Fisheries FOCUS

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Daniel McKiernan Elected ASMFC Chair

At the Commission's Annual Meeting in October, member states thanked Joseph Cimino of New Jersey for a successful two-year term as Chair and elected Daniel McKiernan of Massachusetts to succeed him.

"I'm honored to be chosen by my fellow Commissioners to lead our efforts for the next two years. One of my priorities will be to work with my colleagues in the states and federal agencies to seek resources to fund fundamental fisheries data collection and science activities to support our management programs. Other key topics over the next two years will be our ability to adapt to changes in species distribution and availability and how best to respond to the recalibration of recreational fishing effort and harvest data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey," said Mr. McKiernan.

Mr. McKiernan continued, "I want to thank outgoing Chair, Joe Cimino for his leadership in tackling some challenging management issues for species such as American lobster, American eel, Atlantic striped bass,

Atlantic menhaden, horseshoe crab, and red drum. He helped support the advancement of fisheries science through the completion of an impressive number of benchmark stock assessments and assessment updates for river herring, red drum, American lobster, horseshoe crab, tautog, Atlantic sturgeon, and Atlantic menhaden (single species assessment update and ecological reference points benchmark assessment). Further, under his leadership, the Commission also strengthened stakeholder engagement in horseshoe crab management by bringing together diverse stakeholders for a Delaware Bay management objectives workshop to provide recommendations for possible revisions to the management process, and by increasing nontraditional stakeholder representation on the Horseshoe Crab Advisory Panel to more equitably balance user group perspectives. Lastly, Mr. Cimino initiated the process to consider possible changes to voting practices and declared interests on species management boards."

Additionally, advances in habitat conservation were made by the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP) through its funding of five on-the-ground projects, which will open over seven river miles and restore over 110 acres of habitat. These include dam removal projects in New Jersey and Massachusetts, as well as salt marsh and oyster restoration projects in Maryland and Florida.

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Upcoming Meetings

December 15–18
Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, The Madison Hotel, 1177 15th Street NW, Washington, DC

December 15 (1–3 PM)
American Eel Technical Committee

January 5 (1–3 PM)
Educational Session on Horseshoe Crab Management in the DE Bay Region: Part 2

January 6 (1–4 PM)
American Lobster Technical Committee

January 6 (2–3 PM)
Winter Flounder Technical Committee

January 7 (10 AM–Noon)
Atlantic Menhaden Plan Development Team

January 8 (3–5 PM)
Educational Session on Horseshoe Crab Management in the DE Bay Region: Part 2

January 13 (11 AM–Noon)
Winter Flounder Plan Review Team

January 15 (begins 1 PM)–16 (ends Noon)
Atlantic Striped Bass Tagging Subcommittee Methods Workshop

January 20 (1–3 PM)
Atlantic Striped Bass Stock Assessment Subcommittee Check-In

January 26 (1–3 PM)
Tautog Technical Committee

January 27–29
New England Fishery Management Council

January 29–30
Horseshoe Crab Stakeholder Engagement Workshop on Management in the DE Bay Region, DE Bay Region, pinnaker Room at the Courtyard by Marriot Ocean City Oceanfront, Two 15th Street, Ocean City, MD

February 3–5
ASMFC Winter Meeting, Westin Crystal City, 1800 Richmond Highway, Arlington, VA

February 10–11
Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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 the deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and diadromous species.

The 15 member states of the Commission are: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

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Recovery of Historically Important Species Continues to be Hindered by High Natural Mortality

Weakfish are cherished game fish found along the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia down to Florida, with the highest numbers between New York and North Carolina. Known for their delicious taste and spirited fight, weakfish migrate inshore during the warmer months to spawn and thrive in estuarine and coastal waters. Once a staple in both commercial and recreational fisheries, their populations have declined significantly over the past few decades due to overfishing and habitat loss.

Photo (c) John McMurray

Today, most weakfish catches come from states like New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, with recreational fishing making up the majority of the harvest. Despite management efforts such as size limits and catch restrictions aimed at helping their numbers recover, weakfish still face challenges from high mortality rates. Ongoing regulations and conservation measures are essential to ensure that weakfish remain a sustainable and important part of coastal fishing communities for years to come.

Atlantic Coastal Management

In 1985, as a result of population declines and limited biological information, the Commission developed

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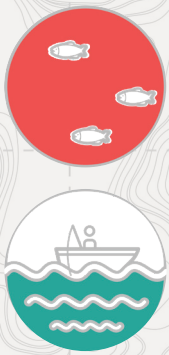
Species Snapshot

Cynoscion regalis



Stock Status: Depleted, overfishing is not occurring

Common Names: Tide runner, sea trout, gray trout, squeteague

Management Unit: Cape Cod, MA to FL

Maximum Age: 17 years

Age at Maturity: 90% mature at age 1, 100% mature mature at age 2

Interesting Facts

- Weakfish are members of the drum family (Sciaenidae), which also includes spotted seatrout, croaker, spot, red drum and black drum. The males of these species are all noted for the drumming noise they produce, particularly during spawning periods.
- The name weakfish refers to the tender, easily torn membrane of the fish's mouth, rather than its fighting ability.
- Delaware declared weakfish its state fish in 1981.

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an Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Weakfish. Weakfish are currently managed under Amendment 4 to the FMP and its subsequent addenda (Addendum I-IV). Addendum IV (approved in 2009) requires states to implement a one fish recreational creel limit, 100 pound commercial trip limit, 100 pound commercial bycatch limit during closed seasons, and 100 undersized fish per trip allowance for the finfish trawl fishery. The Addendum's measures are intended to reduce the level of harvest without creating a large amount of discards and to poise the stock for recovery should natural mortality decrease in the future.

In 2018, in response to concern regarding potential increases in commercial discards (in Virginia and North Carolina) due to the 100 pound trip limit, the Technical Committee reviewed discard information to determine whether current management is resulting in significant loss to the fishery through increased dead discards. The Technical Committee found that while notable increases in commercial discards were observed in Virginia and North Carolina in both 2016 and 2017, these singular points did not fit any long-term trend of increase and were not high enough to be a significant concern to the resource. The Technical Committee did not recommend any immediate action based on its analyses.

Stock Status

The most recent benchmark stock assessment, conducted in 2016, concluded the weakfish stock was depleted and overfishing was not occurring. A stock assessment update was completed in 2019, applying the statistical catch-at-age model from the 2016 benchmark assessment to data through 2017.

Estimates of recruitment, spawning stock biomass, and total abundance remained low in the final years of the assessment update, while estimates of fishing mortality were moderately high, although not near the time-series highs of the mid- to late-2000s, or the earliest years. Natural mortality (i.e., the rate at which fish die due to natural causes such as predation, disease and starvation) was also high, averaging 0.92 in the most recent 10 years (2008-2017), compared to 0.16 over the first 10 years of the time series. Therefore, even though harvest was at low levels up to the last year of the assessment, the weakfish population has been experiencing very high levels of total mortality (including fishing mortality and natural mortality), preventing the stock from recovering.

Spawning stock biomass (SSB) in 2017 was estimated at 1,922 mt, below the SSB threshold of 6,170 mt, indicating the stock is depleted. SSB has shown a slight increasing trend in recent years up to 2017 but is still well below the SSB threshold.

Total mortality (Z) in 2017 was estimated at 1.45, above both the Z target = 1.03

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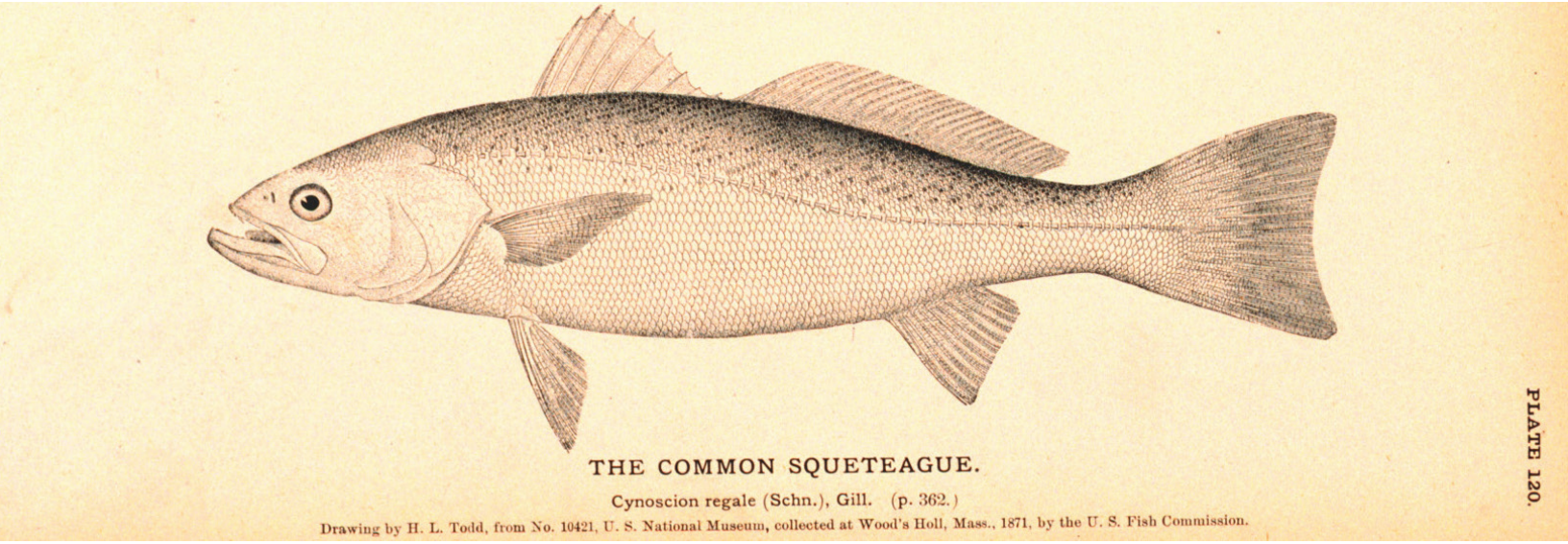


and the *Z* threshold = 1.43, indicating total mortality on the stock is too high. Fishing mortality has increased but was below the threshold in 2017.

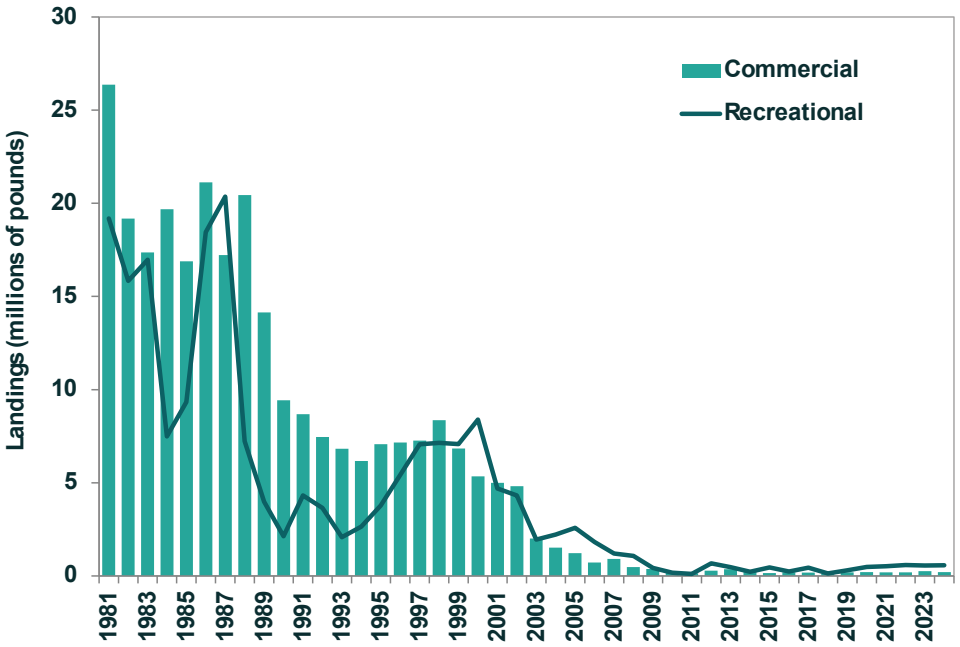
Another assessment update was completed in 2025, incorporating data through 2023. The update included additional work by the Weakfish Technical Committee (TC) to investigate a prior assumption in the model, potentially leading to an underestimation of natural mortality. However, the extent of the work needed to resolve this issue with model performance was beyond the scope of an assessment update. As a result, the Weakfish Board accepted the TC's recommendation to not use this update for management and agreed a new benchmark assessment should be initiated in 2026 and completed in 2028. Although there were some positive signs observed in the fishery-independent and -dependent data in this assessment update, the TC believes the status has not likely changed significantly since the last assessment update in 2019.

Commercial & Recreational Fisheries

Weakfish have been one of the most important components of a mixed-stock fishery on the Atlantic coast since the 1800s. In the late 1990s, however, weakfish landings began to decline, dropping below 1 million pounds in 2009 (compared to 45.6 million pounds in 1981). Total landings in the weakfish fishery have remained low since 2009, fluctuating between 234,394 pounds in 2018 and 947,053 pounds in 2012. Total landings in 2024 were estimated at 766,064 pounds.

From 1950 to 1970, commercial landings fluctuated without trend, ranging from 3 to 9 million pounds. The early 1970s began a period of tremendous growth in the fishery, with landings peaking at 36 million pounds in 1980. Commercial landings have dramatically declined since the early 1980s, dropping from over 19 million pounds landed in 1982 to a time series low of 103,767 pounds in 2018. Since 2018, commercial landings have remained low and relatively constant, fluctuating between 190,176 pounds in 2022 and 211,149 pounds in 2020. In 2024, 199,413 pounds of weakfish were landed commercially, with the majority of landings occurred in New York, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Weakfish Commercial and Recreational Landings
Source: ACCSP Data Warehouse, 2025



The commercial mixed species trawl fishery has been known to discard weakfish, with an assumed discard mortality of 100%. Data indicate that discards peaked in the 1990s but have generally declined since then as the result of management measures and a decline in stock abundance.

Recreational landings have followed a similar trend to that of commercial landings. Coastwide recreational landings peaked at 20 million pounds in 1987, after which landings decreased to 2 million pounds by 1989 and hovered between 1 and 2 million pounds through the early 1990s. Harvest then increased to over 4 million pounds by the late 1990s before declining further, similar to the commercial fishery. Recreational landings have not exceeded 1 million pounds since 2008. In 2024, recreational landings were 566,651 pounds or 374,447 fish, with South Carolina harvesting the largest percentage, followed by New York and North Carolina.

Life History

Weakfish occur long the Atlantic coast of North America from Nova Scotia to southeastern Florida but are more

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Young of the year weakfish (c) New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Life History (continued)

common from New York to North Carolina. Warming of coastal waters in the spring prompts an inshore and northerly migration of adults from their offshore wintering grounds between Chesapeake Bay and Cape Lookout, North Carolina to nearshore sounds, bays, and estuaries. Spawning occurs shortly afterwards, peaking from April to June, with some geographical variation in timing. Females continuously produce eggs during the spawning season and release them over a period of time rather than once. In the fall, an offshore and southerly migration of adults coincides with declining water temperatures.

Feeding on microscopic animals, larval weakfish journey from spawning areas to nursery areas, located in deeper portions of coastal rivers, bays, sounds, and estuaries. They remain in these areas until October to December of their first year, after which the juveniles migrate to the coast. Growth in weakfish is especially rapid in the first year and they mature at a young age. Size at age-1 is variable but most fish are 10 to 11 inches long. As adults, weakfish are often found near the periphery of eelgrass beds, perhaps because weakfish feed primarily on shrimp, other crustaceans, and small fish that are found near these grass beds.

For more information, please contact Tracey Bauer, FMP Coordinator, at **tbauer@asmfc.org**.

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From a data collection and management perspective, ACCSP also made progress under Mr. Cimino's leadership. ACCSP supported 20 partner agency data collection projects and expanded the scope and security of the ACCSP Data Warehouse. ACCSP held a data accountability workshop and extended data validation tools within electronic reporting systems; extended implementation of harvester One Stop Reporting; and made progress on a methodology to more fully use for-hire logbooks in MRIP's catch statistics.

Mr. McKiernan has directed MA DMF since late 2019, where he develops agency policies, represents the Commonwealth in interstate and federal fishery management forums and administers nearly all aspects of the DMF's in-state management and regulations for fisheries management. He began his professional career as a field biologist for DMF in 1985 and worked closely with the lobster fishery as a sea sampler and an assistant marine biologist. He brought his field experience to DMF's headquarters and has worked on fisheries management and policy for almost four decades. He has worked diligently to achieve co-existence between endangered right whales and the maritime and fishing industries in Massachusetts. In 2023, Massachusetts was recognized with the NOAA Fisheries "Partner in the Spotlight" award for exceptional efforts to the conservation and recovery of northern right whales.

Mr. McKiernan is practiced in the arenas of federal and interstate fisheries management. As a long-standing representative to the Commission, he has chaired numerous species management boards and was recognized for his management efforts with the Commission's Award of Excellence in 2018. He is a strong promoter of conservation and accountable fisheries management for commercial fisheries, recreational fisheries, and the seafood industry at large. Mr. McKiernan is a graduate of UMASS-Dartmouth and earned an MS in Fisheries Biology from Auburn University. He received the Massachusetts Pride in Performance Award, as well as the Massachusetts Lobsterman's Association "Ralph W. Maling" Award of Excellence for dedicated service on behalf of the Commonwealth's lobster industry.

The Commission also elected Doug Haymans, Director of the Georgia Coastal Resources Division as its new Vice-Chair.

Headlines from the 2025 Annual Meeting

Atlantic Menhaden

The Atlantic Menhaden Management Board received the results of the single-species assessment update and the 2025 Ecological Reference Points (ERPs) Assessment and Peer Review Reports and accepted the ERPs Assessment and Peer Review Report for management use. The goal of the ERPs is to maximize Atlantic menhaden fishing mortality while also accounting for the forage demands of Atlantic striped bass. Atlantic striped bass was the focal species for the ERP reference points because the species showed the most sensitive relationship between a predator fish and Atlantic menhaden harvest within the NWACS-MICE model. Therefore, an ERP target and threshold that would provide adequate forage for striped bass would likely not cause declines for other predators included in the model.

The single-species assessment indicates the stock is not overfished nor experiencing overfishing relative to the ERPs developed through the benchmark assessment.

However, fishing mortality (*F*) was above the ERP *F* target and fecundity (a measure of the number of eggs the stock can produce in a year) was below the ERP fecundity target. Therefore, the Board set the 2026 total allowable catch (TAC) at 186,840 metric tons (mt), a 20% decrease from the 2023-2025 TAC of 233,550 mt. Projections indicated this TAC would have a 0% chance of overfishing in 2026 but would still result in a 100% probability of fishing mortality being above the ERP *F* target. To have a lower probability of being at or above the ERP *F* target, a 50% or more reduction in the TAC would be required. The Board expressed concerns about the socioeconomic impact of implementing such a significant cut in a single year and chose to take a more moderate cut for 2026 only. This change will provide the Board time to conduct outreach on the results of this new assessment and receive more input from stakeholders before considering a TAC for 2027, 2028 and potentially 2029 at the 2026 Annual Meeting.

The need for reduction to achieve the ERP *F* target is due primarily to the change in the estimate of natural mortality used in the single-species stock assessment update, and secondarily to the lower values for the ERPs as a result of the updated and refined ERP model from the benchmark. The 2025 single-species assessment used a revised value of natural mortality that was lower than the value used in the 2020 benchmark and 2022 update. Natural mortality is the rate at which fish die from causes other than fishing; for menhaden, this includes things like predation, disease, and die-offs caused by low oxygen and warm water. This change was reviewed as part of the 2025 ERP Benchmark Assessment, and the Peer Review Panel agreed it represented the best available scientific information on natural mortality for Atlantic menhaden. Using a lower value of natural mortality in the stock assessment results in a lower overall estimate of population size. When a high estimate of natural mortality is used, the model estimates the population needs to be very large to produce the catches and the trends in observed indices. But, if natural mortality is lower, it means fewer

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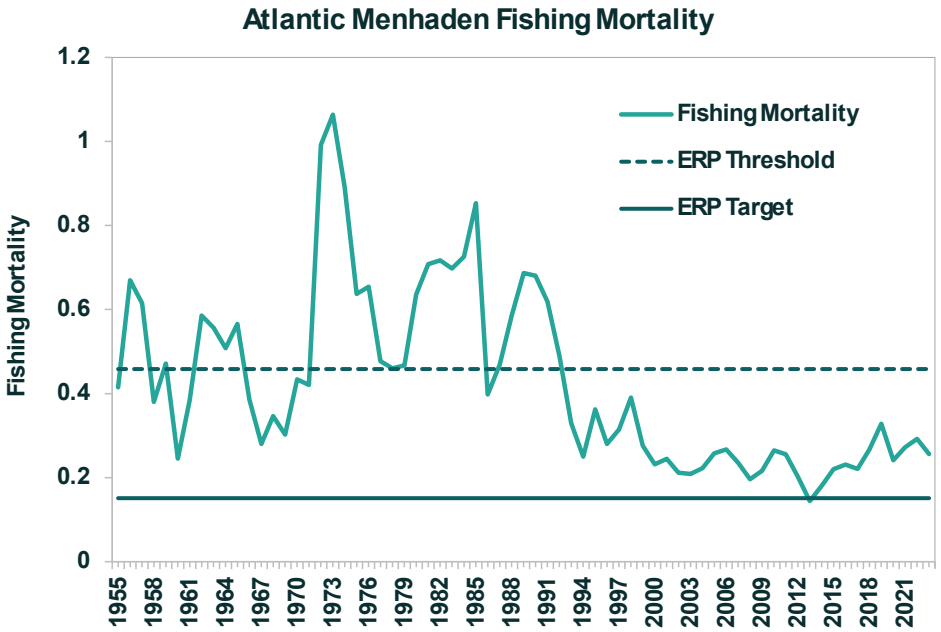


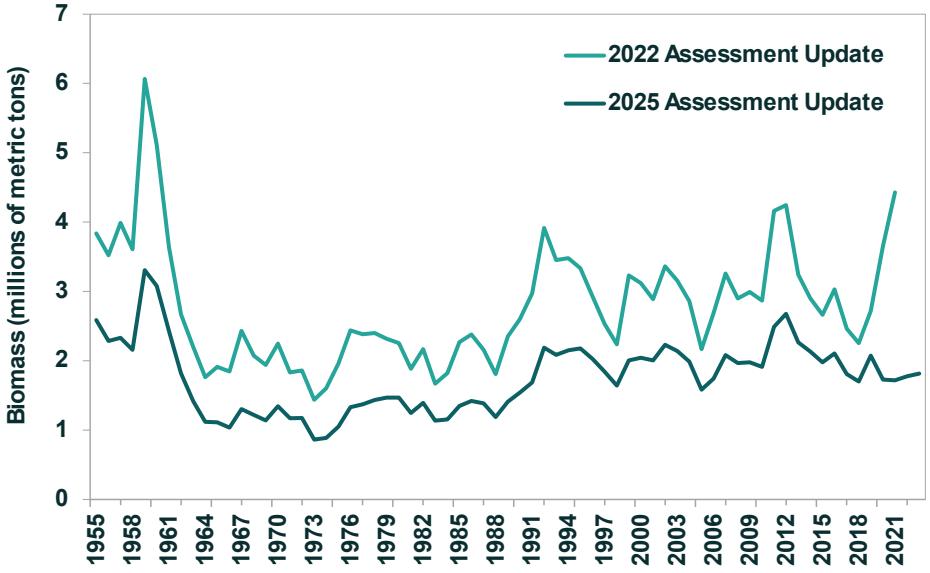
fish are dying due to natural causes, meaning the stock does not need to be as large to produce the observed data.

This lower overall estimate of menhaden abundance was also used in the ecosystem models to establish the ERPs. This change, combined with updating estimates of predator (striped bass, bluefish, weakfish, and spiny dogfish) population sizes and diet data as well as refining the ecosystem model structure resulted in lower estimates of the ERP *F* target and threshold. The ERP assessment, which was endorsed by an independent panel of fisheries scientists, used the Northwest Atlantic Coastal Shelf Model of Intermediate Complexity for Ecosystems (NWACS-MICE) to develop Atlantic menhaden ERPs. The model was chosen because of its ability to explore both the impacts of predators on menhaden biomass and the effects of menhaden harvest on predator populations.

The Board also initiated an addendum to Amendment 3 to consider options to reduce the Chesapeake Bay Reduction Fishery Cap by up to 50% and distribute the cap more evenly throughout the fishing season. The options will aim to alleviate a concentration of effort that may be affecting other fisheries within the Bay and other potential ecological impacts. The Board discussed concerns regarding decreasing pound net harvests and catch per unit effort within the Bay as the timing of reduction fishing effort has changed the last few years. Amendment 3 currently caps reduction harvest within the Bay at 51,000 mt per year. The Board will review the Draft Addendum in February to consider the draft for public comment or provide additional guidance to the Plan Development Team for further development.

The Assessment Update, the Benchmark ERP Stock Assessment, Peer Review Report, and an overview of the assessments are available on the Atlantic Menhaden webpage at **https://asmfc.org/species/atlantic-menhaden/** under News and Resources. For more information, please contact James Boyle, FMP Coordinator, at **jboyle@asmfc.org**.

Age-1+ Biomass Estimates from the 2022 and the 2025 Atlantic Menhaden Single-species Assessment Update



Atlantic Striped Bass

The Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board approved **Addendum III to Amendment 7 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic Striped Bass**. The Addendum modifies requirements for commercial tagging programs, implements a standard method of measuring total length for size limit regulations, and allows Maryland to change its Chesapeake Bay recreational season baseline if the state so chooses.

The Board decided to not move forward with the proposed 12% reduction in fishery removals after lengthy deliberation. The Board reviewed the preliminary estimates of 2025 recreational catch through June, which were lower than anticipated and suggested that the projections may have underestimated the probability of rebuilding by 2029 and overestimated the reductions necessary to rebuild. The Board noted that the over 4,000 public comments they received on the draft addendum were sharply divided on the issue, as was the Board itself. Ultimately, the Board maintained current recreational measures and commercial quotas, noting the severe economic consequences of the proposed reduction, the low fishing mortality rate in 2024, and preliminary indications of lower catch in 2025. However, the Board continued to express concern about the

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seven consecutive years of low recruitment in Chesapeake Bay and the impact on the stock as those weak year-classes become the majority of the spawning stock biomass after 2029. To address this, the Board approved the establishment of a Work Group to consider these upcoming stock and management challenges beyond 2029. The Board will further discuss the specific tasks and timing of this Work Group at subsequent Board meetings.

	Delaware Bay Origin Horseshoe Crab Quota (no. of crabs)	Total Quota*
State	Male Only	Male Only
Delaware	173,014	173,014
New Jersey	173,014	173,014
Maryland	132,865	255,980
Virginia**	21,107	81,331

*Total harvest quotas for Maryland and Virginia include crabs which are not of Delaware Bay origin.
**Virginia harvest refers to harvest east of the COLREGS line only

For commercial tagging, the Addendum requires states to tag commercially harvested fish by the first point of landing. Previously, states could choose the point of tagging, including tagging at the point of sale. This change to when tagging occurs addresses concerns that waiting to tag fish until the point of sale could increase the risk of illegal harvest. The three states that will need to switch their tagging program from point of sale to point of landing have until the end of 2028 to make that change due to the extensive administrative and programmatic transition needed.

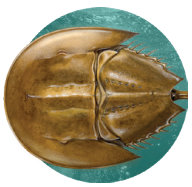
For measuring total length, the Addendum specifies that when measuring total length of a striped bass it must be a straight-line measurement with upper and lower fork of the tail squeezed together. This definition applies to both sectors. This new definition addresses concerns that the previous lack of a standard definition was potentially undermining the intended conservation, consistency, and enforceability of the coastwide size limits, especially for narrow slot limits. States that do not have the new definition in place already have until January 1, 2027 to make changes to their state regulations.

For Maryland's Chesapeake Bay recreational fishery, the Board approved Maryland's ability to change its recreational season baseline (i.e., the timing, type, and duration of striped bass closures throughout the year) if the state so chooses. Maryland is considering changing its season baseline to simplify its Chesapeake Bay regulations as well as re-align access based on stakeholder input and release mortality rates. The new baseline is estimated to be net neutral calculated to maintain the same level of removals as compared to 2024. Maryland will notify the Board of its decision by December 31, 2025 in its state implementation plan.

For more information, please contact Emilie Franke, FMP Coordinator, at **efranke@asmfc.org**.

Horseshoe Crab

The Horseshoe Crab Management Board approved bait harvest specifications for horseshoe crabs of Delaware Bay-origin. Taking into consideration the output of the Adaptive Resource Management (ARM) Framework, the Board set an annual harvest limit of 500,000 male horseshoe crabs and zero female Delaware Bay-origin horseshoe crabs for 2026 and 2027. Addendum IX was approved in May 2025 and allows the Board to set multi-year specifications for male-only harvest.



While the ARM Framework output allowed for a small amount of female harvest, the Board elected to maintain zero female horseshoe crab harvest for the next two fishing years as a conservative measure while it conducts a stakeholder engagement process to evaluate several aspects of the ARM Framework and considers changes to better align the model with stakeholder values. To make up for the lost harvest of larger female crabs, the Board agreed to increase Maryland and Virginia's male harvest quotas with an offset ratio of 2:1 males to females. Using the allocation methodology established in Addendum VIII, the quotas in the accompanying table were set for New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

Under Addendum IX, the Board can maintain the harvest limit of 500,000 male horseshoe crabs through 2028 based on the 2025 ARM Framework output with no annual action required. The Board will continue to review survey data for red knots and horseshoe crabs each year and can modify the specifications before 2028 if desired.

The Board also reviewed and approved changes to the Advisory

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Panel membership based on recommendations from the Board Work Group tasked with providing input on the appropriate distribution of advisors by region and user group, including non-traditional stakeholders. For more information, please contact Caitlin Starks, Senior FMP Coordinator, at **cstarks@asmfc.org**.

Tautog

The Tautog Management Board reviewed the results of 2025 Regional Stock Assessments Update, which found stock status varied by region. Tautog were not overfished in the Massachusetts-Rhode Island (MARI), Long Island Sound (LIS), and New Jersey and New York Bight (NJ/NYB) regions, but were overfished in the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) region. Tautog were not experiencing overfishing in the MARI or LIS regions but were experiencing overfishing in the NJ-NYB region and DMV region.

Stock status did not change for the MARI or LIS regions from the 2021 update but did change for the NJ-NYB and DMV regions. The NJ-NYB region went from being overfished but not experiencing overfishing in the 2021 update to not being overfished but experiencing overfishing in this update. The DMV region was previously not overfished or experiencing overfishing but was considered overfished and experiencing overfishing in the 2025 update.

All regions showed patterns in fishing mortality and spawning stock biomass (SSB), with MARI, LIS, and NJ-NYB assessments overestimating fishing mortality and underestimating SSB, while the pattern was reversed in the DMV region, compared to the 2021 update. Based on the Commission's policy, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee adjusted both fishing mortality and SSB for all regions to account for this pattern, which changed stock status for some regions.

Since the 2021 update, recruitment has increased in the LIS and NJ-NYB regions, and MARI shows a slight increase in SSB. In the DMV, fishing mortality had been low since 2012 before reaching a peak in 2021 followed by a sharp decline thereafter. Total removals have increased in all regions, driven primarily by increases in recreational harvest.

In response to the assessment findings, the Board initiated an addendum to address changes in stock status for NJ/NYB and DMV. The Draft Addendum will also consider allowing for the MARI and LIS regions to modify management for precautionary or alignment purposes.

The 2025 Regional Stock Assessments Update is available at **https://asmfc.org/resources/stock-assessment/2025-tautog-regional-stock-assessment-update/**. For more information on the update, please contact Katie Drew, Stock Assessment Team Lead, at **kdrew@asmfc.org**; and for more information on tautog management, please contact James Boyle, FMP Coordinator, at **jboyle@asmfc.org**.

Red Drum

The Sciaenids Management Board approved **Addendum II to Amendment 2 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Red Drum**. The Addendum updates red drum management, with the goal of improving efficiency, flexibility, and timeliness in implementation of new regulations and providing assessment advice. In addition, the Addendum modifies the fishing mortality for the southern stock (South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida) to end overfishing and aligns red drum recreational regulations in Virginia, Maryland, and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) given their shared water bodies.

The Addendum establishes a process whereby states can propose management measures in response to new assessment advice, including assessment analyses outside of the Commission's stock assessment process. It also allows the Board to approve new methods to estimate the impact of different management options on fishing mortality.

In addition, the Addendum modifies the fishing mortality (30% spawning potential ratio or *F*30%) for the southern stock will aim to meet with implemented management measures. At a minimum, states will reduce fishing effort to *F*30% to end overfishing with the unchanged long-term goal of reducing effort to achieve the fishing mortality associated with 40% spawning potential ratio. South Carolina and Georgia will submit proposals by April 1, 2026 with regulatory options that, at minimum, achieve the 14.4% reduction associated with *F*30%. Florida implemented more restrictive red drum regulations in September 2022; these measures are estimated to have achieved the minimum reduction. The Board will review South Carolina and Georgia's proposals at its May 2026 meeting.

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Northern stock states (New Jersey through North Carolina) are not able to estimate fishing mortality at this time. The states of New Jersey, Delaware, Virgina, and North Carolina will maintain their current fishing regulations. For Virginia, Maryland and the PRFC, the Board agreed to the following recreational measures: 3 fish bag limit and 18"-26" inch total length slot. These measures, which are currently in place for Virginia, are meant to simplify management and enforcement in the shared waterbodies of the three jurisdictions. Although these measures will raise Maryland's current red drum bag limit from 1 fish to 3 fish, the Board noted that these new regulations will lower the 5-fish bag limit for red drum in the Potomac River to 3 fish, providing some additional protection to red drum within the 18"-26" total length slot. The implementation date for all new measures is September 1, 2026.

Lastly, the Addendum updates *de minimis* provisions. A state may be granted de minimis status if the Board determines that action by the state would contribute insignificantly to the overall management program for a specific species. The Addendum updates the definition so that a state may be considered de minimis if the average total landings for the last three years is less than 1% of total landings from its respective stock. In addition, the Addendum implements a process for establishing a set of measures for *de minimis* states which will provide a minimum level of protection and prevent regulatory loopholes.

For more information, please contact Tracey Bauer, FMP Coordinator, at **tbauer@asmfc.org**.

ASMFC to Hold Educational Webinars for Delaware Bay Horseshoe Crab Management Stakeholder Process

The Commission's Horseshoe Crab Management Board is convening a stakeholder engagement process to inform revisions to the Delaware Bay Horseshoe Crab Adaptive Resource Management (ARM) Framework, including a series of three educational webinars and an in-person stakeholder workshop. The process will be facilitated by Compass Resource Management with the goal of identifying stakeholder values and perspectives in order to develop clear, actionable recommendations for revising core functions of the ARM Framework that reflect stakeholder priorities.

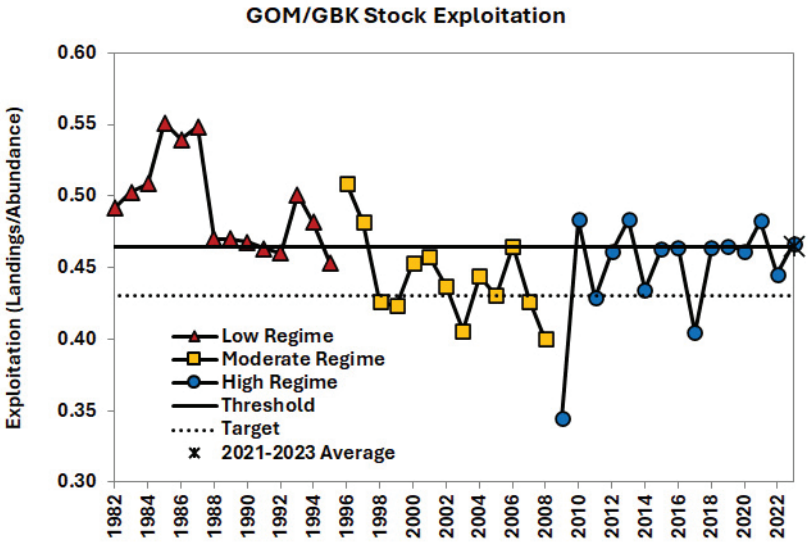
Three educational sessions will be held via webinar to build a shared understanding of the ARM Framework and the role of its three mathematical functions—the Utility, Reward, and Harvest Policy (U/R/H) functions, which serve to align the model with the values and interests of stakeholders. For more information on these sessions, go **here**.

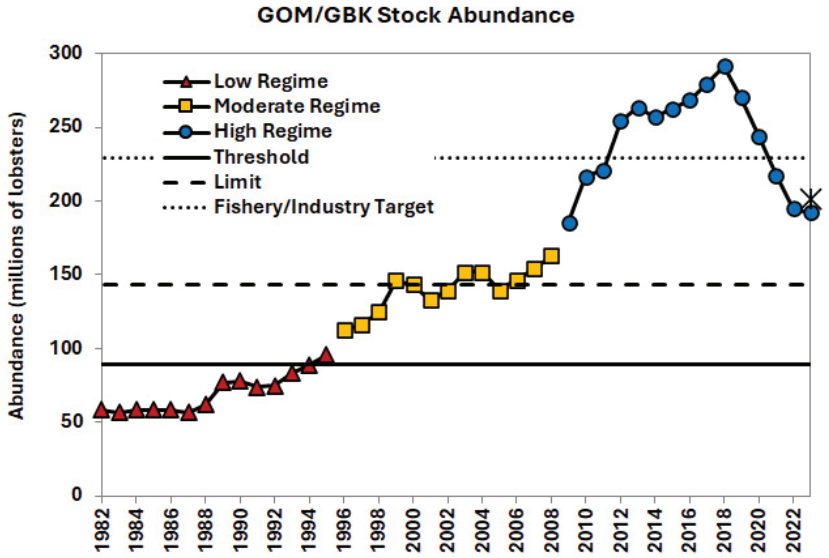
These educational webinars will be followed by a two-day values workshop (January 29 and 30, in Ocean City, MD), where participants will develop quantitative values representing the stakeholder groups' interests for integration into the model and consensus recommendations for model updates. Fourteen individuals were selected to participate in this process and represent a broad range of stakeholder perspectives in this process, including commercial harvesters and dealers; biomedical industry representatives; and horseshoe crab, shorebird, and ecosystem conservationists. Other interested parties are welcome to attend the events as observers.

Spawning horseshoe crabs (c) Gregory Breese, USFWS

Spotlight on American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment

The American Lobster Management Board received the results of the 2025 American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report, which presents contrasting results for the two American lobster stocks in US waters. The Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank (GOM/GBK) stock is not depleted but has declined 34% since peak levels in 2018 and overfishing is occurring, though recent exploitation is just slightly above the threshold. The Southern New England (SNE) stock remains significantly depleted with record low abundances for all life stages in recent years.





Two reference points were used to evaluate the fishing mortality condition of the stocks, determining whether or not overfishing is occurring. The exploitation threshold is calculated as the 75th percentile of exploitation during the current abundance regime. The stock is considered to be experiencing overfishing if exploitation exceeds the exploitation threshold. The exploitation target is calculated as the 25th percentile of exploitation during the current abundance regime. The stock's fishing mortality condition is considered favorable if the three-year average exploitation is less than or equal to the target. This overfishing reference point serves as an extra safeguard against sudden increases in exploitation that may not be explained by decreasing abundance.

However, there are several caveats associated with the fishing mortality condition. Lobster fisheries are efficient at removing the harvestable part of the population that enters the fishery each year. So, trends in landings closely track changes in population abundance. This relationship results in relatively stable exploitation during periods of consistent regulations, even during periods of rapid and consistent abundance increases and decreases. This complicates our understanding of the population's response to fishing pressure. The stability of exploitation rates creates a narrow range of values separating favorable and unfavorable exploitation status, making the overfishing status determination

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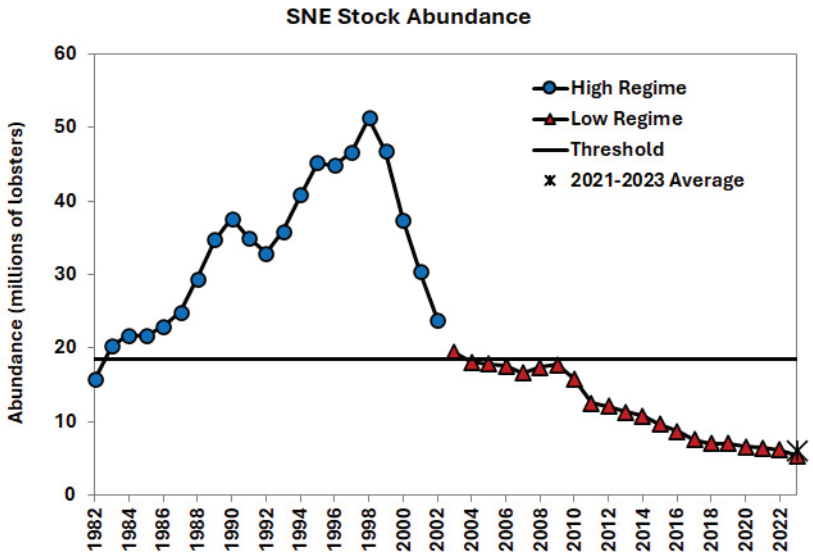
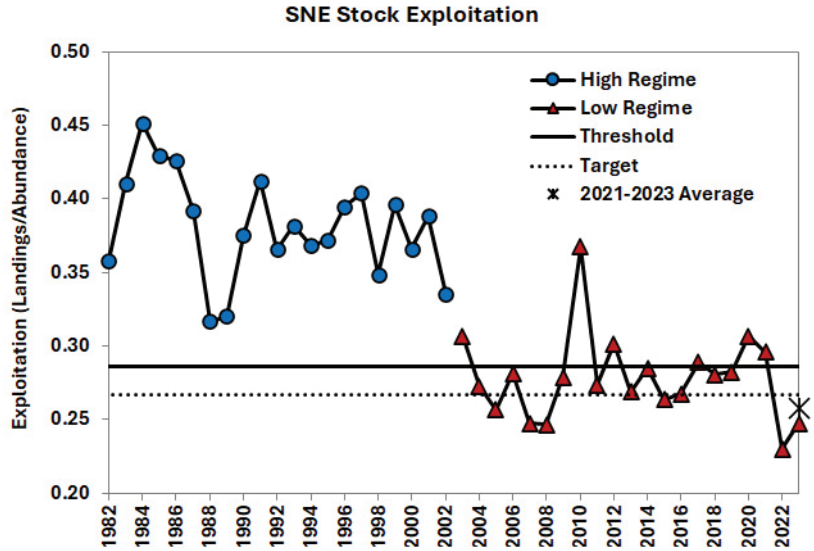
sensitive to data and model uncertainty. Additionally, due to the time lag between young of the year (YOY) settlement and recruitment into the fishery, impacts of current fishing mortality on population productivity do not become apparent for several years. This is further confounded by uncertainty around how future environmental changes will impact young lobsters before they recruit to the fishery.

Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank

For these reasons, if the three-year average exploitation exceeds the threshold, the assessment recommends initiating additional research to better understand the cause of increased exploitation and determine if management action is necessary. Abundance status is considered a more certain measure of stock status and thus is used for assessing the current health of the stocks and triggering management action. Based on these reference points, the GOM/GBK stock is not depleted and overfishing is occurring. Recruitment and spawning stock biomass estimates have declined in recent years from record highs.

Given the overfishing status and rapid declines in abundance in recent years, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee encouraged the initiation of a management strategy evaluation to establish clear management objectives for all stakeholders, better understand socioeconomic status and concerns, and identify potential management tools that might be supported by the industry and prevent further declines. Although continued adverse environmental indicators suggest environmental conditions are major contributors to the poor abundance status in SNE, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee believes significant management action would provide the best chance of stabilizing or improving the abundance and reproductive capacity of the GOM/GBK stock.





Southern New England

The SNE stock is significantly depleted and the stock's ability to replenish itself is diminished. The average abundance from 2021-2023 was 6 million lobster, well below the abundance threshold (18 million lobster) and the lowest on record. The average exploitation from 2021-2023 was between the exploitation threshold and target, indicating overfishing is not occurring.

Stock indicators, which are based strictly on observed data and are free from inherent assumptions in the stock assessment models, were also used as an independent, model-free assessment of the lobster stocks to corroborate the assessment model

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results. Indicators of adult lobster abundance generally showed similar results to the assessment model for the GOM/GBK stock, with abundance declines from peaks since 2018. GOM/GBK young-of-year (YOY) indicators have shown increases from lows in the 2010s, but remain below higher levels observed in the 2000s. Inshore surveys exhibit stronger abundance declines than offshore surveys, and indicators show higher exploitation rates inshore. New to the 2025 assessment, recruit-dependency indicators show inshore harvest is highly dependent on incoming recruitment (lobsters that enter the fishery due to catchable size). Landings and revenue indicators show declining trends but remain at positive levels. Indicators related to environmental conditions, particularly bottom water temperatures, remain positive in GOM/GBK and shell disease prevalence, although increasing in some areas, remains low realtive to SNE.

SNE abundance indicators agree with model results and indicate declines to record low abundances for all life stages in recent years. The contraction of the SNE stock has continued and is now evident offshore as well as inshore. Given data and survey challenges leading to increased instability in the SNE model, consistent poor stock status estimates, and the lack of evidence suggesting environmental and stock conditions will improve in SNE, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee recommended future assessments evaluate the condition of the SNE stock using model-free indicators, and prioritize modelling efforts on the GOM/GBK stock.

The assessment highlights extensive research on the influence of the environment on American lobster life history and population dynamics. Among the critical environmental variables, temperature stands out as the primary influence. The American lobster's range is experiencing changing environmental conditions at some of the fastest rates in the world, making consideration of environmental factors essential when assessing the lobster stocks. Therefore, the assessment incorporated environmental data time series including water temperatures at several fixed monitoring stations throughout the lobster's range, average water temperatures over large areas such as those sampled by fishery-independent surveys, oceanographic processes affecting the environment, and other environmental indicators such as lobster prey abundance. These data time series were analyzed for significant shifts in the lobster environment and population that can affect stock productivity and impact recruitment levels and the ability to support different levels of fishing pressure.

The Stock Assessment Peer Review Panel found the 2025 assessment meets and exceeds the standard for best scientific information available and provides a suitable foundation for management. The Panel commended the addition of socioeconomic data that provide insight into changes in the fishery and the considerable efforts to evaluate environmental impacts on the stock. However, the Panel cautioned against placing too much emphasis on environmental effects and discounting the effects of fishing on the lobster populations.

The Board accepted the Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report for management use. A more detailed overview of the stock assessment, as well as the Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report are available at **https://asmfc.org/species/american-lobster/** under News and Resources.

Juvenile lobsters (c) Sara Ellis

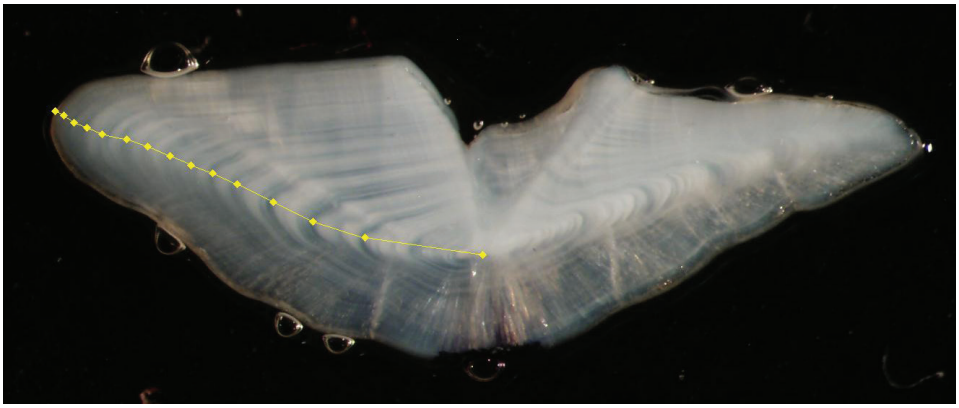
ACCSP Expands Data Warehouse Biological Module

The ACCSP biological module supports the needs of ASMFC and ACCSP partnersby providing data for stock assessments and policy decisions, and improving public and partner data accessibility. Continued expansion of the biological module can only enhance its value.

The ACCSP Data Warehouse was created to hold fisheries-dependent data from Maine to Florida. Data are centrally stored in standardized ACCSP codes supporting efficient data dissemination and use. The Data Warehouse contains commercial data from 1950 to 2024, and recreational data from 1982 to 2024. The biological module was initially focused on specific species and, therefore, contain sample data for American lobster (1981-2024), Atlantic herring (2003-2018), and Jonah crab (2003-2024).

ACCSP is now working with partners and committees to expand biological data (length, weight, age, maturity, etc.) in the Data Warehouse by agency to include more species, years, and regions. These efforts include completing standard online queries to make data more available for partner and public use.

Two active biological data projects at ACCSP are aimed at expanding data availability for the South Atlantic region. One project is with North Carolina Department of Marine Fisheries (NC DMF) and the other with NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) Trip Interview Program (TIP). NC DMF completed an ACCSP-funded proposal to restructure its biological databases and create a direct database link with the Data Warehouse. NC DMF biological data from 2011 to 2024 have been loaded into the Data Warehouse and NC DMF staff are preparing data from 1986 to 2010 for submission.



Otolith (inner ear bone) of a 13 year old golden tilefish, showing the annual growth rings that help determine the age of the fish. Ageing is a common and important component of biological data collection.

Staff from SEFSC and ACCSP completed transfer of TIP data from South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida from 2023 to 2024 to the Data Warehouse. Data from 2014 to 2022 are in preparation. Both projects will continue to submit data multiple times a year to the Data Warehouse.

ACCSP also hosts the Biological Inventory, an online repository for biological sampling program metadata. It contains summary information and contact points on current and past biological sampling from state and federal programs. In early 2026, the Biological Review Panel Committee will be discussing and implementing a biological load process like the commercial data biannual load process. Data will be submitted on a regular basis throughout the year, becoming accessible to partners and the public.

To share our progress and learn more from partners, ACCSP staff attended the State-Federal Commercial Landings Sampling Workshop led by GARFO in September. This meeting created an opportunity for state and federal fisheries agencies to discuss Northeast and Mid-Atlantic biological sampling programs. ACCSP presented on the biological module in the Data Warehouse and demonstrated opportunities for a standardized coastwide data repository.

ACCSP is a cooperative state-federal program focused on the design, implementation, and conduct of marine fisheries statistics data collection programs and their integration into a single system. For further information please visit **accsp.org**.

Special Recognition

James Boyle and Trevor Scheffel Receive Employee of the Quarter Awards

In recent months, two staff members – James Boyle and Trevor Scheffel – were recognized for their exceptional contributions to the Commission.

James Boyle

James Boyle IV, a Fisheries Management Coordinator with the Interstate Fisheries Management Program (ISFMP), was named Employee of the Quarter (EOQ) for the third quarter of 2025. Since joining the Commission in 2022, James has been a valued member of the ISFMP team and the Commission staff as a whole. His recent recognition as EOQ celebrates his exceptional contributions to the species he coordinates over the past year and a half. His recent accomplishments include work on Atlantic menhaden management within Chesapeake Bay, and assistance with recent assessment updates for tautog and Atlantic menhaden, and the Ecological Reference Points Benchmark Stock Assessment.

James's thoughtful questions, willingness to explore innovative approaches, and drive to deepen his technical understanding have elevated discussions across the ISFMP team and at numerous technical meetings. This was particularly evident in his work with the Atlantic Menhaden Chesapeake Bay Work Group, where his insight and analytical rigor advanced the development of well-informed management strategies at the board level. With James's support, the Work Group met nine times between September 2024 and April 2025 via webinar and in-person to discuss alternatives for precautionary management in Chesapeake Bay for consideration by the Atlantic Menhaden Management Board. Throughout these meetings and the development of the Work Group's Report on Chesapeake Bay Precautionary Management, James worked diligently to advance the Commission's vision of "sustainable and cooperative management of Atlantic coastal fisheries."

While coordinating the management of Atlantic menhaden and other species, James's dedication and attention to detail has ensured that reports and documents he develops are accurate, comprehensive, and trusted by states, partners, and stakeholders. His commitment to producing high-quality materials provides Commissioners with the clear, reliable information they need to support sound decision-making across complex management issues.

In addition to his technical strengths, James's reliability has made him an indispensable member of the team. Colleagues know they can count on him to follow through on commitments and provide support whenever needed. Whether assisting at a public hearing, helping plan a horseshoe crab workshop, or managing multiple quota transfer letters, James remains committed and willing to provide a helping hand. In a program where many tasks must be juggled and timelines are tight, James's dependability and expertise have become a true asset.

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Trevor Scheffel

In recognition of his dedication and outstanding work, Trevor Scheffel, Senior Data Coordinator with the ACCSP, was named EOQ for the fourth quarter of 2025. Trevor joined the ACCSP Recreational Team in 2019 and has consistently provided exceptional leadership, technical expertise, and commitment to projects foundational to the success of ACCSP and the Commission. This EOQ recognizes Trevor's exceptional work launching the Catch Card Project and his expanding role with the Recreational Technical (RecTech) Committee.

The Catch Card Project is a significant, multi-year effort designed to improve the collection of recreational length data that plays a crucial role in stock assessments and in understanding angler recall in the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS). Trevor's work to prepare partners for implementation required extensive collaboration and logistical planning. From monthly consensus building on procedures and logistics to coordinating eight different partner card specifications and setting up pre-paid postage systems, Trevor guided the project from concept to launch. Trevor's hard work, commitment, and willingness to support state partners was essential to the successful launch of this project and has cleared the way for its potential implementation across the Atlantic in the future.

Trevor's leadership within RecTech has been equally impactful. As recreational data collection needs grow more complex, RecTech continues to provide a vital role in developing Atlantic coast recreational data collection standards. Trevor has helped drive progress on several key fronts, including the for-hire logbook methodology, updates to MRIP APAIS depredation and areas-fished questions, and improvements to committee roles and processes. Trevor has balanced these tasks while continuing to excel in his other duties on the ACCSP Recreational Team. His efforts have strengthened committee engagement and improved decision-making efficiency.

Trevor's colleagues value his thoughtful insight, collaboration, and persistence in moving projects forward. RecTech members and MRIP partner states regularly express how invaluable he is to their work. ACCSP and Commission co-workers also appreciate Trevor's strength in these areas as they relate to his role leading the staff fantasy football league, where he holds the title of "Commish" and has managed a few shockingly impressive winning streaks.

As EOQ recipients, James and Trevor received a cash award and a letter of appreciation to be placed in their personal record. In addition, their names are on the EOQ plaque displayed in the Commission's lobby. Congratulations, James and Trevor!


HAPPY
HOLIDAYS!