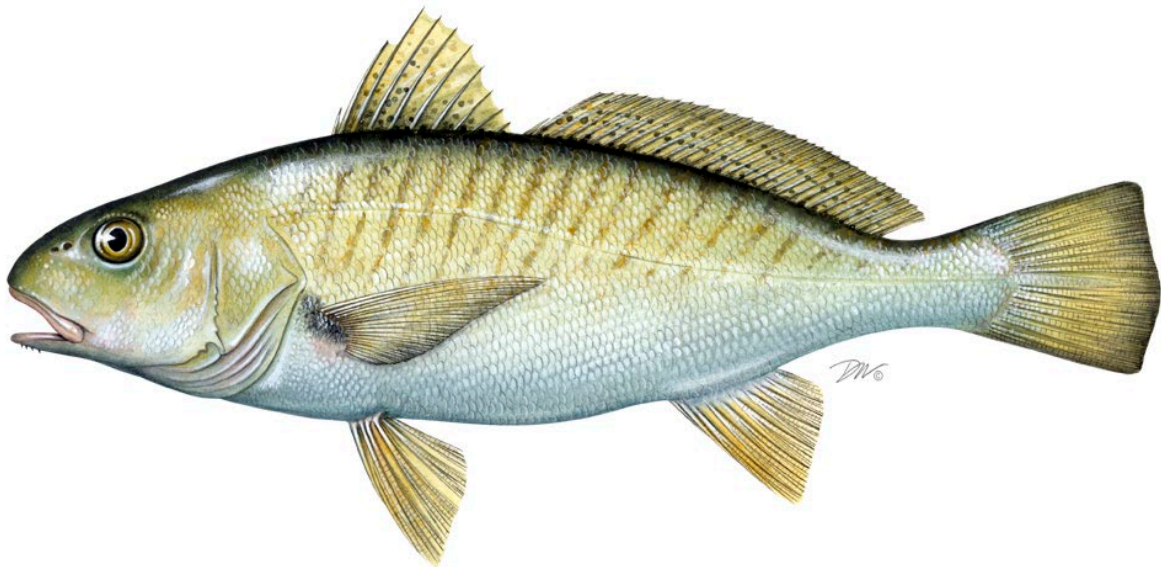


ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION
REVIEW OF THE INTERSTATE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

FOR ATLANTIC CROAKER
(Micropogonias undulatus)

2024 FISHING YEAR



Prepared by the Plan Review Team
Approved August 2025



Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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I. Status of the Fishery Management Plan

<u>Date of FMP Approval:</u>	Original FMP – October 1987
<u>Amendments:</u>	Amendment 1 – November 2005 (implemented January 2006) Addendum I – March 2011 Addendum II – August 2014 Addendum III – February 2020
<u>Management Areas:</u>	The Atlantic coast distribution of the resource from New Jersey through Florida
<u>Active Boards/Committees:</u>	Sciaenids Management Board; Atlantic Croaker Technical Committee, Stock Assessment Subcommittee, and Plan Review Team; South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel

[The Fishery Management Plan \(FMP\) for Atlantic Croaker](#) was adopted in 1987 and included the states from Maryland through Florida (ASMFC 1987). In 2004, the South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board (Board) found the recommendations in the FMP to be vague, and recommended that an amendment be prepared to define management measures necessary to achieve the goals of the FMP. The Interstate Fisheries Management Program Policy Board also adopted the finding that the original FMP did not contain any management measures that states were required to implement.

In 2002, the Board directed the Atlantic Croaker Technical Committee (TC) to conduct the first coastwide stock assessment of the species to prepare for developing an amendment. The Atlantic Croaker Stock Assessment Subcommittee developed a stock assessment in 2003, which was approved by a Southeast Data Assessment Review (SEDAR) panel for use in management in June 2004 (ASMFC 2005a). The Board quickly initiated development of an amendment and, in November 2005, approved [Amendment 1 to the Atlantic Croaker FMP](#) (ASMFC 2005b). The amendment was fully implemented by January 1, 2006.

The goal of Amendment 1 was to utilize interstate management to perpetuate the self-sustainable Atlantic croaker resource throughout its range and generate the greatest economic and social benefits from its commercial and recreational harvest and utilization over time. Amendment 1 contains four objectives:

- 1) Manage the fishing mortality rate for Atlantic croaker to provide adequate spawning potential to sustain long-term abundance of the Atlantic croaker population.
- 2) Manage the Atlantic croaker stock to maintain the spawning stock biomass above the target biomass levels and restrict fishing mortality to rates below the threshold.
- 3) Develop a management program for restoring and maintaining essential Atlantic croaker habitat.
- 4) Develop research priorities that will further refine the Atlantic croaker management program to maximize the biological, social, and economic benefits derived from the Atlantic croaker population.

Amendment 1 expanded the management area to include the states from New Jersey through Florida. Consistent with the stock assessment completed in 2004, the amendment defined two Atlantic coast management regions: the south-Atlantic region, from Florida through South Carolina; and the mid-Atlantic region, from North Carolina through New Jersey.

Amendment 1 established biological reference points (BRPs) to define an overfished and overfishing stock status for the mid-Atlantic region only. Reliable stock estimates and BRPs for the South Atlantic region could not be developed during the 2004 stock assessment due to a lack of data. The BRPs were based on maximum sustainable yield (MSY), and included threshold and target levels of fishing mortality (F) and spawning stock biomass (SSB): F threshold = F_{MSY} (estimated to be 0.39); F target = $0.75 \times F_{MSY}$ (estimated to be 0.29); SSB threshold = $0.7 \times SSB_{MSY}$ (estimated to be 44.65 million pounds); and SSB target = SSB_{MSY} (estimated to be 63.78 million pounds). An SSB estimate below the SSB threshold resulted in an overfished status determination, and an F estimate above the F threshold resulted in an overfishing status determination. The Amendment established that the Board would take action, including a stock rebuilding schedule if necessary, should the BRPs indicate the stock is overfished or overfishing is occurring.

Amendment 1 did not require any specific measures restricting recreational or commercial harvest of Atlantic croaker. States that already had more conservative measures were encouraged to maintain those regulations (Table 1). The Board was able to revise Amendment 1 through adaptive management, including any regulatory and/or monitoring requirements in subsequent addenda, along with procedures for implementing alternative management programs via conservation equivalency.

The Board initiated [Addendum I to Amendment I](#) at its August 2010 meeting, following the updated stock assessment, in order to address the proposed reference points and management unit. The stock assessment evaluated the stock as a coastwide unit, rather than the two management units established within Amendment I. In approving Addendum I, the Board endorsed consolidating the stock into one management unit, as proposed by the stock assessment. In addition, Addendum I established a procedure, similar to other species, by which the Board may approve peer-reviewed BRPs without a full administrative process, such as an amendment or addendum.

In August 2014, the Board approved [Addendum II to the Atlantic Croaker FMP](#). The Addendum established the Traffic Light Approach (TLA) as the new precautionary management framework to evaluate fishery trends and develop management actions. The TLA was originally developed as a management tool for data poor fisheries. The name comes from assigning a color (red, yellow, or green) to categorize relative levels of population indicators. When a population characteristic improves, the proportion of green in the given year increases. Harvest and abundance thresholds of 30% and 60% were established in Addendum II, representing moderate and significant concern for the fishery. If thresholds for both population characteristics achieve or exceed a threshold for a three year period, then management action is enacted.

The TLA framework replaces the management triggers stipulated in Addendum I, which dictated that action should be taken if recreational and commercial landings dropped below 70% of the previous two-year average. Those triggers were limited in their ability to illustrate long-term declines or increases in stock abundance. In contrast, the TLA approach is capable of better illustrating trends in the fishery through changes in the proportion of green, yellow, and red coloring. A 2018 TC report recommended several updates to the current TLA approach (ASMFC 2018). The Board initiated an Addendum III to incorporate these updates.

In February 2020 the Board approved [Addendum III to Amendment 1](#) of the Atlantic Croaker FMP. This addendum adjusted the TLA to incorporate additional fishery-independent indices, age information, use of regional characteristics, and changes to the management triggering mechanisms. Management triggers and responses include bag limits for the recreational fishery and percentage harvest reductions from a 10-year average for the commercial fishery. The response will be defined by which percent threshold (30% or 60%) that was exceeded in any of the 3 out of 4 terminal years.

Addendum III did not add or change any management measures or requirements, unless management-triggering mechanisms are tripped. The only pre-existing requirement is for states to submit an annual compliance report by July 1st of each year that contains commercial and recreational landings as well as results from any monitoring programs that intercept Atlantic croaker.

II. Status of the Stock

The most recent stock assessment, conducted in 2017, was not recommended for management use upon peer review. Therefore, current stock status is unknown. The Peer Review Panel did not indicate problems in the Atlantic croaker fishery that would require immediate management action but did recommend continued evaluation of the fishery using the annual TLA.

The conclusions of the 2010 stock assessment (ASMFC 2010), which is the most recent assessment that was recommended by peer review for management use, were that Atlantic croaker was not experiencing overfishing and biomass had increased and fishing mortality decreased since the late 1980s. The 2010 assessment was unable to confidently determine stock status, particularly with regards to biomass, due to an inability to adequately estimate removals from discards of the South Atlantic shrimp trawl fishery. Improvements on estimation of these discards were made in the 2017 assessment, allowing the potential for shrimp trawl discards to be included as supplemental information with the annual TLA. Annual monitoring of shrimp trawl fishery discards is important because these discards represent a considerable proportion of Atlantic croaker removals, ranging from 7% to 78% annually during 1988-2008, according to the 2010 assessment (ASMFC 2010).

One of the primary reasons that the 2017 stock assessment did not pass peer review was due to conflicting signals in harvest and abundance metrics. Theoretically, increases in adult

abundance should result in more fish available to be caught by the fishery; thus, fishing would be more efficient (greater catch per unit effort) and harvest would increase in a pattern similar to adult abundance. However, several recent abundance indices have shown increases while harvest has declined to some of the lowest levels on record. One factor thought to contribute to overestimates of adult abundance is an increase in the number of juveniles misclassified as adults in surveys that historically have typically caught adults.

In response, the Atlantic Croaker TC recommended several changes to the annual TLA through [Addendum III](#). The addendum added indices from the Chesapeake Bay Multispecies Monitoring and Assessment Program (ChesMMAAP) and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Trammel Net Survey into the adult composite characteristic index. In addition, all surveys used revised adult abundance indices and now have an established reference period of 2002-2012. Regional metrics were also used to characterize the fisheries north and south of the Virginia-North Carolina state line. The ChesMMAAP and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) surveys will be used to characterize abundance north of the state line, and SCDNR Trammel Net and Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) surveys will be used to characterize abundance south of the state line.

III. Status of the Fishery

Total Atlantic croaker harvest (recreational and commercial) from New Jersey through the east coast of Florida in 2024 is estimated at 2.4 million pounds (Tables 2 and 3, Figure 1). This represents an 5% increase in total harvest from 2023 (2.3 million pounds). The commercial and recreational fisheries harvested 34% and 66% of the 2024 total, respectively, which continues a trend that began in 2020, of the recreational fishery harvesting a majority (2020-2024 average=74%) of the total Atlantic croaker harvest. This represents a large shift from the historical split of recreational and commercial Atlantic croaker harvest, averaging 43% and 57%, respectively.

Atlantic coast commercial landings of Atlantic croaker exhibit a cyclical pattern, with low harvests in the 1960s to early 1970s and the 1980s to early 1990s, and high harvests in the mid-to-late 1970s and the mid-1990s to early 2000s (Figure 1). Commercial landings increased from a low of 3.7 million pounds in 1991 to 28.6 million pounds in 2001; however, landings have had a declining trend since then, from 47 million pounds in 2003 to 505,828 pounds in 2023, the lowest value of the time series (1950-2024). Commercial landings increased by 65% in 2024, to 835,315 pounds. Within the management unit, the majority of 2024 commercial landings came from North Carolina (54%), Virginia (22%), and Florida (12%).

From 1981-2024, recreational landings of Atlantic croaker from New Jersey through Florida have varied between 4.4 million fish in 2024 and 36.2 million fish in 1986 and by weight between 1.6 million pounds in 2024 and 18.9 million pounds in 2003 (Tables 4 and 5, Figure 2). Landings generally increased from 1990 until 2003, after which they show a declining trend through 2024. Landings in 2024 in both numbers of fish and weight were both time series lows. Virginia was responsible for 39% of the 2024 recreational landings, in numbers of fish, followed by North Carolina (19%), and Florida (18%).

The number of recreational releases generally increased over the time series until 2013 when releases steadily declined until reaching a low of 18.1 million fish released in 2018 (Table 5 and Figure 2). From 2018 through 2024, releases have overall been increasing again. In 2024, anglers released 30.4 million fish, a 12% decrease from the 34.8 million fish released in 2023. However, anglers released a greater percentage of the total recreational catch in 2024, compared to 2023. An estimated 87.3% of the total recreational croaker catch was released in 2024, the highest percentage on record for a fourth year in a row (Figure 2). The percentage of released recreational catch has shown an increasing trend from the 1990s through 2024.

IV. Status of Assessment Advice

A statistical catch-at-age (SCA) model was used in the 2010 Atlantic croaker stock assessment (ASMFC 2010). This model combines catch-at-age data from the commercial and recreational fisheries with information from fishery-independent surveys and biological information such as growth rates and natural mortality rates to estimate the size of each age class and the exploitation rate of the population. The assessment was peer reviewed by a panel of experts in conjunction with the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process.

The benchmark stock assessment conducted in 2017 was not recommended for management use due to uncertainty in biomass estimates resulting from conflicting signals among abundance indices and catch time series as well as sensitivity of model results to assumptions and model inputs. Specifically, model-estimated values of stock size, fishing mortality, and biological reference points are too uncertain for use; however, the trends in model-estimated parameters and ratio-based fishing F reference points are considered reliable. Currently, a Traffic Light Analysis (TLA) is used to monitor the stock and make management decisions in lieu of an approved stock assessment. The TLAs can be found [here](#). A benchmark stock assessment for Atlantic croaker is currently underway.

V. Status of Research and Monitoring

There are no research or monitoring programs required of the states except for the submission of an annual compliance report. New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC), Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia conduct fishery-dependent (other than catch and effort data) monitoring programs. All states and jurisdictions conduct fishery-independent monitoring programs along the Atlantic coast from New Jersey to Florida.

The NEFSC performs a randomly stratified groundfish survey from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to Maine. Atlantic croaker are one of the main species caught throughout much of the survey area and, since the surveys started in 1972, it provides a long term data set. Since 1994, there has been an increase in annual catch variability. The NEFSC survey was not carried out in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but was active again in 2021.

VI. Status of Management Measures and Issues

Fishery Management Plan

Amendment 1 was fully implemented by January 1, 2006, and provided the management plan for the 2009 fishing year. There are no interstate regulatory requirements for Atlantic croaker. Should regulatory requirements be implemented in the future, all state programs must include law enforcement capabilities adequate for successfully implementing the regulations.

Addendum I to Amendment 1 was initiated in August 2010 and approved in March 2011, in order to 1) revise the biological reference points to be ratio-based, and 2) remove the distinction of two regions within the management unit, based on the results of the 2010 stock assessment. Addendum II was approved August 2014 and established the TLA management framework for Atlantic croaker in order to better illustrate long-term trends in the fishery. Addendum III was approved February 2020 and adjusted management through the TLA by incorporating additional fishery-independent indices, age information, use of regional characteristics, and changes to the management-triggering mechanisms.

Traffic Light Approach

Harvest Composite Index (Figure 3 and Figure 4)

- Harvest restrictions were put in place in 2021 in response to the 2020 TLA triggering at the 30% threshold. These restrictions are still in place and thus the harvest metrics cannot be interpreted for the purpose of a TLA, since lower landings get a red designation but measures have been put in place to lower landings.
- Landings in both regions remain low relative to the reference period (2002-2012). It is unknown if this is due to the harvest restrictions or a continued concern for this fishery.
- The Mid-Atlantic harvest exceeds 60% red in all four terminal years. The South Atlantic harvest exceeds 30% red in all four terminal years.
- This is the 10th consecutive year the harvest metric in both regions have exceeded the 30% threshold and 7th consecutive year it has exceeded the 60% threshold in the Mid-Atlantic.

Abundance Composite Characteristic Index (Figure 5 and Figure 6)

- The Mid-Atlantic abundance metric exceeded the 30% red threshold in three of the four terminal years. Index values were up in 2024 with no red and a 79% green proportion. However, the Mid-Atlantic abundance index still exceeded the 30% threshold for three of the four terminal years, indicating moderate concern.
- The South Atlantic abundance index did not trigger at 30% or 60% thresholds. The last four years are predominantly green or yellow, representing no concern.

Conclusions

- Because the harvest metrics cannot be interpreted when management is in place to keep harvest low, interpretation of the TLA relies on the abundance metrics. Although the South Atlantic abundance index did not exceed any threshold level, the Mid-Atlantic

abundance index continues to exceed the 30% threshold in three of the four terminal years.

- Given the TLA continues to be triggered at the 30% threshold level which has not been elevated to the 60% threshold level, the TC recommends that current management measures remain in place until the 2026 Atlantic croaker assessment is complete, after which the TLA will be re-evaluated.

De Minimis Requests

States are permitted to request *de minimis* status if, for the preceding three years for which data are available, their average commercial landings or recreational landings (by weight) constitute less than 1% of the coastwide commercial or recreational landings for the same three-year period. A state may qualify for *de minimis* in either its recreational or commercial sector, or both, but will only qualify for exemptions in the sector(s) that it qualifies for as *de minimis*. Amendment 1 does not include any compliance requirements other than annual state reporting, which is still required of *de minimis* states. Addendum III, depending on the level of management action triggered, has exemptions for *de minimis* states when measures are triggered at the 30% level (see above for the TLA description). If the TLA triggers at the 60% level, then all states, including *de minimis*, must implement management measures.

In the annual compliance reports, the following states requested *de minimis* status: New Jersey (commercial and recreational fisheries), South Carolina (commercial fishery), and Georgia (commercial fishery). The commercial and recreational *de minimis* criteria for 2024 are based on 1% of the average coastwide 2022-2024 landings in each fishery. South Carolina and Georgia commercial fisheries both qualify for *de minimis* status, but landings are confidential. New Jersey's recreational and commercial fisheries both did not qualify for *de minimis* status. The 3-year average of New Jersey recreational landings constituted more than 1% of the coastwide recreational landings, at 1.7%. This is the second year in a row New Jersey has been slightly above the 1% threshold with their recreational fishery, as last year, New Jersey was at 1.2%. The 3-year average of New Jersey commercial landings constituted more than 1% of the coastwide commercial landings, at 3.4%. This is the first year New Jersey has been above the 1% threshold for their commercial fishery in the last 9 years. Despite being above the 1% threshold for both fisheries, New Jersey has requested continued *de minimis* status due to their average recreational and commercial landings only slightly above 1% and above 1% for the first time in several years, respectively. New Jersey would like to see a continuing positive trend before becoming non-*de minimis*.

Changes to State Regulations

In 2020, the TLA triggered management measures at the 30% level, or moderate concern. Non *de minimis* states were required to implement management measures that instituted a 50 fish recreational bag limit and reduce the commercial harvest by 1% of the average state commercial harvest from the previous 10 years. If the state had more restrictive measures in place, they did not need to make any changes. All proposed management changes were reviewed by the Technical Committee and approved by the Board. Below is a list of states that who implemented measures in 2021:

- Virginia: 50 fish bag limit, charter allowance, and commercial fishery season closure from January 1 to January 15. Approved on March 23, 2021.
- North Carolina: 50 fish bag limit and a commercial fishery season closure from December 16 to December 31. Proclamation authority published on April 15, 2021.
- Florida: 50 fish bag limit and a commercial vessel limit of 1,200 pounds in state waters. Rule published December 1, 2021.

The Potomac River Fisheries Commission implemented a season closure for the Atlantic croaker commercial fishery from September 30 to December 31. It was approved on December 2, 2021. In 2024, Delaware did not request *de minimis* status for its recreational fishery, which meant due to the FMP requirements, they had to implement the 50-fish bag limit for their recreational fishery. A 50-fish bag limit went into effect on September 5, 2024, and was published in Delaware's Register of Regulations on October 1, 2024.

As Delaware has not requested *de minimis* status for its commercial fishery in their 2025 compliance report, they will be required to implement regulations which reduce the commercial harvest by 1% of the average state commercial harvest from the previous 10 years in order to stay in compliance with the FMP. The time requirement to implement this regulation is up to the Sciaenids Board.

Atlantic Croaker Habitat

In 2017, the ASMFC Habitat Committee released *Atlantic Sciaenid Habitats: A Review of Utilization, Threats, and Recommendations for Conservation, Management, and Research*, which outlines the habitat needs of Atlantic croaker at different life stages (egg, larval, juvenile, adult). This report also highlights threats and uncertainties facing these ecological areas and identifies Habitat Areas of Particular Concern. It can be found online at:

http://www.asmfc.org/files/Habitat/HMS14_AtlanticSciaenidHabitats_Winter2017.pdf.

Bycatch Reduction

Atlantic croaker are subject to both direct and indirect fishing mortality. Historically, Atlantic croaker ranked as one of the most abundant bycatch species of the South Atlantic shrimp trawl fishery, resulting in the original FMP's recommendation that bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) be developed and required in the shrimp trawl fishery. Since then, the states of North Carolina through Florida have all enacted requirements for the use of BRDs in shrimp trawl nets in state waters, reducing croaker bycatch from this fishery (ASMFC 2010). However, bycatch and discard monitoring from the shrimp trawl fishery have historically been inadequate, resulting in a major source of uncertainty for assessing this stock, as well as other important Mid- and South Atlantic species. Most of the discarded croaker are age-0 and thus likely have not yet reached maturity (ASMFC 2010). The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries conducted a two-year study, published in 2015, to collect bycatch data from state shrimp trawlers. It found that Atlantic croaker represent between 34-49% of the total observed finfish bycatch by weight in estuarine waters and between 20-42% in ocean waters. The at-net mortality for Atlantic croaker was found to be 23% (Brown 2015). These data will be valuable for incorporating estimates of removals in future stock assessments.

Developed during the 2017 benchmark assessment, discard estimates of Atlantic croaker in the South Atlantic Shrimp Trawl Fishery are informed by catch rates observed during the SEAMAP survey and South Atlantic Shrimp Trawl Fishery Observer Program, and total effort of the South Atlantic Shrimp Trawl Fishery. Increases in discards could be an indicator of higher abundance of juveniles in the region, an increase in effort by the fishery, or a combination of both. Discard estimates of Atlantic croaker in the South Atlantic Shrimp Trawl Fishery were not calculated in 2024, as the Sciaenids Management Board directed the TCs to focus on updating only the Harvest and Abundance Characteristic Indices used for management. A summary of the most recent analysis can be found in the [FMP Review](#) for fishing year 2021, as the Atlantic croaker benchmark assessment is still ongoing. For additional information on the South Atlantic Shrimp Trawl Fishery discard estimation, see Appendix 1 of the [2020 TLA Update Report](#).

Atlantic croaker are also discarded from other commercial fishing gears, primarily due to market pressures and few restrictions on croaker harvest at the state level. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Pelagic Observer Program provides data to estimate these discards for use in assessments; however, the time series is limited and only discards from gill nets and otter trawls could be estimated for the 2010 assessment based on the available data. Since 1988, estimated discards have fluctuated between 94 and 15,176 mt without trend, averaging 2,503 mt (ASMFC 2010).

Atlantic croaker are also a major component of the scrap/bait fishery. Landings from this fishery are not reported at the species level, except in North Carolina, which has a continuous program in place to sample these landings and enable estimation of croaker scrap landings for use in the stock assessment. As part of the 2010 stock assessment, North Carolina estimated the scrap/bait landings, which have declined in recent years, from a high of 1,569 mt in 1989 to a low of 84 mt in 2008, primarily due to restrictions placed on fisheries producing the highest scrap/bait landings (ASMFC 2010). Regulations instituted by North Carolina include a ban on flynet fishing south of Cape Hatteras, incidental finfish limits for shrimp and crab trawls in inside waters, minimum mesh size restrictions in trawls, and culling panels in long haul seines.

South Carolina began a state monitoring program to account for bait landings in 2015. The state initiated a bait harvester trip ticket program for all commercial bait harvesters licensed in South Carolina. The impetus for this program is to track bait usage of small sciaenid species (croaker, spot, and whiting) as well as other important bait species.

Several states have implemented other commercial gear requirements that further reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality, while others continue to encourage the use of the BRD devices. NOAA Fisheries published a final rule with an effective date of April 1, 2021 requiring all skimmer trawls greater than 40 feet in length to use TEDs. For all other vessels, the net must be emptied of catch on the deck within a specified time (84 FR 70048). Continuing to reduce the quantity of sub-adult croaker harvested should increase spawning stock biomass and yield per recruit.

Atlantic croaker are also subject to recreational discarding. The percentage of Atlantic croaker released alive by recreational anglers has generally increased over time. Discard mortality was estimated to be 10% for the 2010 stock assessment (ASMFC 2010). The use of circle hooks and appropriate handling techniques can help reduce mortality of released fish.

VII. Implementation of FMP Compliance Requirements for 2024

The PRT found no inconsistencies among states with regard to the requirements of Amendment 1 and Addendum III. However, Delaware will now be required to implement regulations that reduce their commercial harvest by 1% of the average state commercial harvest from the previous 10 years fishery since they are no longer a *de minimis* state for their commercial fishery.

VIII. Recommendations

Management and Regulatory Recommendations

- Consider approval of the *de minimis* requests from New Jersey, South Carolina, and Georgia for their commercial fisheries.
- Consider not approving the *de minimis* request from New Jersey for their recreational fishery. In line with their recommendation in last year's FMP Review (FY 2023), the PRT will no longer recommend *de minimis* status because that New Jersey's recreational fishery has exceeded the 1% *de minimis* threshold two years in a row. The PRT considers New Jersey exceeding 1% of the coastwide Atlantic croaker recreational harvest two years in a row is an appropriate amount of time to determine this is a consistent trend. This is particularly important as the 2025 update of the TLA indicates a continued triggered state for Atlantic croaker at the 30% threshold, and the PRT notes that New Jersey is now the only state in the management unit that does not have any regulations in place for their Atlantic croaker recreational fishery.
- Research into the impacts of climate change on the range of the species.
- Research into Atlantic croaker juvenile discard mortality for recreational and commercial fisheries by each gear type in regions where removals are highest.

Research and Monitoring Recommendations

Additional research and monitoring recommendations can be found in the 2016 Atlantic Croaker Stock Assessment Peer Review Report [here](#) under Term of Reference 8.

IX. References

- Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). 1987. Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Croaker. Washington (DC): ASMFC. Fishery Management Report No. 10. 90 p.
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- Brown, K. 2015. Characterization of the commercial shrimp otter trawl fishery in the estuarine and ocean (0-3 miles) waters of North Carolina. Morehead City (NC): NCDEQ, Division of Marine Fisheries. Abstract.

X. Figures

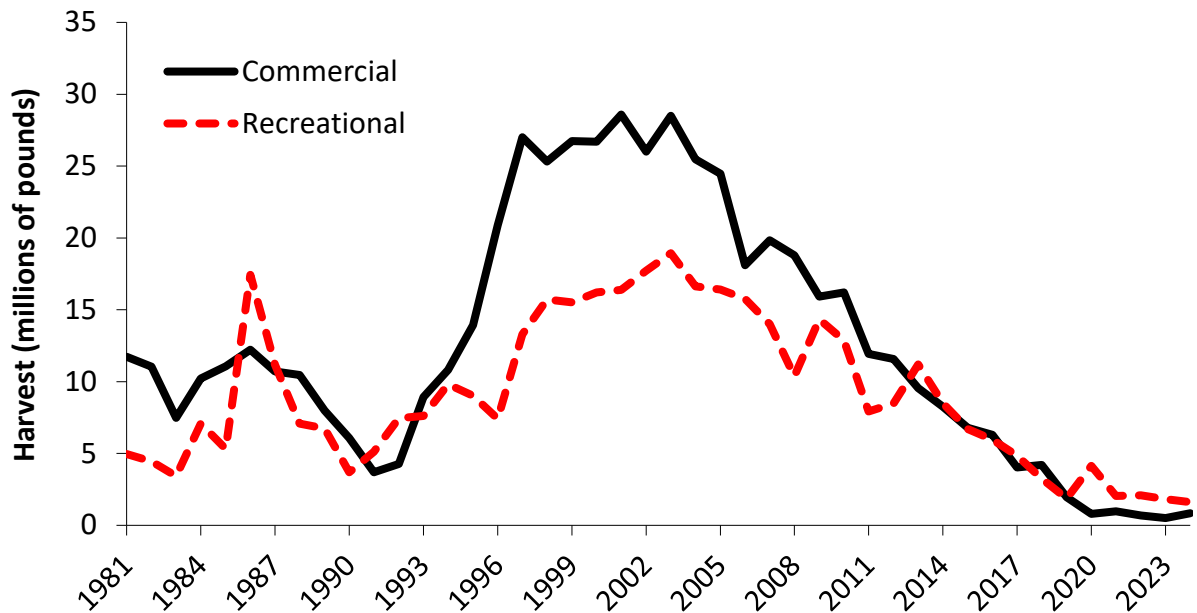


Figure 1. Atlantic croaker commercial and recreational landings (millions of pounds) from 1981-2024. (See Tables 2 and 3 for source information. Commercial landing estimates for 2024 are preliminary. Reliable recreational landings estimates are not available prior to 1981. Recreational landings estimates are based on the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey.)

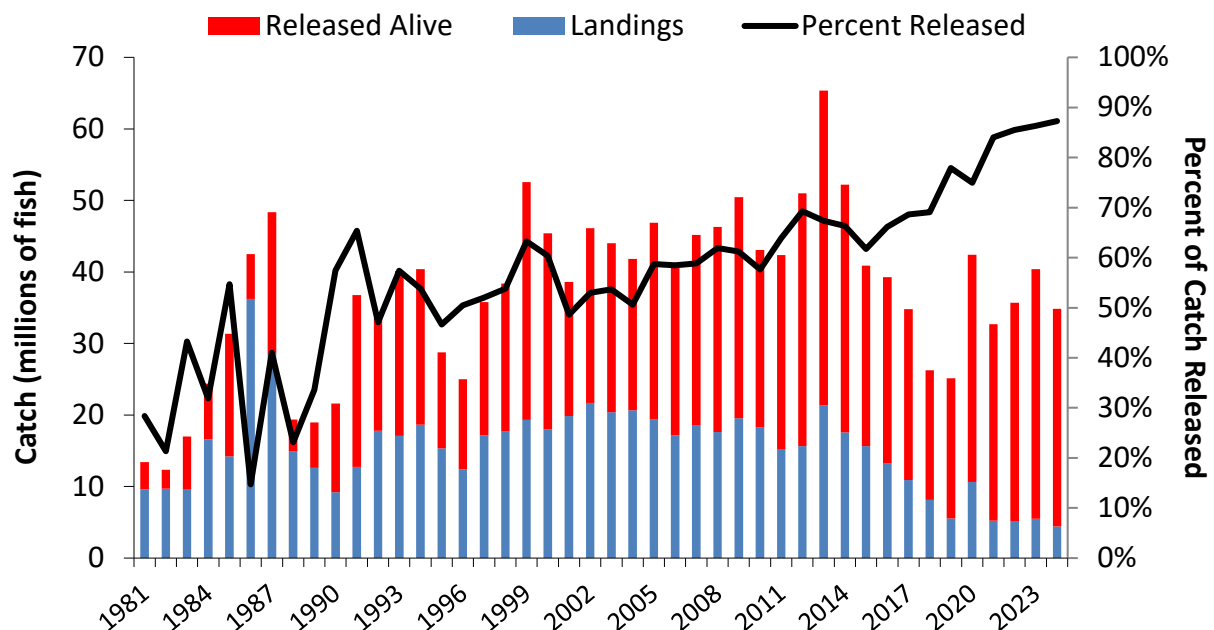


Figure 2. Recreational catch (landings and alive releases, in millions of fish) and the percent of catch that is released, 1981-2024, based on the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey calibration. (See Tables 4 and 5 for values and source information.)

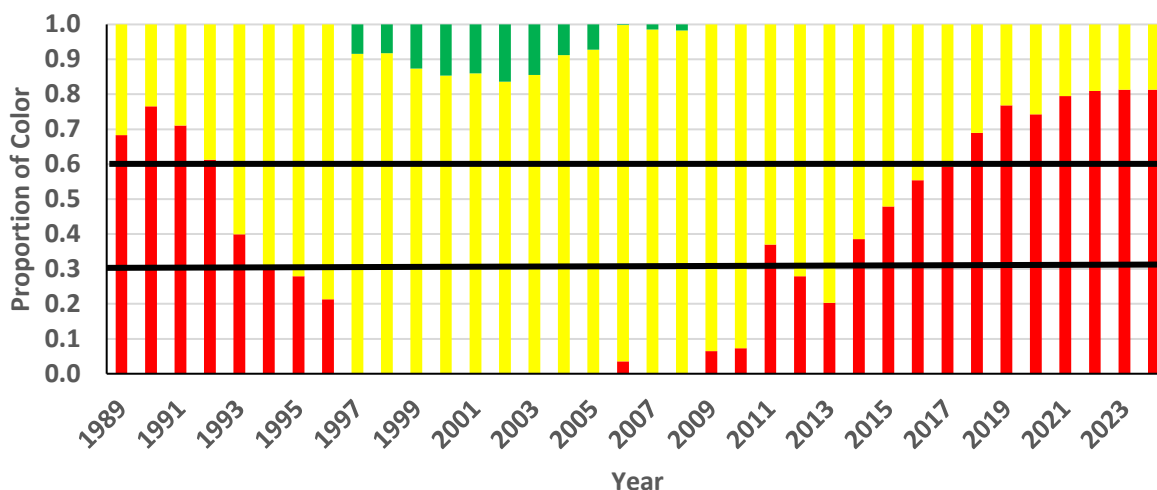


Figure 3. Annual TLA for Atlantic croaker harvest composite (commercial and recreational landings) in the Mid-Atlantic (NJ-VA) from 1989-2024 using a 2002-2012 reference period.

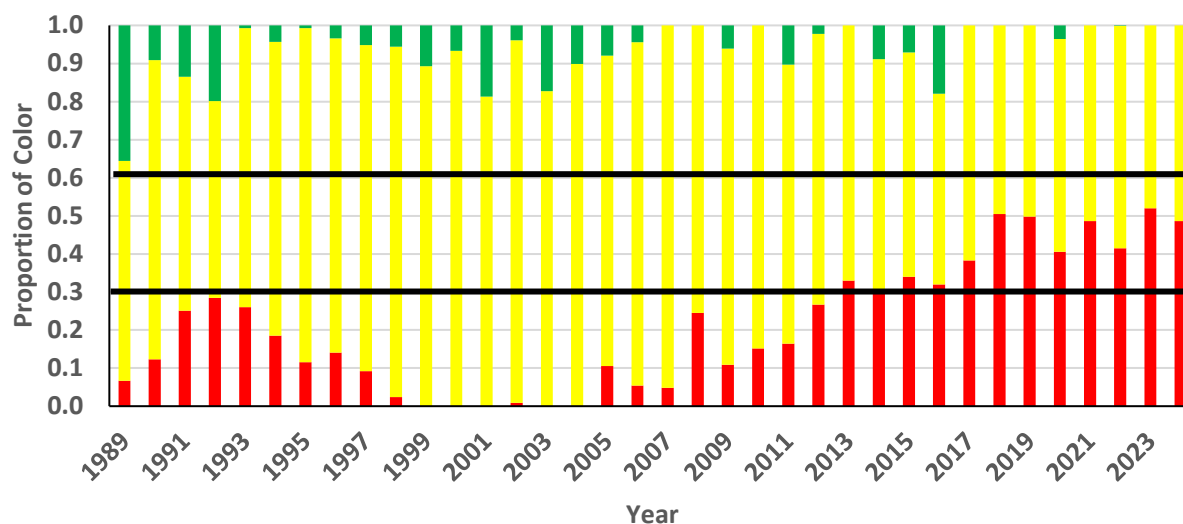


Figure 4. Annual TLA for Atlantic croaker harvest composite (commercial and recreational landings) in the South Atlantic (NC-FL) from 1989-2024 using a 2002-2012 reference period.

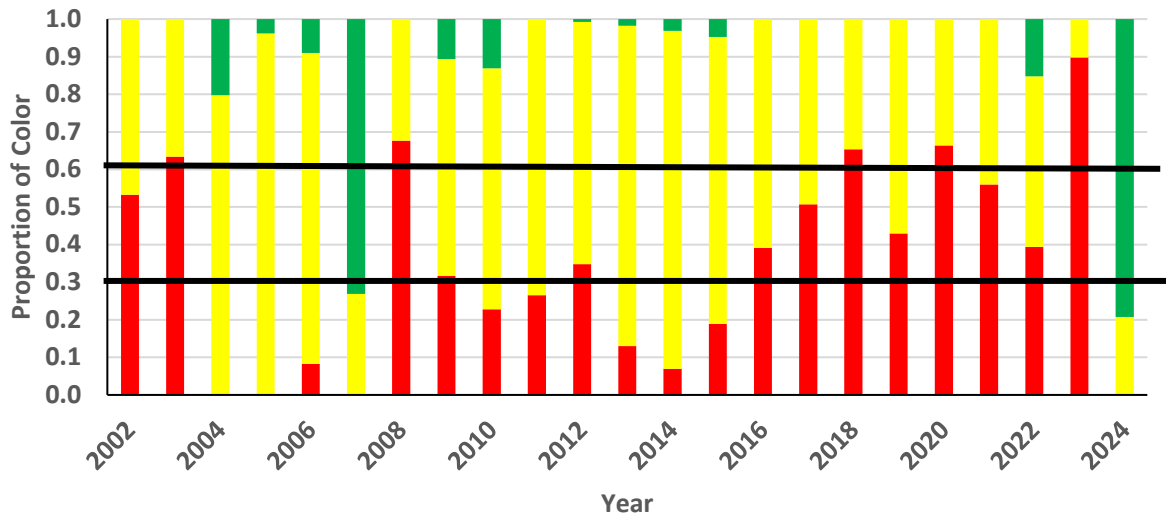


Figure 5. Annual TLA for adult (age 2+) Atlantic croaker composite abundance index in the Mid-Atlantic (NEFSC and ChesMMAAP surveys) from 2002-2024 using a 2002-2012 reference period.

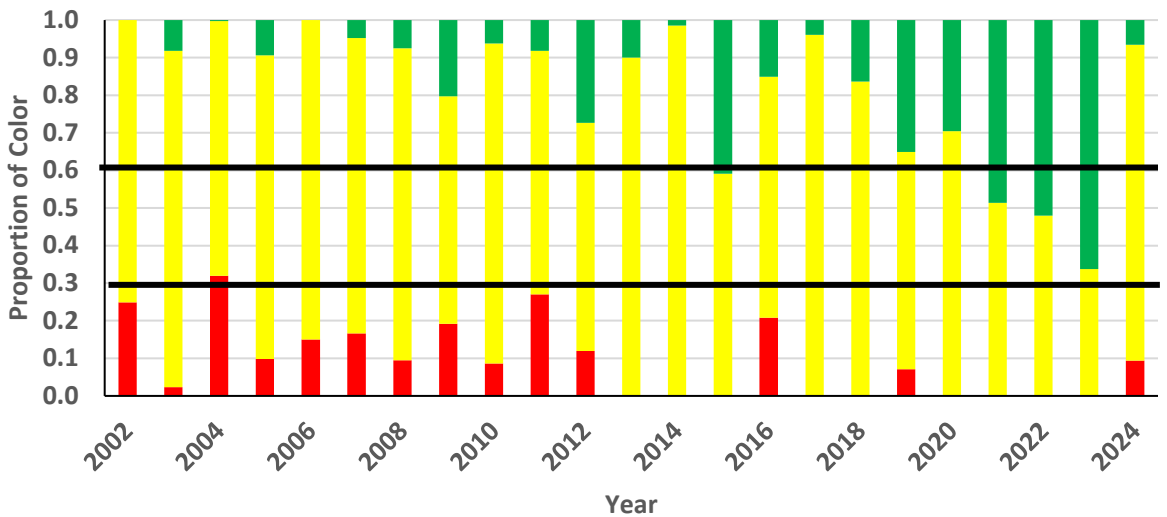


Figure 6. Annual TLA for adult (age 2+) Atlantic croaker composite abundance index in the South Atlantic (SEAMAP and SCDNR trammel survey) from 2002-2024 using a 2002-2012 reference period.

**XI.
Tables**

Table 1. Summary of state regulations for Atlantic croaker in 2024.

State	Recreational	Commercial
NJ	None	Otter/beam trawl mesh restriction for directed croaker harvest (>100 lbs in possession)
DE	8" min, 50 fish/day (effective 9/5/2024); recreational gill nets (up to 200 ft.) with license	8" minimum
MD	9" min, 25 fish/day, charter boat logbooks	9" minimum; open 3/16 to 12/31
PRFC	9" min, 25 fish/day	Open 1/1 to 9/30 (effective 1/1/22) Pound net season: 2/15 to 12/15
VA	50 fish/day, with additional charter live bait allowance (effective 3/23/21)	Open 1/15 to 12/31 (effective 3/23/21)
NC	50 fish/day (effective 4/15/21), recreational use of commercial gears with license and gear restrictions	Open 1/1 to 12/15 (effective 4/15/21)
SC	Mandatory for-hire logbooks, small Sciaenidae species aggregate bag limit of 50 fish/day	None
GA	25 fish/day	25 fish/day limit except for trawlers harvesting shrimp for human consumption (no limit)
FL	50 fish/day (effective 12/1/21)	1,200 commercial vessel limit (effective 12/1/21)

* A commercial fishing license is required to sell croaker in all states with fisheries. For all states, general gear restrictions affect commercial croaker harvest.

Table 2. Commercial harvest (pounds) of Atlantic croaker by state, 2015-2024. Total includes landings from states north of New Jersey.

(Estimates for 2024 are preliminary. Sources: 2025 state compliance reports for 2024 fishing year and for years prior to 2024, personal communication with ACCSP, except PRFC [compliance reports only].) Note that Georgia does not have a commercial fishery for Atlantic croaker.

Year	North of NJ	NJ	DE	MD	PRFC	VA	NC	SC	GA	FL	Total
2015	457	C	C	294,038	118,996	4,426,957	1,819,007	C	0	39,096	6,784,146
2016	92	C	C	101,949	168,889	3,825,737	2,092,287	C	0	57,538	6,302,799
2017	1,061	C	C	42,958	114,319	2,822,005	1,008,015	C	0	43,033	4,032,993
2018	C	C	C	44,306	16,561	2,450,984	1,643,646	C	0	54,409	4,210,715
2019	12	C	463	2,865	C	595,434	1,278,340	C	0	68,179	1,945,723
2020	0	C	C	1,857	601	147,026	570,453	C	0	84,906	806,781
2021	C	C	C	4,584	11,430	287,898	540,622	C	0	124,642	972,121
2022	C	C	773	3,944	C	193,161	357,312	C	0	117,958	684,464
2023	C	9,981	C	C	C	134,392	249,390	C	0	101,450	505,828
2024	15,363	50,263	23,139	14,993	C	183,106	450,527	C	0	97,672	835,315

C: Confidential data

Table 3. Recreational harvest (pounds) of Atlantic croaker by state, 2015-2024. (Sources: 2025 state compliance reports for 2024 fishing year and for years prior to 2024, personal communication with MRIP)

Year	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	FL	Total
2015	263,749	189,320	871,596	3,514,410	557,735	181,909	248,431	881,185	6,708,335
2016	7,133	10,959	407,010	2,998,022	443,728	81,896	116,313	1,893,203	5,958,264
2017	0	26,441	238,659	3,383,057	237,160	310,621	100,565	555,389	4,851,892
2018	34,125	5,859	191,854	2,245,518	164,644	81,251	83,258	445,663	3,252,172
2019	973	23,973	38,895	995,491	224,337	133,227	97,791	358,941	1,873,628
2020	16,358	21,870	91,047	2,410,612	223,685	230,205	77,876	1,072,714	4,144,367
2021	7,079	35,746	69,744	823,319	376,121	173,526	95,031	461,048	2,041,614
2022	33,048	22,483	21,043	554,254	481,721	240,275	152,231	577,555	2,082,610
2023	31,709	42,567	40,788	499,010	201,056	313,242	116,558	584,977	1,829,907
2024	30,167	40,972	47,923	438,469	363,595	212,152	65,744	415,639	1,614,661

Table 4. Recreational harvest (numbers) of Atlantic croaker by state, 2015-2024. (Sources: 2025 State compliance reports for 2024 fishing year and for years prior to 2024, personal communication with MRIP)

Year	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	FL	Total
2015	339,021	334,676	1,738,576	8,024,381	1,437,019	555,263	790,014	2,429,723	15,648,673
2016	8,236	24,546	659,318	7,276,719	1,109,570	268,470	402,254	3,553,777	13,302,890
2017	0	65,606	423,790	7,644,516	666,930	765,227	371,301	969,146	10,906,516
2018	104,321	12,370	305,469	5,472,329	472,917	335,833	241,382	1,176,999	8,121,620
2019	3,031	53,048	69,771	3,055,510	651,268	593,475	332,073	801,751	5,559,927
2020	58,097	54,193	244,788	6,529,494	673,377	827,904	232,535	2,010,168	10,630,556
2021	22,722	71,237	174,056	1,862,543	1,066,533	707,924	371,257	952,581	5,228,853
2022	91,584	64,397	55,408	1,969,042	1,110,382	545,062	394,967	942,037	5,172,879
2023	104,481	86,227	151,628	2,364,942	597,690	779,691	535,875	890,684	5,511,218
2024	87,260	85,082	143,921	1,712,674	852,372	533,102	202,231	817,924	4,434,566

Table 5. Recreational releases (number) of Atlantic croaker by state, 2015-2024. (Sources: 2025 state compliance reports for 2024 fishing year and for years prior to 2024, personal communication with MRIP)

Year	North of NJ	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	FL	Total
2015	0	240,840	309,389	1,236,293	6,815,343	9,632,560	3,236,774	1,320,939	2,451,253	25,243,391
2016	0	139,085	390,655	726,662	6,993,470	7,254,382	5,233,835	1,178,630	4,073,001	25,989,720
2017	0	152,540	230,455	2,829,255	8,464,305	4,631,445	4,755,853	1,059,539	1,770,846	23,894,238
2018	0	144,637	85,424	203,081	5,359,179	4,311,368	5,568,892	1,403,560	1,072,381	18,148,522
2019	0	33,333	101,523	1,243,785	6,642,685	3,634,211	3,768,288	1,893,287	2,259,705	19,576,817
2020	0	147,494	286,780	2,870,268	6,223,025	5,560,605	12,921,019	1,696,852	2,057,158	31,763,201
2021	797	116,606	353,743	1,909,466	4,306,221	9,539,047	8,207,074	1,687,801	1,363,075	27,483,033
2022	0	74,058	467,349	1,537,746	7,193,201	7,914,042	8,359,506	2,056,650	2,901,874	30,504,426
2023	1,607	1,380,298	588,623	2,939,081	8,537,665	4,722,440	13,901,122	1,643,243	1,166,700	34,879,172
2024	18,134	1,067,057	1,195,745	3,259,427	8,067,116	6,976,866	6,835,442	1,356,680	1,630,107	30,406,574