



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

NEWS RELEASE

Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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PRESS CONTACT: Tina Berger
703.842.0749

ASMFC Presents 2025 Annual Awards of Excellence

Arlington, VA – Last evening, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission presented its Annual Awards of Excellence to a number of individuals for their outstanding contributions to the management, legislative, scientific, outreach, and law enforcement efforts along the Atlantic coast.

“Every year a great many people contribute to the success of fisheries management along the Atlantic coast. The Commission’s Annual Awards of Excellence recognize outstanding efforts by professionals who have made a difference in the way we manage and conserve our fisheries,” said Awards Committee Chair Spud Woodward of Georgia. “I am humbled by the breadth and extent of accomplishments of the recipients and am grateful for their dedication to Atlantic coast fisheries.”



Award Recipients from left: Chris Baker, Andrew Alexander, Megan Ware, Joey Ballenger, Alexander Law, Julie Simpson, Julia Byrd, Kathy Knowlton, and Brandi Salmon

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as a deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and diadromous species.

Management and Policy Contributions

Megan Ware, Maine Department of Marine Resources (ME DMR)

Megan Ware's dedication, expertise, and collaborative spirit have made a significant and lasting positive impact on the management and sustainability of Maine's marine resources, and by extension, the health of the broader Atlantic coast ecosystem.

Since 2019, Ms. Ware has served as Pat Keliher's (and now Carl Wilson's) ongoing proxy, participating on several management boards, including those for American eel, Atlantic menhaden, and as current Chair for Atlantic striped bass. Her contributions to the development of interstate FMPs, Maine's regulations, and collaboration with fishermen have been instrumental in maintaining healthy and sustainable stocks, while ensuring the long-term viability of these fisheries.

A highly effective collaborator and leader, Ms. Ware has the remarkable ability to build consensus among diverse stakeholders, facilitate productive discussions, and communicate complex scientific information clearly and effectively. Her work as Chair of the Striped Bass Board is a testament to her ability to bring together different perspectives, achieve shared goals, and foster a sense of shared responsibility for the management of marine resources. Ms. Ware's approach to being board chair has truly raised the bar for others who are or will be in this role. She works closely with staff to ensure she fully understands the relevant information and can accurately communicate that information at Board meetings. She not only attends Maine's public hearings but those of other states as well, with the intent of absorbing the complexity of issues along the coast. Dedicated to a strong collaborative process, Ms. Ware works with Board members in between meetings to understand their divergent viewpoints so that she can effectively guide the Board during very difficult conversations.

Ms. Ware's contributions extend beyond immediate management needs. She is also dedicated to long-term planning, research initiatives, education, and outreach. Her work in this area will have a lasting positive impact on the future of Maine's marine resources. Ms. Ware's dedication to science-based management, her commitment to collaboration, and her passion for marine conservation make her a true asset to ME DMR and the broader Atlantic fisheries community.

Congressional & Legislative Contributions

Alexander Law, ASMFC Legislative Program Coordinator

In his two and a half years with the Commission, Alexander Law has strengthened the Commission's presence on Capitol Hill. With his prior experience working on Congressional and legislative issues, Mr. Law has been instrumental in facilitating meetings between Commissioners and Congressional offices during our quarterly meetings and has built important relationships with the offices that are critical to furthering the Commission's mission.

Mr. Law has focused on conveying the Commission's appropriations priorities to NOAA Fisheries and Congressional offices. This process involves submitting the priorities to numerous offices and following up with dozens of meetings. Mr. Law's efforts, when combined with those of the states', have resulted in strong financial support for Commission priorities over the past few years.

Mr. Law has revitalized the Commission's Legislative Committee, which now regularly meets to develop positions on pending legislation and develop strategies for engaging Capitol Hill on issues important to the Commission. He has excelled at developing partnerships to advance Commission priorities by working

the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and the other Interstate Fisheries Commissions to engage in the reauthorization of the Sportfish Restoration Act. This partnership has resulted in draft language that would increase support for the Commission and the states as contributions to the Sportfish Restoration fund grow.

Throughout the first 100 days of the new Administration, Mr. Law has been tracking their priorities and actions and developing relationships with the 119th Congress. We are hopeful that Alexander's Hill experience and appropriations messaging will yield positive results for the Commission and the states in this and future budget cycles.

Scientific & Technical Contributions

Dr. Joey Ballenger, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

Over the years, Joey Ballenger has earned the reputation of being a highly valued member of several Commission technical committees, stock assessment subcommittees, and science committees, with his efforts widely respected by his colleagues, fisheries scientists external to the Commission process, and fisheries managers. He currently serves on the Assessment Science Committee, which he chaired from 2022-2023, and represents South Carolina on the Atlantic Menhaden Technical Committee and Red Drum Stock Assessment Subcommittee.

Dr. Ballenger's most notable work, however, has been as Chair of Red Drum Stock Assessment Subcommittee for the past two assessments. Throughout the long process, he effectively kept the Subcommittee engaged and productive and even brought in two external contributors to the process to develop fishery selectivity estimates and tag-recapture mortality estimates for use in the assessment. He exhibited innovation and creativity by introducing a new Stock Synthesis model to the red drum stock assessment, which was used to determine a spawning stock biomass threshold and target for the first time. During the peer review workshop, Dr. Ballenger met with peer reviewers after hours to get training on reanalyzing data with new spatiotemporal methods recommended by reviewers to include in the stock assessment sensitivity analyses. Dr. also provided outreach on assessment data, methods, and results to local South Carolina stakeholders, in addition to presentations to the Sciaenids Management Board.

Dr. Ballenger's knowledge and expertise of sciaenids and other inshore species, the fishing industry that targets these species, and the statistical models used to assess them, have been of great benefit to the Commission, and South Carolina's management of the most popular and economically important gamefish.

Outreach & Advocacy Contributions

SciFish Core Development Team members: Julia Byrd and Meg Withers, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council; Brandi Salmon and Ami Staples, North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries; Kathy Knowlton, Georgia Coastal Resources Division; Mike Bucko, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management; Lauren Dolinger-Few and Dr. Andrew Cathey, NOAA Fisheries; and Julie DeFilippi Simpson, Atlantic Coastal Statistics Program

There are numerous citizen science projects along the Atlantic coast that contribute valuable data and knowledge to our stock assessments, but data standardization and access can be a challenge. The SciFish team developed an innovative app which standardizes the collection of citizen science data from Atlantic coast fisheries by providing a single platform for multiple data collection projects. They designed it so that

researchers can create new data collection projects with no IT development and storage costs – allowing projects to focus on the project goals and participating anglers.

For more than three years, a series of surveys, workshops, and public meetings were conducted by the Team to determine which data fields are most important to end users, scientists, managers, and other stakeholders to ensure that the SciFish platform met everyone's needs. In addition, the Team developed (1) the mobile SciFish application and project builder, (2) an application process consisting of pre- and full applications so only those projects that meet the project requirements and use sound citizen science practices are approved, and (3) an overall policy document approved by the ACCSP Coordinating Council.

The Team launched SciFish in 2024 and is already approving new projects and receiving national interest from additional partners at the state and federal level. The app is being considered by the Marine Recreational Information Program and received interest from the Pacific States Marine Fisheries

Law Enforcement Contributions

Private First Class (PFC) Andrew Alexander, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

As a Saltwater Enforcement Unit Officer with the Beaufort Unit within SC DNR Law Enforcement Region 4, PFC Alexander is responsible for enforcing recreational and commercial saltwater activities, including the training of new hires assigned to his unit. A dedicated officer, who is widely recognized for his knowledge of the waterways in his area of operation, has a reputation for being the go-to officer for Joint Enforcement Agreements (JEAs) not just in his unit but across the state, with over 100 hours of JEA patrol time in 2025.

PFC Alexander has made multiple commercial saltwater fisheries cases including license violations, harvesting shellfish in closed areas, commercial crabbing violations, and illegal shrimp trawling activity. He is also responsible for numerous recreational saltwater cases to include creel and size limit cases for saltwater gamefish, and numerous commercial crabbing cases. He has multiple JEA case packets including closed season snapper/grouper species, undersized fish, and gear violations. Known by fellow officers as "Turbo," PFC Alexander was the lead officer in a two-month long investigation, resulting in 17 cases of undersized saltwater sheepshead; a commercial crabbing investigation that resulted in 11 cases; 2 JEA case packets (one for 5 times the amount of undersized black sea bass and possession of red porgy out-of-season, and one for gag grouper out-of-season). Lastly, he observed a shrimp trawler dragging inside closed waters without commercial decals resulting in over \$4,000 in fines and seized catch.

PFC Alexander is a hardworking officer willing to go above and beyond to protect SC's natural resources. He has a phenomenal work ethic and maintains a positive working relationship with outside agencies as well, at the local, state, and federal levels. He coordinates offshore and inshore JEA patrols as well as state fishery enforcement patrols within his assigned unit.. PFC Alexander is one of the most productive fishery enforcement officers within the South Atlantic fishery law enforcement community.

Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Chris Baker, Massachusetts Environmental Police

LTC Baker, with the MA Environmental Police, began his career in the USCG, where he gained invaluable experience in maritime law enforcement and environmental conservation. Building on this foundation, he earned his Juris Doctorate, further strengthening his expertise in legal matters related to environmental and fisheries law. His intrinsic understanding of conservation law and legal issues has been a defining asset throughout his career, allowing him to navigate complex regulatory frameworks, interpret legislation with precision, and apply enforcement strategies effectively.

His deep interest in marine fisheries enforcement has been a driving force in his professional journey. From his early days aboard an offshore patrol vessel, LTC Baker quickly distinguished himself through his work ethic, sound judgment, and leadership capabilities. This led to a steady rise through the ranks in agency leadership. Over the years, he has held key supervisory positions, overseeing enforcement teams, directing large-scale regulatory operations, and mentoring officers in best practices for fisheries enforcement. His tenure in the Coastal Bureau was particularly impactful, where he played a pivotal role in enforcing commercial and recreational fishery regulations, fostering strong relationships with industry stakeholders, and ensuring regulatory compliance through strategic enforcement initiatives. His ability to balance enforcement with industry engagement has made him a trusted leader within the agency and beyond.

As a senior leader within the MA Environmental Police, LTC Baker has been instrumental in shaping agency policy, enhancing operational efficiency, and fostering interagency collaboration. His measured, confident leadership and proactive approach to problem-solving have strengthened the agency's role in fisheries law enforcement and conservation.

Beyond his contributions to the agency, LTC Baker has been a dedicated contributor to the Commission, serving as an integral member of the Law Enforcement Committee (LEC). His ability to interpret and apply fisheries regulations, along with his strategic guidance in enforcement discussions, has been instrumental in guiding the Spiny Dogfish Management Board and Northern Shrimp Section. His keen legal insight ensures that regulations are not only enforceable but also practical, effective, and fair.

LTC Baker's work has enhanced enforcement operations, improved industry collaboration, and advanced fisheries sustainability, all while ensuring adherence to sound legal principles.

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