Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Red Drum Technical Committee and Stock Assessment Subcommittee Meeting Summary

Webinar
August 27, 2025

Technical Committee and Stock Assessment Subcommittee Members: Ethan Simpson, Joey Ballenger, Chris Swanson, Jared Flowers, CJ Schlick, Matt Jargowsky, Devon Scott, Stacy VanMorter, Chris Kalinowsky, Cara Kowalchyk, Sara Burnsed

ASMFC Staff: Tracey Bauer, Jeff Kipp

The Red Drum TC reviewed proposals from South Carolina and Georgia regarding two different methodologies to estimate the overall percent reduction if new measures include an increase in their minimum and/or maximum size limits (see attached). The TC had a few questions on the proposed methodologies but did not express any major concerns. In addition, the TC recommend Georgia use the assumption of the full 8% discard mortality, and to redistribute the 25% of the harvest of the smaller size classes that were no longer included in the slot.

Lastly, the TC noted it would be difficult for South Carolina to use historical data like Georgia did to estimate the percent reduction using Georgia's method because South Carolina changed both their minimum and maximum size in 2007. In contrast, Georgia previously only increased their maximum size. Hence, the two states are proposing two different methodologies to accomplish the same thing.

South Carolina's Proposal (8/13/2025)

South Carolina is interested in exploring options for increasing the upper slot limit as part of its management changes. This will likely be in combination with bringing the lower slot limit up as well as decreasing the bag and/or vessel limit and likely the slot limit width will need to be tightened down from the current 8" width. If valid, we are only exploring options to move the upper limit by one to two inches. Prior to providing management options to the public and decision makers, we would like to get feedback from the Sciaenids Technical Committee on the methodology specifically surrounding the idea of moving the upper slot limit. A recommendation of a minimum 24% reduction in South Carlina's red drum harvest is being proposed but this will ultimately be decided on by the SC General Assembly.

SCDNR staff investigated different methodologies to quantify moving the upper slot limit outside of using historical data, since the same upper limit of 23 inches has been in place since 2007. Essentially staff used a proxy by taking the amount of reduction that you get when you lower the upper slot (ie, reductions moving to a 22 or 21 inch upper limit) while keeping all the other parameters the same and then decreased the amount of overall percent reduction by that amount if it added 1 or 2 inches respectively. Meaning if we didn't move the upper slot then whatever specific management option we are dealing with would have been 4.05% or 6.94% more of a reduction but when we move the upper slot it decreases the total percentage of reduction by those amounts (not factoring in effort).

This is an assumption, but we feel it is a very strong assumption that if we increased the maximum size allowed, the selectivity would simply shift to the right.

In practice, this means we looked at the catch reduction of keeping the minimum slot size, boat, and bag limits the same, but reducing the maximum slot by either 1 or 2 inches. This resulted in some reduction in total removals, but a relatively small change compared to increasing the minimum slot size by 1 or 2 inches and keeping the maximum the same, due to most of the fish harvested lying within the lower bounds of the current slot limit. This is because most of the fish are removed preferentially as they enter the slot. For numbers we have the following:

Management Assumption	1" Reduction (23-22" TL max)	2" Reduction (23-21" TL max)
No Effort Increase; no change in bag/vessel limit	4.05%	6.94%

Based on these #s, staff added this reduction back in to the reduction changing the minimum slot when assuming either a 1" (4.05% ; 24" TL max) or 2" (5.12% ; 25" TL max) upper limit. While a larger max size means they would be in the slot for a slightly longer period of time, making them directly harvestable for a longer period, on the flip side emigration out of the estuary may start occurring at these sizes and it assumes these fish are not as available to the fishery as the current slot sized fish, and finally this shift in the selectivity curve could be viewed as a "worst" case scenario.

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August 22, 2025

Tracey Bauer
Fishery Management Plan Coordinator
Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
1050 N. Highland Street, Suite 200 A-N
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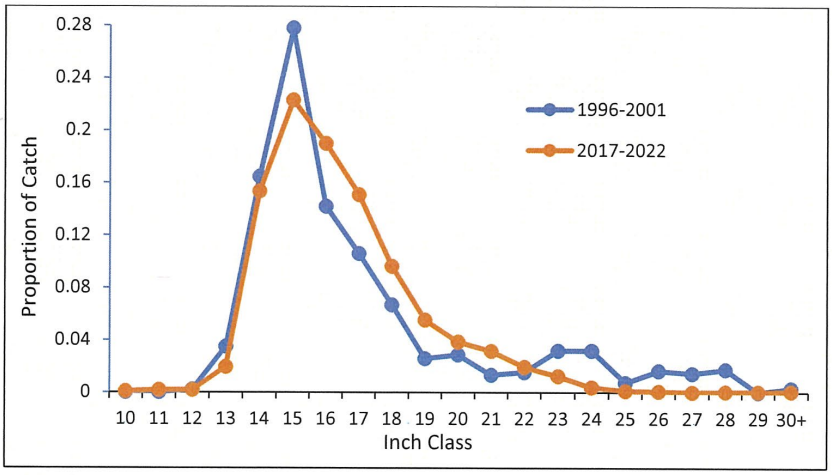
Dear Tracey,

This letter serves as Georgia's proposal for a method to assess slot changes in the Red Drum fishery, which we wish to submit for review by the Red Drum Technical Committee.

In 2022, Georgia had begun to explore options to change state Red Drum regulations to reduce catch prior to the 2024 ASMFC benchmark assessment. These efforts focused on bag reductions and were presented to the public and proposed to the DNR board, but ultimately did not proceed based on concerns regarding potential results of the upcoming assessment and state political considerations. Changes to length limits were not considered at that time due to the proximity of the benchmark assessment and the hope that the bag and length Static SPR tables from FMP Amendment 2 could be updated through the assessment to provide up-to-date guidance. Since the FMP SPR tables could not be updated after the assessment, alternative methods need to be used to inform management decisions.

While landings reductions can be achieved solely through bag limits, recent experience and public feedback has suggested that bag limits below 3 fish are not palatable for anglers. As a part of Georgia's Red Drum catch reduction evaluation, we wanted to explore the potential of expanding the upper end or shifting upward the current slot (14-23"). We developed a method to examine this, modified from the method developed previously by the TC. Where the TC looked at MRIP landings numbers in each size bin, we instead used size bins representing the proportion of landings (including above and below the slot) from MRIP data.

To accomplish the comparison, we chose to use averaged data from a recent 5-year period (2017-2022) with the 14-23" slot and a 5-year period at the end of the previous 14-27" slot (1996-2001), also representing a time when the population was not overfished. Using proportions helped remove the effect of the magnitudes of landings being different between years and periods. While there was some concern about the age of the historic data, the landings distributions between periods were very similar. These catch distribution observations were also supported by our carcass return program, which has been ongoing since 1997. During both time periods, the majority of harvest occurred at the lower end of the slot, with 15 inches being the peak during both periods. We also evaluated using distributions weighted between the old and recent time periods, but there was little difference given the underlying similarity.



Average proportion of harvested Red Drum landed in each size class (inches) for 2 5-year periods where the slot limit was 14-27 (1996-2001) and 14-23 (2017-2022).

The current 14-23" slot proportional distribution was used as the base for comparison to gauge reductions or increases in catch. Potential regulations were then applied, using the modified slot distribution, and the differences were calculated. To evaluate uncertainty, we added variable levels of discard mortality and redistribution of harvest (the idea that fish not caught in an excluded lower size class could be caught later in the new distribution). We then estimated the range of potential reductions for each regulation, with the maximum reduction being just the removal of size classes and the minimum including discards from outside the slot and a redistribution of landings. We also added an option to plug in landings numbers to look at things from that perspective.

The net effect was greater reductions were achieved by contracting the lower end of the slot than the top end. Additional reductions at upper slot sizes were very small relative to lower sizes and may be influenced by aspects of Red Drum behavior and biology, as well as angler behavior. We compared our applicable results to results from the TC model previously proposed, and our middle were comparable with the TC results.

Example estimated catch reductions from the different levels of GADNR proposed model (Min, Mid, Max) at different slot sizes compared to the TC model for selected values (last column). Reductions were calculated using a fixed 3 fish bag and 9 fish vessel limit.

Slot	Min	Mid	Max	TC
15-23	-18.40%	**-24.50%**	-30.70%	**-22.27%**
15-24	-17.90%	-23.50%	-29.10%	
15-25	-17.80%	-23.30%	-28.70%	
15-26	-17.60%	-22.80%	-28.00%	
15-27	-17.50%	-22.40%	-27.40%	
16-23	-30.80%	**-41.70%**	-52.60%	**-35.23%**
16-24	-29.60%	-40.30%	-51.00%	
16-25	-29.30%	-40.00%	-50.60%	
16-26	-28.70%	-39.30%	-49.90%	
16-27	-28.20%	-38.70%	-49.30%	

Based on these results, our preference would be to at least maintain the width of our current slot, while raising either the lower or both ends of the slot, also taking into consideration angler input. Not included in these overall estimates is the effect of a captain retention restriction in the charter fishing fleet, which while minor, will like further reduce landings.

We look forward to the Technical Committee's discussion and feedback relative to our proposal.

Sincerely,

H. Jared Flowers, PhD
Research and Surveys Unit Lead

Cc: Doug Haymans
Carolyn Belcher