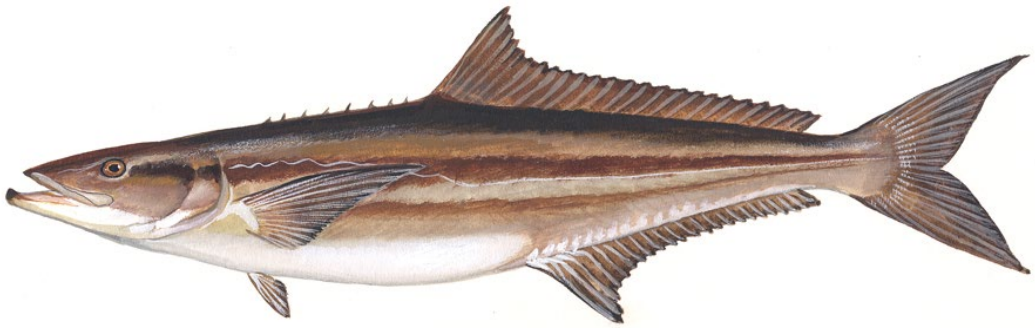
ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

REVIEW OF THE INTERSTATE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

FOR ATLANTIC COBIA
(*Rachycentron canadum*)

2024 FISHING YEAR



Approved by the Coastal Pelagics Management Board
February 2026

Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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I. Status of the Fishery Management Plan

Date of FMP Approval:	Original FMP – November 2017
Amendments & Addenda:	Amendment 1 – August 2019 Addendum 1 – October 2020
Management Areas:	The distribution of the Atlantic stock of cobia from Georgia through Rhode Island
Active Boards/Committees:	Coastal Pelagics Management Board; Cobia Technical Committee, Plan Development Team, and Plan Review Team; South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted an Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Atlantic Migratory Group of cobia (Atlantic cobia) in 2017 (ASMFC, 2017). Prior to the FMP, federal management was through the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources (CMP FMP), while New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina had regulations for their respective state waters.

The FMP established a complementary management approach between the ASMFC and SAFMC. Under the ASMFC, Atlantic cobia are managed as part of the Coastal Pelagics Board (Board). Through the FMP, regulations for states with a declared interest were required to reflect several measures established federally through the CMP FMP.

In March, 2019, Regulatory Amendment 31 to the CMP FMP became effective (SAFMC, 2018). This removed Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, resulting in management solely through the ASMFC.

In August, 2019, the Board approved Amendment 1 to reflect removal of Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, assume management responsibilities previously accomplished through the SAFMC and CMP FMP, and establish recommendations for measures in federal waters. Amendment 1 stated requirements were to be implemented by July, 2020.

Amendment 1 maintains many regulations of the original Commission FMP and previous CMP FMP. These include a 36-inch fork length (or 40-inch total length) recreational minimum size limit, 1 fish per person recreational bag limit, a recreational daily vessel limit not to exceed 6 fish per vessel, a 33-inch fork length (or 37-inch total length) commercial minimum size limit, and a commercial possession limit of 2 cobia per person not to exceed 6 cobia per vessel.

There are four plan objectives:

1) Provide a flexible management system to address future changes in resource abundance, scientific information, and fishing patterns among user groups or areas.

2) Promote cooperative collection of biological, economic, and social data required to effectively monitor and assess the status of the cobia resource and evaluate management efforts.
3) Manage the cobia fishery to protect both young individuals and established breeding stock.
4) Develop research priorities that will further refine the cobia management program to maximize the biological, social, and economic benefits derived from the cobia population.

In February, 2020, the Board approved an annual total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for 2020-2022, based on results from the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 58 stock assessment for Atlantic cobia, allocated to the recreational and commercial sectors based on the Amendment 1 allocation of 92% recreational and 8% commercial. However, states with commercial harvest had an agreement to harvest a smaller portion of that amount in 2020. SEDAR 58 used updated recreational catch estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) 2018 transition and calibration to the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey effort estimates, which replaced those of the Coastal Household Telephone Survey.

Given the increased recreational catch estimates used in the SEDAR 58 assessment, the total annual quota approved by the Board also increased, resulting in increases to both the recreational and commercial quotas. As this increase in recreational harvest did not truly reflect a change in previous effort, only the estimate of that effort, Addendum I to Amendment 1 was approved by the Board in October 2020 to reconsider the percent allocations to the commercial and recreational sectors to better reflect the observed harvest. The Addendum changed the allocation of the resource between the recreational and commercial fisheries from 92% and 8%, respectively, to 96% and 4%, respectively. The calculation of the commercial trigger, which determines when an in season coastwide commercial closure occurs, was also revised. The Addendum established a commercial *de minimis* set aside of 4% of the commercial quota with a maximum cap of 5,000 pounds to account for potential landings in *de minimis* states not tracked in-season against the quota. The Addendum also allowed states that are *de minimis* for their recreational fisheries to choose to match the recreational management measures implemented by an adjacent non-de minimis state (or the nearest non-de minimis state if none are adjacent) or limit their recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or an equivalent total length of 37 inches). Based on maturity data from the SEDAR 58 assessment, this latter regulatory option was updated from 29 inches fork length to 33 inches fork length in Addendum I to allow a greater number of females to spawn before being susceptible to harvest. Addendum I measures were effective January 1, 2021.

In May 2022, the Board changed the cobia quota timeframe from 2020-2022 to 2021-2023, thereby, maintaining the total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for the 2023 fishing season. For the 2024-2026 fishing seasons, the total harvest quota for both sectors combined is 80,112 fish, which is the same harvest quota that has been in place since 2020.

In 2023, in response to increased cobia harvest in some Mid-Atlantic states, as well as concerns about high uncertainty associated with cobia recreational harvest estimates, especially at the state level, the Board initiated Addendum II. Approved in 2024, Addendum II modifies the recreational allocation framework, allows the Board to update allocations quickly if the underlying data are

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

2024 and 2025 Measures

With a total harvest quota for both sectors of 80,112 fish for the 2024-2026 fishing seasons, the 4% allocation to the commercial sector results in an annual commercial quota of 73,116 pounds. The current management measures for the commercial fishery include a 33" FL (or 37" total length) minimum size limit and 2 fish limit per person, with a 6 fish maximum vessel limit. The commercial Atlantic cobia fishery will close once the commercial quota is projected to be reached as determined by the commercial closure trigger.

Per the 96% allocation to the recreational sector, the coastwide recreational harvest target for 2024-2026 fishing seasons is 76,908 fish. For 2024, the previous state allocations were in place resulting in the following state targets for recreational harvest:

Georgia - 7,229 fish
South Carolina - 9,306 fish
North Carolina - 29,302 fish
Virginia - 30,302 fish
De minimis - 769 fish

When the Board set the total harvest quota for 2024-2026, the Board would typically consider changes to state recreational management measures starting that first year (2024) by comparing each state's recent harvest to state harvest targets. However, the Board considered a Technical Committee analysis reviewing the impacts of maintaining status quo recreational management measures, and ultimately, the Board chose to maintain status quo state waters recreational management measures for the 2024 fishing season while a new addendum was considered regarding recreational allocations.

For 2025, the new regional targets for recreational targets were in place under Addendum II:

Southern Region (NC through GA) - 24,083 fish
Northern Region (RI through VA) - 52,825 fish

To determine 2025 recreational measures, each region's average harvest from 2021-2023 was compared to the region's target. The Northern Region average harvest was above its target resulting in a 15.9% reduction. The Southern Region average harvest was below its target so states in that region maintained status quo measures.

II. Status of the Stock

SEDAR 58

In 2020, the Board approved the SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) 58 Atlantic Cobia benchmark assessment for management use which continued to use the Beaufort Assessment Model (BAM), a forward-projecting statistical catch-at-age model used in the prior assessment, SEDAR 28 (SEDAR 2013). SEDAR 58 provided new reference points and determined that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring (Figures 1 and 2). This assessment had a terminal year of 2017, and used the recalibrated recreational catch data from MRIP, which yielded much higher biomass and spawning stock biomass estimates as compared to SEDAR 28 (Figure 3). Even with the large changes in biomass estimates, the trends of abundance, recruitment, and relative status were very similar between the two assessments. Stock structure also remained unchanged from the SEDAR 28 assessment which established the stock boundary between Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico cobia at the FL/GA border with the Atlantic stock extending northward to Rhode Island.

The assessment proposed updated reference points of $F_{40\%}$ and 75% of $SSB_{F40\%}$ as the threshold reference points (Figures 4 and 5). The reference points were selected as the fishing rate and SSB that allows the population to reach 40% of the maximum spawning potential the stock would have obtained in the absence of harvest. These reference points serve as proxies for maximum sustainable yield-derived relationships due to insufficient data for cobia.

Spawning stock biomass showed little overall trend throughout the estimated time series, but the terminal year is the lowest in the time series. Age structure estimated by the base run indicated a slight decline in the number of younger fish in the last decade, but the rest of the age structure was above the expected values in 2017. The estimated fishing mortality rates have generally increased through the assessment time frame, peaking in 1996, with the recreational fleet as the largest contributor to total F ($F_{2015\text{-}2017}/F_{40\%} = 0.29$).

SEDAR 107

The next stock assessment for Atlantic cobia is underway with an expected completion date of mid-2027. The stock assessment initially began in March 2024 through the SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) process under SEDAR 95. However, the assessment was paused starting in September 2024 due to no lead analyst being available. A new lead analyst will begin in 2026 and the assessment has been transitioned to the Commission assessment process with the peer review coordinated by SEDAR in early 2027.

III. Status of the Fishery

Regulations, by state, for the 2024 fishing year are presented in Table 1. Total Atlantic cobia landings (commercial and recreational) are estimated at about 1.7 million pounds in 2024, which is a 40% decrease from 2023 (Figure 6, Tables 2 and 3). This decrease was driven by a decrease in recreational landings, while commercial landings slightly increased. The commercial and recreational fisheries harvested 4% and 96% of the 2024 total, respectively.

Coastwide commercial landings show an increasing trend since low harvests in the 1970s and early 1980s, but comprise a small portion of the total harvest due, in part, to the current 4% allocation of the total annual harvest quota since 2021 (Figure 6); the commercial allocation was 8% prior to 2021. For the past five years, commercial landings have stayed between 64,000 and 75,000 pounds. Coastwide cobia commercial landings in 2024 were estimated at 70,546 pounds, which is a 10% increase from 2023 commercial landings. The commercial quota of 73,116 pounds was not exceeded in 2024. Virginia (56%) and North Carolina (40%) harvested the majority of the commercial landings in 2024 (Table 2).

The total non-*de minimis* commercial landings reached the commercial trigger level for fishery closure on November 18, so the commercial fishery in state waters were closed starting December 18 through the end of the year. NOAA Fisheries implemented a complementary closure for the same timeframe in federal waters.

Recreational harvests have fluctuated widely throughout the time series, often through rapid increases and declines. Average annual recreational harvest for the time series is 40,869 fish (1.1 million pounds) (Figures 6-7, Table 3-4). This fishery has grown noticeably over the time series, with average annual harvests over the last 10 years of 79,789 fish (2.4 million pounds). The 2024 recreational harvest was 54,289 fish (1.6 million pounds), which is below the coastwide recreational harvest target 0f 76,908 fish. 2024 harvest decreased by 45% in number of fish from 2023 and is the lowest harvest since 2017.

From 2018-2024, Virginia harvested the majority of the coastwide recreational cobia, comprising an average of 72% of coastwide recreational harvest by number each year. North Carolina has the second highest recreational harvest with an average of 13% of coastwide recreational harvest by number each year for the same timeframe. South Carolina and Georgia have averaged 6.5% and 5.5% of the coastwide recreational harvest annually for the same timeframe, and states north of Virginia comprised the remainder (3% on average annually). Since 2018, recreational landings have increased in some Mid-Atlantic states, notably Virginia, while remaining relatively stable in southern states, indicating a range expansion is more likely than a stock shift.

It should be noted that North Carolina's estimated recreational harvest in 2023-2024 was very low at 629 fish in 2023 and 3,631 fish in 2024, as compared to the 12,403 average harvest from the previous five years (2018-2022). North Carolina noted in their compliance report that the cobia fishery is a pulse fishery, with the primary wave of fish historically arriving in late May and being available for about 6 weeks. In recent years, anecdotal observations suggest cobia are migrating to

Chesapeake Bay much earlier, in April and May, and are residing in North Carolina for a shorter period of time resulting in fewer recreational catches.

South Carolina's estimated recreational harvest in 2024 of 1,432 fish was also low as compared to the 6,001 average harvest from the previous five years (2019-2023). This 2024 harvest is the lowest for South Carolina since 2017, when federal closures were in place.

For recreational effort, MRIP estimates 567,320 directed cobia angler trips in 2024 (cobia as primary or secondary target), a 21% decrease from 2023. This aligns with the decrease in recreational harvest in 2024.

The PRT notes that changes in harvest and effort can be attributed to multiple factors, including stock distribution, fish availability in nearshore or offshore waters, state regulatory changes, and level of effort. Additionally, the timeframe when cobia are available in some state waters can be very limited, so factors like poor weather conditions during that narrow window can affect effort and harvest.

Recreational releases of live fish have generally increased throughout the time series (Figure 7, Table 5). In 2024, 220,820 recreationally-caught fish were released which represents about 80% of the total recreational catch. From 2018-2023, an average 76% of cobia caught recreationally were released alive each year. This is higher than the average 65% released alive during the period of 2013-2017.

IV. Status of Assessment Advice

Current stock status information comes from SEDAR 58 (SEDAR, 2020), which determined the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. Results of this assessment were approved for management use by the Board at their February 2020 meeting, and, as such, have been incorporated into ASMFC's FMP.

The stock assessment could be improved by developing a fishery-independent sampling program for abundance of cobia and other coastal migratory pelagic species. The currently used fishery-dependent index causes notable uncertainty in part due to the lack of an effective sampling methodology. In addition, while the terminal year of the assessment was 2017, due to federal water closures for cobia, the index could only be calculated through 2015 in the previous assessment. The assessment could also benefit from improved characterization of age, reproductive, genetic, and migratory characteristics, tag-based information on natural mortality, and more precise recreational catch estimates.

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

V. Status of Research and Monitoring

There are no monitoring or research programs required annually of the states except for the submission of a compliance report. Fishery-dependent data collections (other than catch and effort data) are conducted in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Data collected includes length, age, and sex data. Fishery-independent monitoring programs conducted by states that may encounter cobia are conducted in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia. Below are brief summaries of relevant data collection programs reported by states in their compliance reports for Atlantic cobia.

Georgia: The Marine Sportfish Carcass Recovery Project is used to collect biological data from recreationally harvested finfish such as Red Drum, Spotted Seatrout, Southern Flounder, Sheepshead, and Southern Kingfish. Anglers donate filleted whole fish carcasses and GACRD personnel collect the carcasses and process them to determine species, fork length (FL), and sex (when possible). Sagittal otoliths are removed and processed to determine the age of the fish. Cobia are occasionally donated to the project; however, none were donated in 2024.

The Marine Sportfish Population and Heath Survey (MSPHS) is a multi-faceted fishery independent survey used to collect information on the biology and population dynamics of recreationally important finfish. Sampling is ongoing in three Georgia estuaries, Altamaha, St. Andrew, and Wassaw, on a seasonal basis, using entanglement gear (gill nets and trammel nets). Although they are not routinely caught during MSPHS sampling, Cobia are occasionally encountered during sampling events; however, none were caught during 2024.

South Carolina: The SCDNR charterboat logbook program has been in place since 1993 as a mandatory trip-level logbook reporting system for all charter vessels to collect basic catch and effort data. Annual cobia recreational harvest by weight has ranged from 4,152 to 15,638 lbs. with a long term mean of 10,068 lbs. for 2005-2024. The mean annual harvest for years prior to the month of May harvest closure in South Carolina's Southern Management Cobia Zone (1993-2016) was 10,882 lbs. which has since averaged 5,900 lbs. in subsequent years (2018-2024). Since 1998, the charterboat data has shown an increase in the number of Cobia released alive while harvest remained relatively consistent throughout the 2000s and has been on an overall declining trend since 2012. Catch per unit effort (CPUE) in the Cobia charterboat fishery peaked in 1997 and declined afterwards to the series low in 2012. It should be noted that 2012-2014 had the lowest continuous CPUE levels of the time series which also coincided with several management changes, as well as fishery closures that occurred during this time period. There has been a slight uptick in charterboat CPUE in the last several years with a CPUE level above the long-term mean (0.002 fish/trip/angler) since 2018.

There are currently no independent fishery monitoring programs in South Carolina that monitor Cobia. There are a few SCDNR surveys that capture incidental Cobia, but the intercept levels are so low as to not be useful as a proxy abundance index. The SCDNR estuarine trammel net survey has captured only 19 Cobia between 1991-2022 over a total of 24,337 net sets. The SEAMAP nearshore trawl survey conducted from Cape Hatteras, NC to Cape Canaveral, FL by the SCDNR has captured

few Cobia over its history (362 fish over 17,517 tows from 1989-2022), but with a low catch rate of only 11.2 fish/year (1.6% positive tows) over this same time period.

North Carolina: Supplemental length-frequency information for the recreational cobia fishery is collected through the NCDMF Carcass Collection Program. In the last 5 years, mean FL of cobia measured by MRIP has ranged from 34 to 43 inches. In 2024, the minimum FL was 35 inches, and the maximum FL was 52 inches. Mean FL of the cobia collected through the NCDMF Carcass Collection Program is generally similar to MRIP samples. In 2024, the minimum length recorded in the Carcass Collection Program was 32 inches FL and the maximum was 53 inches FL. The number of commercial and recreational sampled fish is low due to low possession limits and the seasonal nature of the cobia fishery in North Carolina.

North Carolina currently does not have any fishery-independent monitoring programs that target or catch cobia in large numbers. The NCDMF initiated a fishery-independent gill net survey in Pamlico Sound in 2001 and expanded its coverage in 2008 to include the Cape Fear and New rivers. Coverage was further expanded to Bogue, Back, and Core sounds in 2018. The objective of this project is to provide annual, independent, relative abundance indices for key estuarine species in North Carolina estuaries. The survey employs a stratified random sampling design and utilizes multiple mesh gill nets (3.0 inch to 6.5 inch stretched mesh, in ½-inch increments). A total of 291 cobia have been captured in the North Carolina Independent Gill Net Survey from 2001 to 2024. Cobia from this survey ranged from six to 38 inches FL with a mean size of 21 inches FL. Due to the low number of positive trips, ranging from <1% to 5% of all sets annually, this survey cannot be used as an index of abundance. While this data has not been considered suitable for an index of abundance for this species, this sampling program is one of the few programs on the Atlantic coast that catches smaller cobia, providing important life history information that may not otherwise be obtained.

Virginia: Virginia currently has a voluntary discard reporting system (Voluntary Recreational Cobia Initiative) and is focused on collecting discard length data from recreational cobia anglers. A total of 26 release lengths were submitted through the new voluntary program in 2024. This program will continue in 2025. Age data will continue to be collected from the preexisting carcass collection program that began in 2007.

Maryland: Cobia are rarely encountered in Maryland's fishery dependent monitoring. One survey which has encountered cobia is the Maryland commercial pound net survey. Since 1993, Maryland has sampled commercial pound nets in the lower portion of Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River. Each site is sampled once every two weeks from May through September, weather and fisherman's schedule permitting. These nets are sampled as part of the fisherman's regular activity; therefore, net soak times and the manner in which they are fished is consistent with the fisherman's day-to-day activities. Between 1993 and 2024, 19 cobia total have been sampled in this survey, though at least one cobia was sampled each year between 2018-2022. Sampled cobia ranged in size from 371-1197 mm. No cobia have been sampled in this survey since 2022.

Cobia have rarely been encountered in Maryland's fishery independent surveys. Almost all of the fishery independent cobia have been sampled in Maryland's coastal bays in two fishery-independent surveys. One survey which has encountered them is the Maryland coastal bays juvenile seine and trawl survey. The Maryland coastal bays have been sampled since 1972, with the sampling protocol standardized in 1982. Shore beach seine sampling is conducted using a 100 foot beach seine at 19 fixed sites once per month, June through September. Trawl sampling occurs at 20 fixed sites on a monthly basis, April through October. Between 1982-2024, just nine cobia have been sampled in the Maryland coastal bays juvenile seine and trawl survey over six years (1989, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2010, and 2021), ranging in size from 151-287 mm. None have been sampled since 2021 in this survey.

The other fishery independent survey in Maryland's coastal bays that has encountered cobia is the Coastal Fisheries Program's submerged aquatic vegetation habitat survey. This survey has been conducted each September since 2015 and uses a 50-foot beach seine to sample varying habitat types. While a single cobia measuring 147 mm was sampled in this survey for the first time in 2020, none were sampled between 2021-2024.

New Jersey: New Jersey does not conduct fishery-independent monitoring of cobia. New Jersey conducts a fishery-independent trawl survey, which historically samples the nearshore ocean waters on five sampling cruises throughout the year. During the entire time series of the survey from 1988 through 2024, a total of 26 cobia were caught and sampled. A total of 2 cobia were caught in the survey in 2024.

VI. Status of Management Measures and Issues

Fishery Management Plan

No management changes were required or implemented in 2024. States maintained the same management measures as 2021-2023.

In January 2024, New York declared an interest in the Atlantic Cobia FMP and its management measures meet the requirements of the FMP.

For the 2024 fishing season, the Board chose to maintain status quo state recreational management measures instead of adjusting measures based on each state's harvest target evaluation while a new draft addendum was developed. For the 2025 fishing season, the Board implemented new recreational allocations which were used to set recreational measures for 2025 with a reduction in the Northern Region and status quo in the Southern Region.

De Minimis

The FMP allows states to request recreational *de minimis* status if their recreational landings in two of the previous three years are less than 1% of annual coastwide recreational landings during that time period. Prior to Addendum II (prior to 2025), if a state qualified for *de minimis*, the state could choose to match all FMP-related recreational management measures (including seasons and vessel limits) implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if

none are adjacent) or the state could choose to limit its recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or 37 inches total length) with no seasonal restrictions. Those recreational *de minimis* measures were in place for 2024. With the new regional recreational allocation implemented in 2025, there are no longer different recreational measures for recreational *de minimis* states.

Rhode Island, Delaware, Maryland, and Florida requested recreational *de minimis* status through the annual reporting process. All of these states meet the recreational *de minimis* qualifications.

De minimis status for commercial fisheries may be granted to states if their commercial landings for 2 of the previous 3 years were less than 2% of the coastwide commercial landings for the same time period. Commercial regulations in *de minimis* states are the same as non-*de minimis* states and are limited to a minimum size of 33 inches FL (or 37 inches TL) with 2 fish per person for a total of 6 fish per vessel (the same requirements as non-*de minimis* states). Commercial *de minimis* states, however, are not required to monitor their in-season harvests. Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida requested *de minimis* status for commercial fisheries through the annual reporting process. All of these states meet the commercial *de minimis* qualifications.

VII. Implementation of FMP Compliance Requirements for 2024

The PRT finds no inconsistencies among states in regard to the Fishery Management Plan.

VIII. Recommendations of the Plan Review Team

Management
The PRT recommends that the Board approve the 2024 FMP Review, state compliance, and all *de minimis* requests from Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida.

The PRT emphasizes that multiple states could exceed *de minimis* thresholds over the next few years if cobia landings continue to increase in Mid-Atlantic states due to cobia potentially becoming more available in those areas. The PRT notes the management implications of this, including requiring commercial in-season monitoring in more states. For recreational measures, the *de minimis* designation no longer affects state recreational regulations since new measures must be consistent for the whole region. Though in the long term, the allocation between regions may need to be reevaluated.

The next stock assessment will be critical to better understand trends in the stock and the fishery. The previous assessment had a terminal year of 2017, and this assessment will likely have a terminal year of 2025 which will capture recent trends of higher landings in Mid-Atlantic states and the transition to Commission-only management. The PRT emphasizes the importance of incorporating the revised MRIP time series into the new assessment.

Research

The current stock assessment (SEDAR 95) is facing data limitation challenges for cobia. To support future assessments and management, it is important to consider long-term monitoring and data collection for cobia. The following are important research recommendations the PRT continues to highlight:

- Define, develop, and monitor adult and juvenile abundance estimates through the expansion of current or development of new fishery independent surveys. This recommendation is especially relevant as it is uncertain that the current abundance index used in SEDAR 58 will be able to be updated for the upcoming Atlantic cobia stock assessment scheduled to be completed in 2027.
- Continue to collect and analyze current life history data from fishery independent and dependent programs, including size, age, maturity, histology workups and information on spawning season timing and duration. Increase spatial and temporal coverage of age samples collected regularly from fishery dependent and independent sources.
- Continue collection of genetic material to continue to assess the stock identification and any Distinct Population Segments that may exist within the management unit relative to recommendations made by the SEDAR 58 Stock ID Process.
- Expand existing fishery independent surveys in time and space to better define and cover cobia habitats, including conducting otolith microchemistry studies to identify regional recruitment contributions and new and ongoing satellite tagging programs to help identify spawning and juvenile habitat use and regional recruitment sources.
- Additional work to better understand the impacts of climate change on cobia habitat and range expansion.

Additional research recommendations can be found in Section 2.8 of the SEDAR 58 stock assessment.

IX. References

ASMFC. 2017. Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Migratory Group Cobia. ASMFC, Arlington, VA. 85 p.

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SEDAR. 2013. SEDAR 28 – South Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 420 pp. available online at: http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/Sedar_Workshops.jsp?WorkshopNum=28

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X. Figures

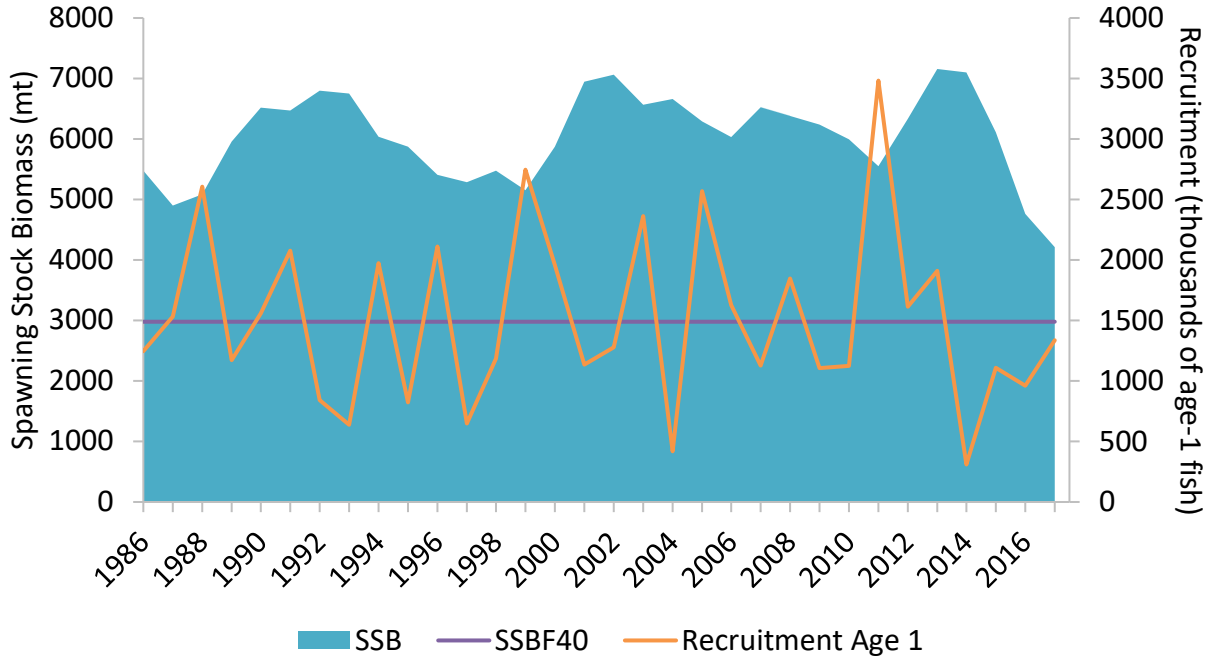

Figure 1. Atlantic Cobia spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment of year 1 fish. (SEDAR, 2020)

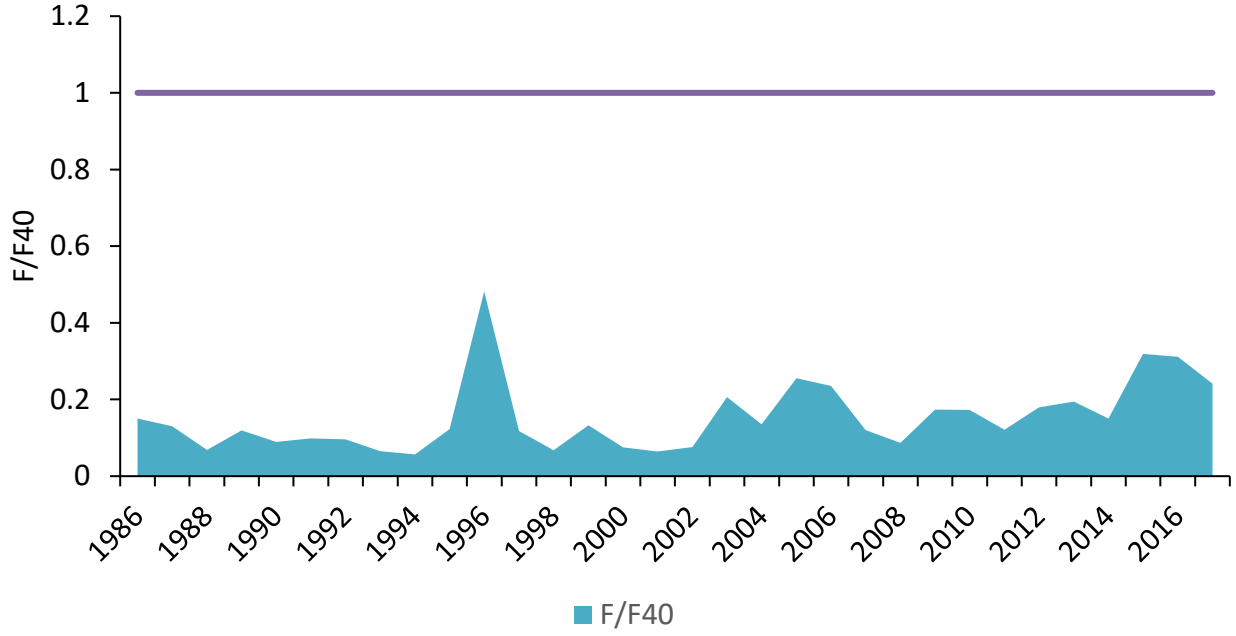

Figure 2. Atlantic Cobia fishing mortality (F) relative to the F40 reference point from 1986-2017. (SEDAR, 2020)

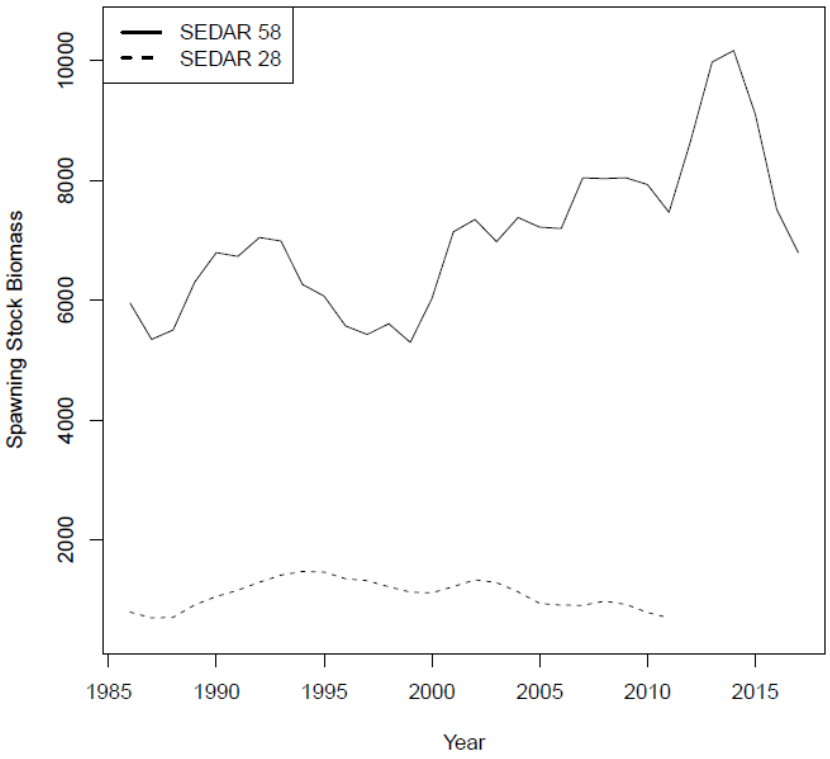

Figure 3. Comparing spawning stock biomass from the current assessment (SEDAR 58) to the previous assessment (SEDAR 28). (SEDAR, 2020)

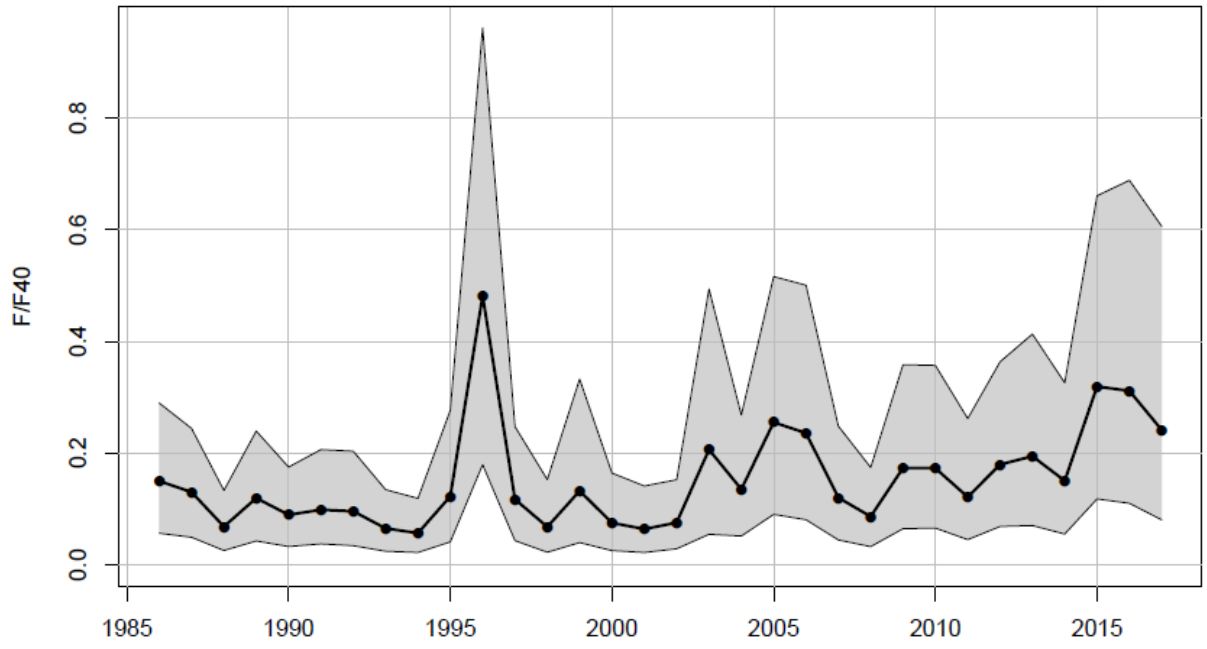

Figure 4. Estimated time series of Fishing Mortality (F) relative to F at Maximum Sustainable Yield ($F_{40\%}$) (SEDAR, 2020).

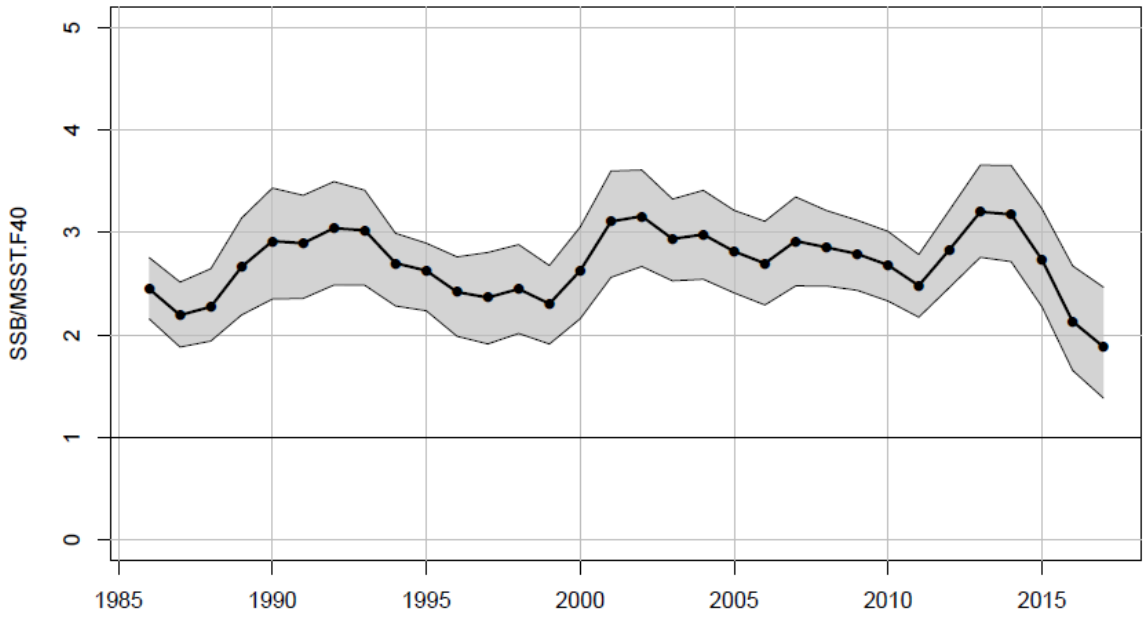

Figure 5. Estimated time series of Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) relative to the Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST) (SEDAR, 2020).

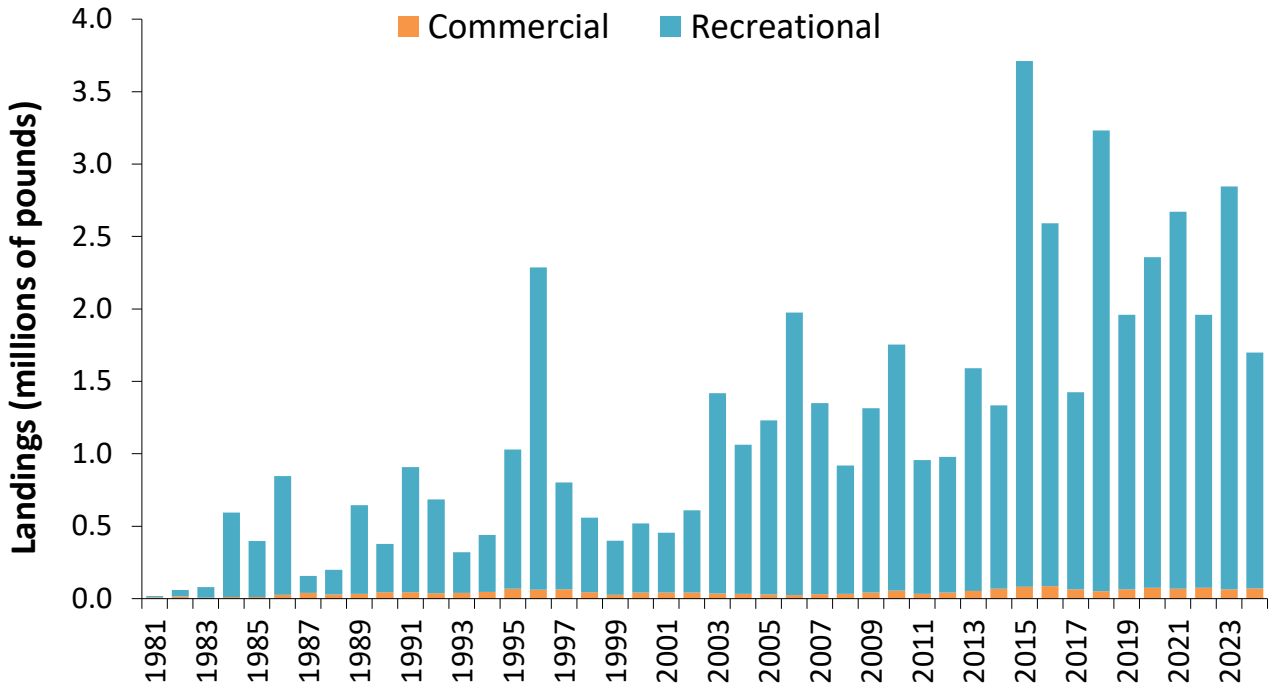

Figure 6. Commercial and recreational landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia. Recreational data not available prior to 1981. See Tables 2 and 3 for data sources and values from the last ten years.

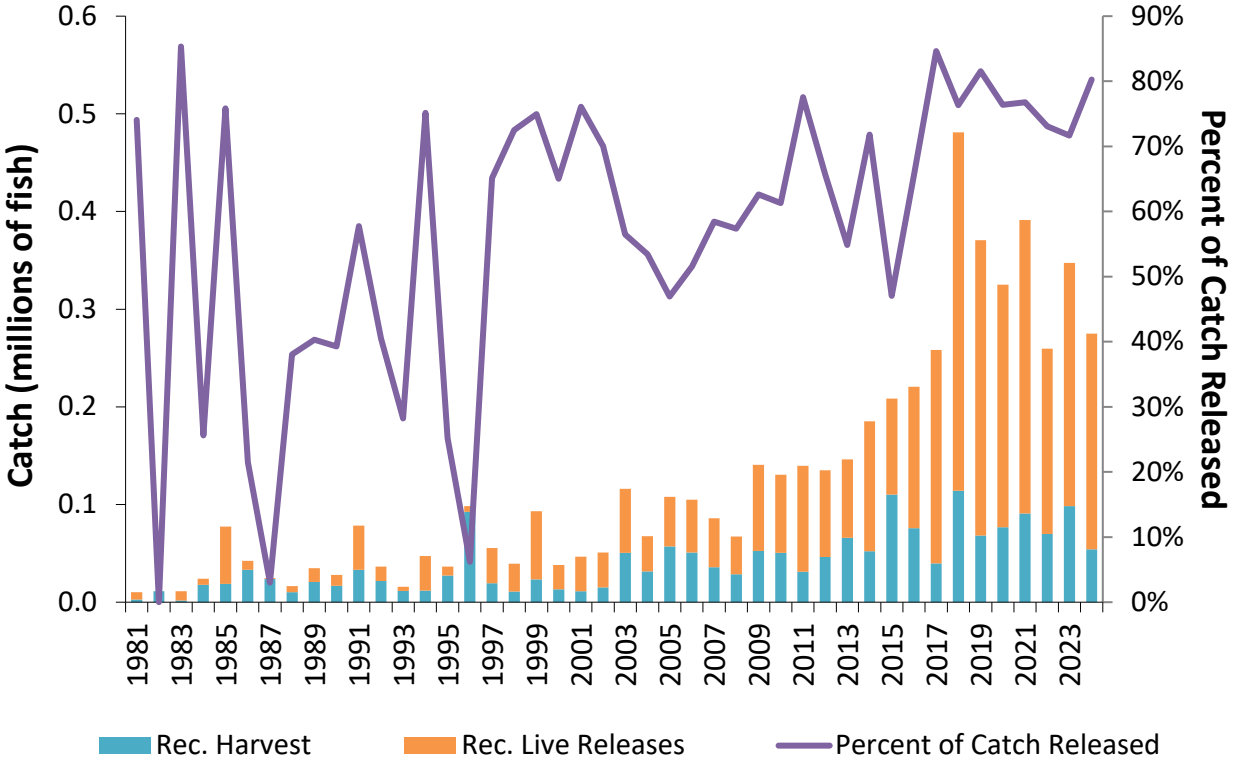

Figure 7. Recreational catch (harvest and live releases) of Atlantic cobia (numbers) and the proportion of catch that is released. See Tables 4 and 5 for data sources and values from the last ten years.

XI. Tables

Table 1. Atlantic cobia regulations for 2024.

State	Recreational Measures	Commercial Measures
RI	*De minimis* Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	<u>Coastwide</u> Possession Limit: 2 fish per person Minimum Size: 33 in fork length or 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 6 fish If commercial fishing in state waters is closed, commercial fishing in federal waters will be recommended to mirror state closures <u>Deviations</u> -Rhode Island and New York possession limit is 2 fish per vessel -Virginia possession limit is per licensee rather than per person -North Carolina has 36 minimum fork length -No commercial harvest in South Carolina state waters -Georgia possession limit is 1 fish per person (not to exceed 6 per vessel) and minimum size is 36 in fork length -Georgia state waters close to commercial fishing when federal waters close
NY	*De minimis* Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	
NJ	*De minimis* Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round	
DE	*De minimis* Minimum Size: 37 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per vessel Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel	
MD	*De minimis* Minimum Size: 40 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	
PRFC	Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50” per vessel) Bag limit: 1 per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	
VA	Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50” per vessel) Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15	

State	Recreational Measures	Commercial Measures
NC	Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Season: May 1-December 31 <u>Private Vessel Limit</u> May 1- June 30: 2 fish July 1-Dec 31: 1 fish <u>For-Hire Vessel Limit</u> May 1-Dec 31: 4 fish	
SC	Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Vessel Limit: 6 fish Season: Open year-round <u>Southern Cobia Management Zone:</u> Minimum Size: 36 in FL Season: June 1-April 30 (closed in May) Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 3 fish -If recreational fishing in federal waters is closed, recreational fishing in all SC state waters is also closed.	
GA	Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Vessel Limit: 6 fish Season: March 1-October 31	
***Florida has a declared interest in the Atlantic Coastal Migratory Group, but their cobia fisheries are managed as part of the Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group due to cobia stock boundaries.**		

Table 2. Commercial landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2015-2024. Sources: 2025 state compliance reports for 2024 fishing year; for years prior to 2024, personal communication with Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program [ACCSP].

Year	RI	CT*	NY	NJ	DE	MD	PRFC	VA	NC	SC	GA	Total
2015	C		235	C		C		25,352	52,684	2,487	C	82,117
2016	183		114	312		C	1,642	32,131	48,252	4,533	C	87,168
2017	115		81	C		C	C	34,069	20,842	4,591	C	64,124
2018	290	C	400	707		C		25,194	20,629	3,026	C	50,953
2019	352		1,191	C	C	C	2,375	33,496	21,553	2,619	C	64,741
2020	844	C	5,182	699	C	C	378	27,768	38,344	1,588	C	75,150
2021	797	C	1,754	2,230		C	816	29,386	29,301	2,324	C	67,711
2022	83		1,537	C		C	147	38,572	32,711	1,565		75,456
2023	139	C	436	1,211		C		29,824	31,301	1,500		64,411
2024	C		161	918	C	619	C	39,195	28,560	765	C	70,546

C: confidential landings.

*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 3. Recreational harvest (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2015-2024. Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried August 2025.

Year	RI	CT*	NY	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	Total
2015							1,166,000	1,925,762	434,899	102,917	3,629,578
2016						307	1,505,528	838,363	159,345		2,503,543
2017							488,287	872,861		390	1,361,538
2018		4,136			15,053	4,647	2,259,661	685,962	205,647	6,081	3,181,187
2019							1,573,485	254,963	64,937	1,632	1,895,017
2020		1,595				38,991	1,541,393	407,883	247,250	44,976	2,282,088
2021				6,060		131,129	1,722,619	356,340	217,129	170,356	2,603,633
2022			144,715	20,970			1,129,258	306,411	139,599	142,606	1,883,559
2023							2,467,557	12,523	87,486	212,679	2,780,245
2024				2,184		42,774	1,376,436	103,272	37,219	65,233	1,627,118

*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 4. Recreational harvest (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2015-2024. Coastwide harvest shaded in red if coastwide harvest target of 76,908 fish for 2020-2024 was exceeded. Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried August 2025.

Year	RI	CT*	NY	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	Total
2015							38,672	47,110	15,575	8,934	110,291
2016						56	43,780	26,421	5,437		75,694
2017							14,613	25,025		19	39,657
2018		569			581	206	80,679	25,331	6,340	233	113,939
2019							55,770	10,090	2,381	72	68,313
2020		219				1,360	50,287	15,067	7,650	2,203	76,786
2021				250		5,084	57,135	10,970	8,858	8,510	90,807
2022			3,462	711			39,668	12,330	6,988	6,641	69,800
2023	361						81,824	629	4,129	11,368	98,311
2024				75		1,630	44,954	3,631	1,432	2,567	54,289

*CT does not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 5. Recreational live releases (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2015-2024.
Source: Personal communication with MRIP queried August 2025.

Year	MA*	RI	CT*	NY	NJ	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	Total
2015					416			40,689	44,254	12,369	283	98,011
2016							1,075	81,482	39,237	20,255	2,917	144,966
2017								77,184	125,251	11,359	4,830	218,624
2018					2,879		12,090	194,865	68,219	71,020	18,056	367,129
2019					10,166	30	251	184,716	38,285	59,724	9,080	302,252
2020				2,979		564	8,233	146,913	51,158	23,384	15,091	245,343
2021						197	12,344	187,872	40,136	39,341	20,578	300,468
2022				722				84,150	46,777	43,131	14,828	189,608
2023	1,554	450			3,582			141,956	32,590	39,864	28,894	248,890
2024							792	145,123	23,992	41,377	9,536	220,820

*MA and CT do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.