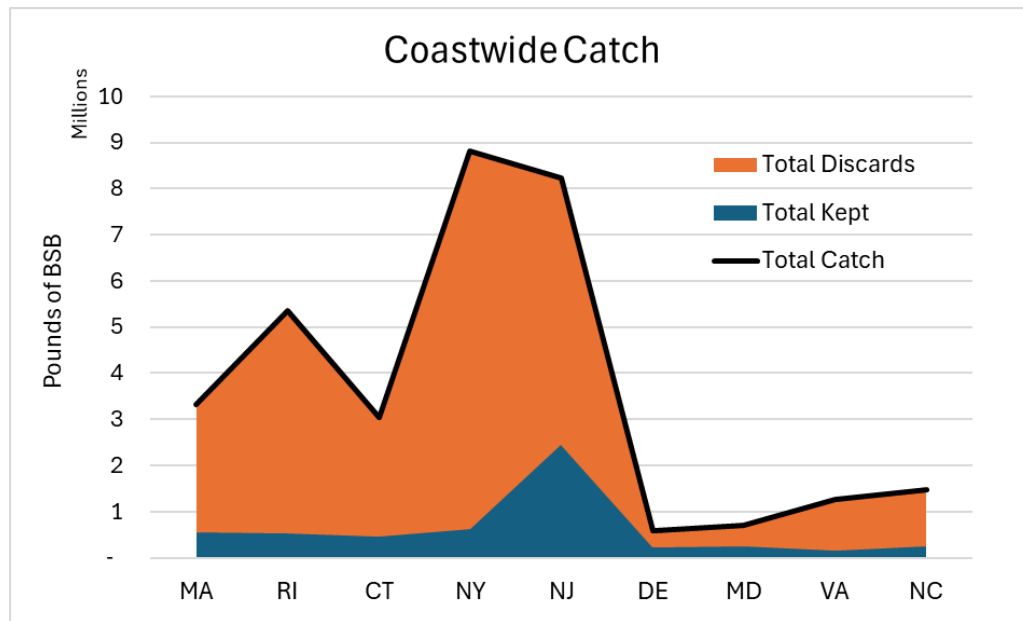


Figure 2. Total black sea bass recreational catch in millions of pounds by state (Massachusetts through North Carolina) as estimated by the RDM for 2026 under status quo management measures. Orange shows millions of pounds of black sea bass discarded recreationally and blue shows millions of pounds of black sea bass kept.

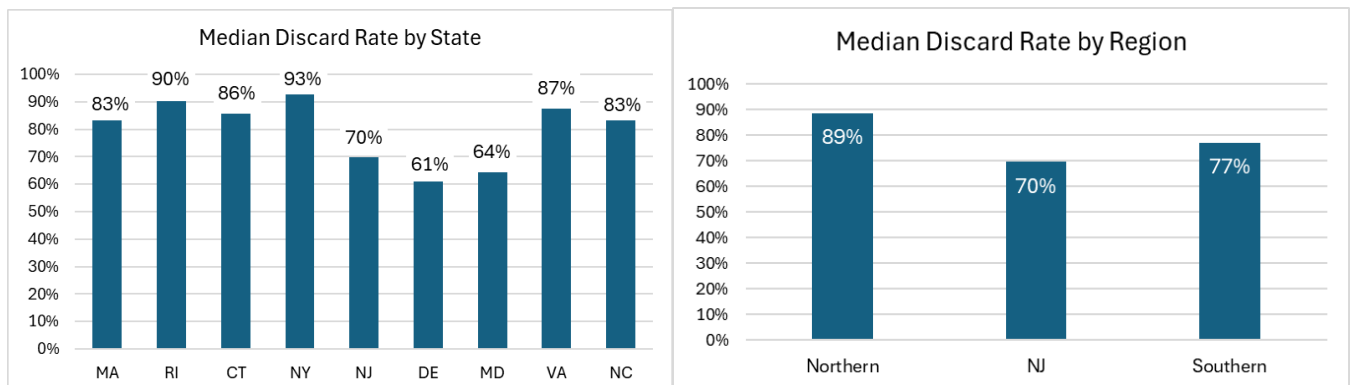


Figure 3. Median discard rate (percent of total black sea bass recreational catch that would be discarded under status quo measures) by state (Massachusetts through North Carolina) and by region (Northern=Massachusetts through New York, New Jersey, Southern=Delaware through North Carolina).

4. Coastal Distribution of Black Sea Bass Abundance

Figure 4, from the 2025 Black Sea Bass Management Track Assessment, shows trends in abundance of black sea bass for the North and South stock assessment sub-units. In the assessment, black sea bass abundance is separated out into these two spatial sub-units, with New Jersey split approximately at Hudson Canyon. The indices show black sea bass abundance in the northern assessment sub-unit, which has been increasing since the mid-2000's, is at a time series high. Comparatively, black sea bass abundance in the southern sub-unit has generally varied without trend, although abundance has increased in the last 5-10 years.

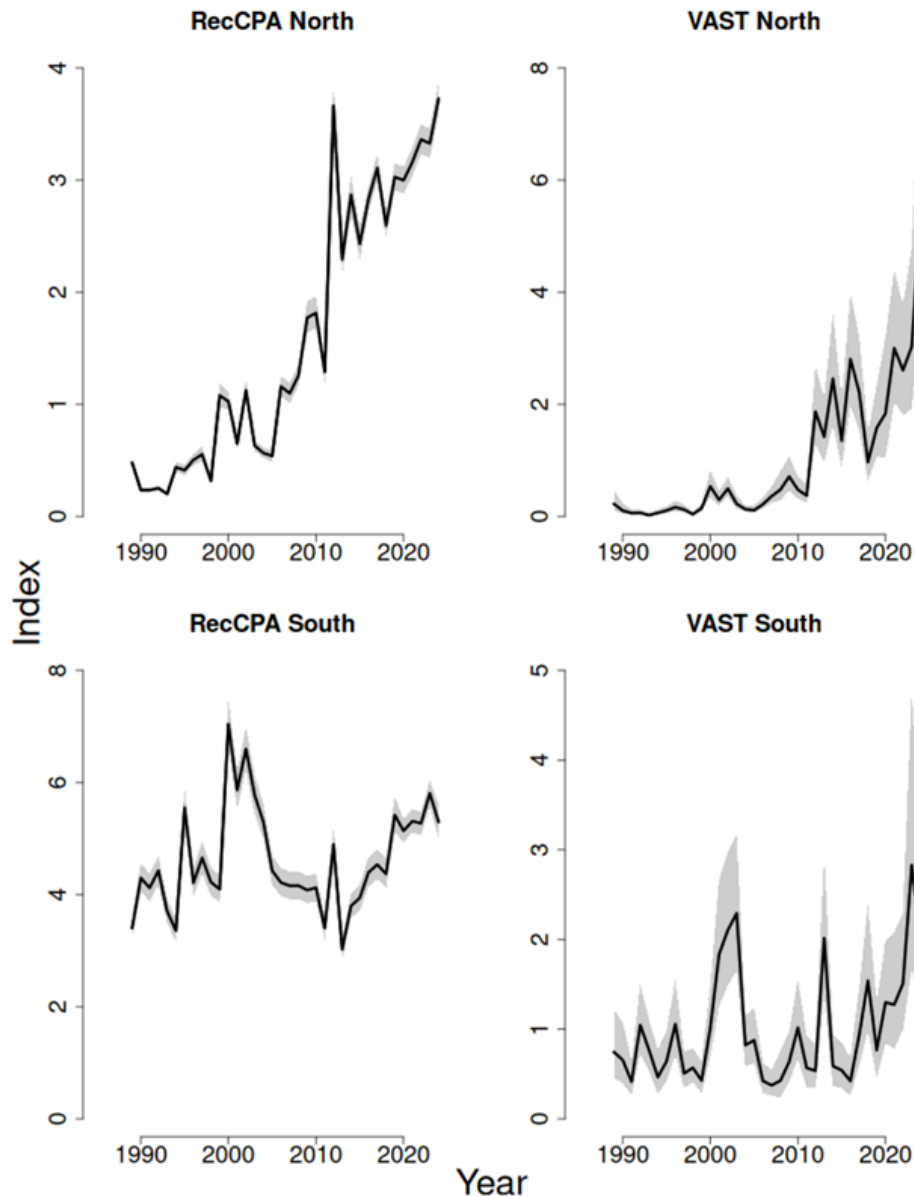


Figure 4. Indices of abundance for black sea bass between 1989-2024 for the recreational catch-per-angler (RecCPA) and the Vector Autoregressive Spatio-Temporal Model (VAST) models in the North and South regions. The approximate 95% lognormal confidence intervals are shown. Source: [2025 Black Sea Bass Management Track Assessment Report](#).

5. Catch-per-trip

Table 4 provides the average recreational catch (harvest and releases) of black sea bass by state.

Table 4. Average recreational catch-per-trip of black sea bass by state, as calculated from MRIP data from wave 4 of 2023 through wave 3 of 2025.

State	Average Catch-Per-Trip
MA	2.89
RI	3.19
CT	2.59
NY	1.59
NJ	2.00
DE	1.83
MD	1.78
VA	1.61
NC	3.69

Additional Proposed Methodology

The TC also reviewed a proposed methodology from the southern region to estimate harvest in MRIP waves that were not previously open to black sea bass recreational harvest.

Stakeholders from the southern region were interested in opening dates as early as April 15th, as the fish can move to the fishing grounds earlier than the current opening date of May 15th. However, since the fishery has previously been closed during that window in the region, the RDM estimate of harvest during that time will be an underestimate, since it depends on past MRIP catch data from that wave during which anglers were not targeting black sea bass. TC members from southern states and RDM developers calculated an adjustment meant to be a conservative estimate of harvest under April opening scenarios. The RDM predicts increases when opening is as early as May 1st since it is dependent on wave 3 data (May and June), and harvest is historically open during the majority of wave 3. Therefore, southern state TC members calculated the expected harvest increase when changing from May 15th to May 1st and divided by 14 to arrive at a daily rate. Southern state TC members then added 16 days of this harvest to the May 1st estimate to arrive at an adjusted estimate for an April 15th start date. That corresponds to a median 21.1% increase from the status quo for the southern region. In order to keep median percent increase under 20%, an April 19th or later opening would be necessary (a 19.9% increase). Southern state TC members believe this method uses catch data from wave 3 to better estimate the behavior of anglers during an April opening. However, this should be considered a conservative estimate, since the fish may not always move to the fishing grounds as early as proposed for opening. An important note is that until Federal conservation equivalency is approved through a Federal rulemaking, those with Federal permits and/or fishing in the EEZ will be under the Federal coastwide measures if they are more restrictive than state measures.

The TC expressed no concerns with this methodology.

Next Steps

Following the Board's decision on how the 20% liberalization will be distributed among the regions, the TC will use the RDM and associated decision support tool to recommend options for 2026 and 2027

recreational management measures for black sea bass which meet but do not exceed a 20% liberalization coastwide. Specific black sea bass measures and status quo summer flounder and scup measures (Tables 6 and 7) are associated with each option, as the model relies on inputs of measures from all three species to calculate estimates of 2026 harvest. Options will be organized by region (Massachusetts-New York, New Jersey, Delaware-North Carolina).

A template for submitting black sea bass recreational measure options has been distributed to the TC. All recreational management measure options should be submitted using this template to Tracey Bauer (tbauer@asmfc.org) no later than Monday, February 16, 2026.

Appendix 1.

Table 5. 2025 recreational management measures for black sea bass.

	STATE	Size Limit	Possession Limit	Open Season
Northern Region	MASSACHUSETTS	16.5"	4 fish	May 17-September 1
	RHODE ISLAND Private & Shore	16.5"	2 fish	May 22-August 26
			3 fish	August 27-December 31
	RI For-Hire	16"	2 fish	June 18-August 31
			6 fish	September 1-December 31
	CONNECTICUT Private & Shore	16"	5 fish	May 17-June 23; July 8-November 25
	CT (Authorized For-Hire Monitoring Program vessels)		5 fish	May 17-August 31
			7 fish	September 1-December 31
	NEW YORK	16.5"	3 fish	June 23-August 31
6 fish			September 1-December 31	
	NEW JERSEY	12.5"	10 fish	May 17-June 19
			1 fish	July 1-August 31
			10 fish	October 1-October 31
			15 fish	November 1-December 31
Southern Region	DELAWARE	13"	15 fish	May 15-September 30; October 10-December 31
	MARYLAND			May 15-September 30; October 10-December 31
	VIRGINIA			May 15-July 15; August 5-December 31
	NORTH CAROLINA - North of Cape Hatteras (N of 35° 15'N)			May 15-September 30; October 10-December 31

Table 6. 2026 and 2027 recreational management measures for summer flounder (status quo from 2025).

STATE	Mode	Size Limit	Possession Limit	Open Season
MASSACHUSETTS	Private & For-Hire	17.5"	5 fish	May 24 – September 23
	Shore	16.5"		
RHODE ISLAND	All	19"	6 fish	April 1 – December 31
Rhode Island Shore Program (7 designated shore sites)	Shore	19"	4 fish ³	
		17"	2 fish ¹	
CONNECTICUT	All	19"	3 fish	May 4 – August 1
		19.5"		August 2 – October 15
Connecticut Enhanced Opportunity Shore Fishing Sites (45 designated shore sites)	Shore	17"	3 fish	May 4 – October 15
NEW YORK	All	19"	3 fish	May 4 – August 1
		19.5"		August 2 – October 15
NEW JERSEY	All	18"	3 fish	May 4 – September 25
New Jersey Shore Program Site (IBSP)	Shore	16"	2 fish	
New Jersey Delaware Bay and Tributaries	All	17"	3 fish	
DELAWARE, MARYLAND, & VIRGINIA	All	16"	4 fish	January 1 – May 31
		17.5"		June 1 – December 31
NORTH CAROLINA	All	15"	1 fish	August 16 – September 30 ⁴

³ Combined possession limit of 6 fish; no more than 2 fish at 17-inch minimum size limit.

⁴ Season subject to become more restrictive pending southern flounder management needs.

Table 7. 2026 and 2027 recreational management measures for scup (status quo from 2025).

STATE	Mode	Size Limit	Possession Limit	Open Season
MASSACHUSETTS	Shore	9.5"	30 fish	May 1 – December 31
	Private	11"		
	For-Hire	11"	40 fish	May 1 – June 30
			30 fish	July 1 – December 31
RHODE ISLAND	Shore	9.5"	30 fish	May 1 – December 31
	Private	11"		
	For-Hire	11"	30 fish	May 1 – August 31
			40 fish	September 1 – October 31
			30 fish	November 1 – October 31
CONNECTICUT	Shore	9.5"	30 fish	May 1 – December 31
	Private	11"		
	For-Hire	11"	30 fish	May 1 – August 31
			40 fish	September 1 – October 31
			30 fish	November 1 – December 31
NEW YORK	Shore	9.5"	30 fish	May 1 – December 31
	Private	11"		
	For-Hire	11"	30 fish	May 1 – August 31
			40 fish	September 1 – October 31
			30 fish	November 1 – December 31
NEW JERSEY	All	10"	30 fish	January 1 – June 30
				September 1 – December 31
DELAWARE, MARYLAND, VIRGINIA, & NORTH CAROLINA (North of Cape Hatteras, N of 35° 15'N)	All	9"	30 fish	January 1 – December 31