



**Atlantic States
Marine Fisheries**
COMMISSION

Update from Winter Flounder Technical Committee on Board Requests

Winter Flounder Management Board

August 4, 2026

Background

- At their February 2026 meeting, the Winter Flounder Board expressed interest in receiving additional info on:
 1. Recent research on environmental drivers that are hypothesized to limit stock rebound
 2. Utilization of catch limits in federal waters
- Updates on both items

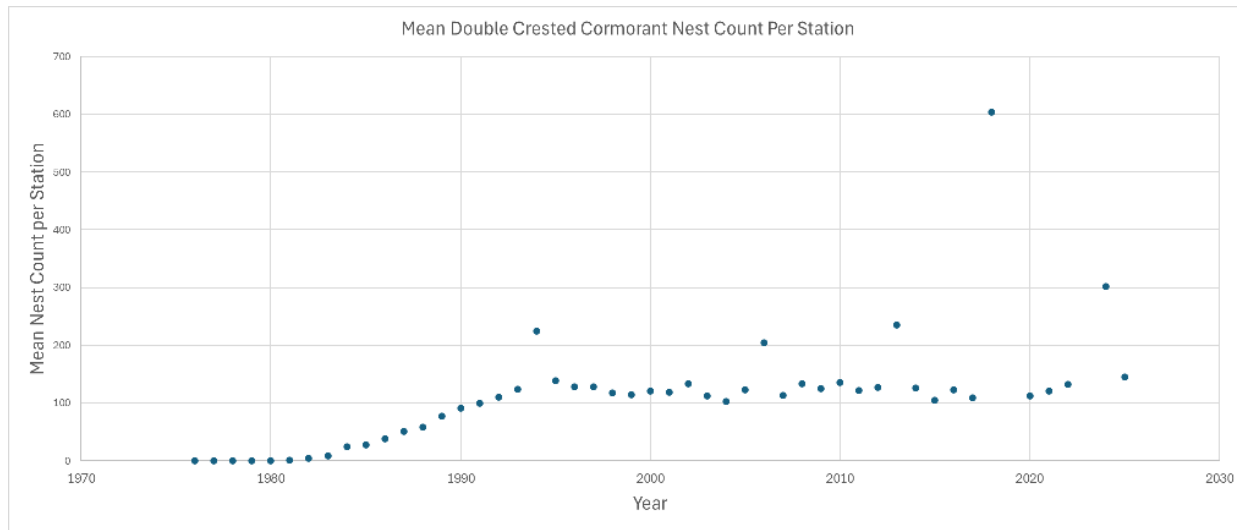
Environmental Drivers

- Winter Flounder Research Track Working Group prioritized further analysis and compilation of info on environmental drivers impacting the population
- Although research track assessment is currently paused, investigations of environmental covariates within the model are ongoing
- A Master's thesis was recently completed, which includes a lit. review of ecosystem and climate influences on winter flounder stock dynamics, an evaluation of shifts in stock dynamics, and modeling of climate and ecosystem drivers in the population
- A presentation can be provided at a future Board meeting summarizing this work
- Copy of thesis included in meeting materials

Environmental Drivers – Double-Crested Cormorants

- At the February 2026 Board meeting, predation, specifically from cormorants, was mentioned as a topic of particular concern
- The TC compiled several existing datasets to conduct a preliminary analysis of:
 1. Coastal colonial waterbird nesting survey from RI and MA
 2. Stomach content analysis of nesting cormorants in Narragansett Bay

Environmental Drivers – Double-Crested Cormorants



- Coastal colonial waterbird nesting survey from RI (began 1976) and MA (began 1984)
- Fixed stations surveyed once annually
- Analysis conducted for SNE/MA areas only
- Cormorant nesting population increased 1980's - mid-1990's and then plateaued

Environmental Drivers: Double-Crested Cormorants

- Top 10 prey species by mass from Narragansett Bay, RI 1995
- Of the 67 collected, 13 cormorants or 19% had winter flounder in stomach contents
- When present, winter flounder made up between 16% and 100% of stomach contents

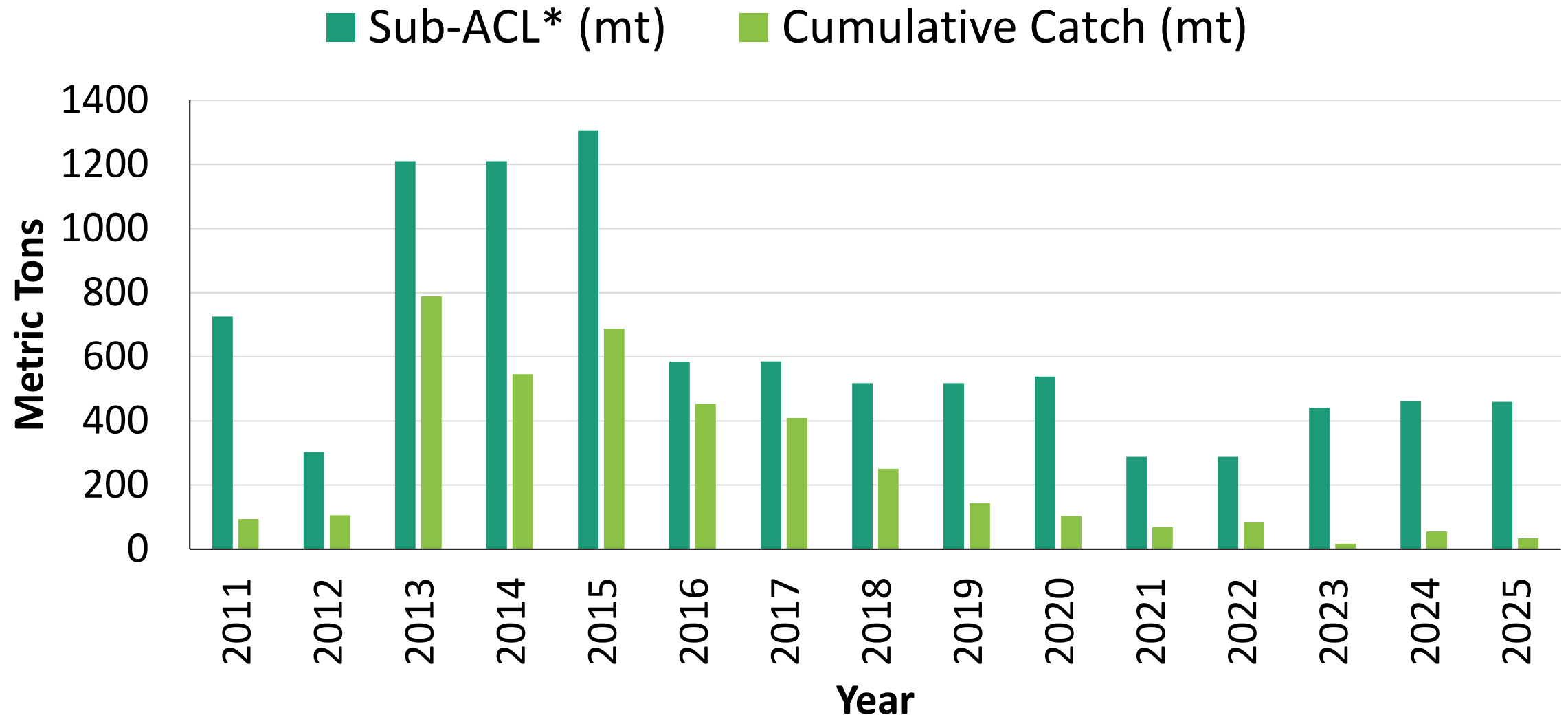
Species	Mass (g)	Percentage of Total Mass
Cunner	1153.2	18.9
Unidentified	1100.7	18.1
Winter Flounder	623.6	10.2
Northern Searobin	559.5	9.2
Common Mummichog	491.8	8.1
Butterfish	466.4	7.7
Oyster Toadfish	465.4	7.6
Tautog	283.8	4.7
Grubby Sculpin	206	3.4
Scup	164.8	2.7

Utilization of Catch Limits

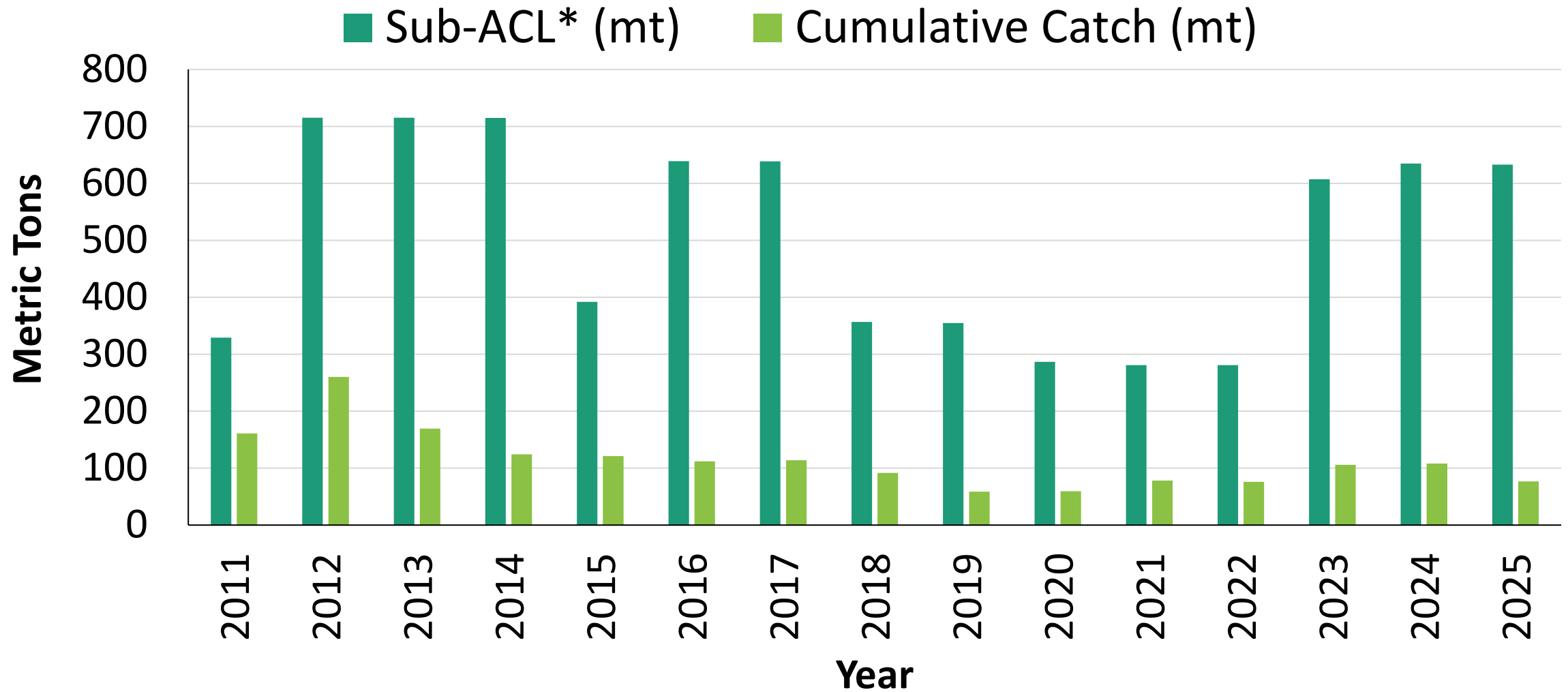
Utilization of Catch Limits

- TC compiled info on utilization of catch limits of SNE/MA and GOM winter flounder between 2011-2025
- This information will be updated in future Board discussions of specifications
- May inform later bag limit agenda item

SNE/MA Winter Flounder



GOM Winter Flounder

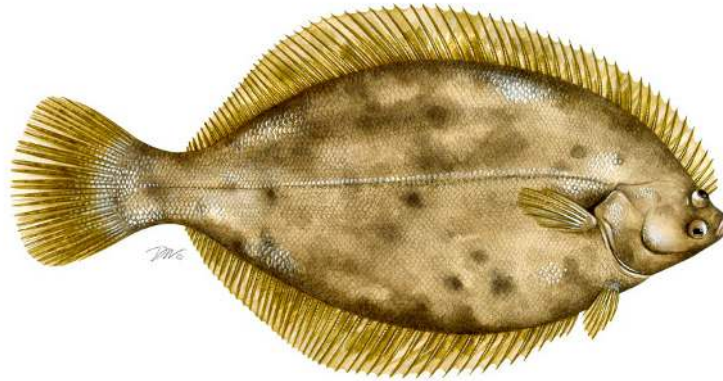


Questions?





Winter Flounder Specifications Process



Winter Flounder Board

August 4, 2026

- Background
- New England Fishery Management Council Groundfish Specifications Process
 - OFLs and ABCs
 - ACLs (including sub-components)
 - Accountability measures
- Proposed Modifications to Process

Background

- The January 2026 TC meeting summary shared concerns regarding the current management system for SNE/MA and GOM winter flounder
 - Federal management requires accounting for all removals, including assumptions of state waters removals, to estimate ACLs
 - NEFMC's Groundfish PDT makes an initial estimate of future state sub-component catch without knowing if any changes will be made to state regulations
 - If Board ever approves a liberalization of measures for either winter flounder stock, it was unclear how the NEFMC would be able to incorporate the Board's decision into their previously approved catch limits
- In February 2026, Board request for additional information on the process

NEW ENGLAND FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL – GROUNDFISH SPECIFICATIONS PROCESS

Amendment 16 established process for setting OFLs, ABCs, and ACLs for all stocks under the Council's Northeast Multispecies (Groundfish) FMP → includes both Southern New England (SNE/MA) and Gulf of Maine (GOM) winter flounder

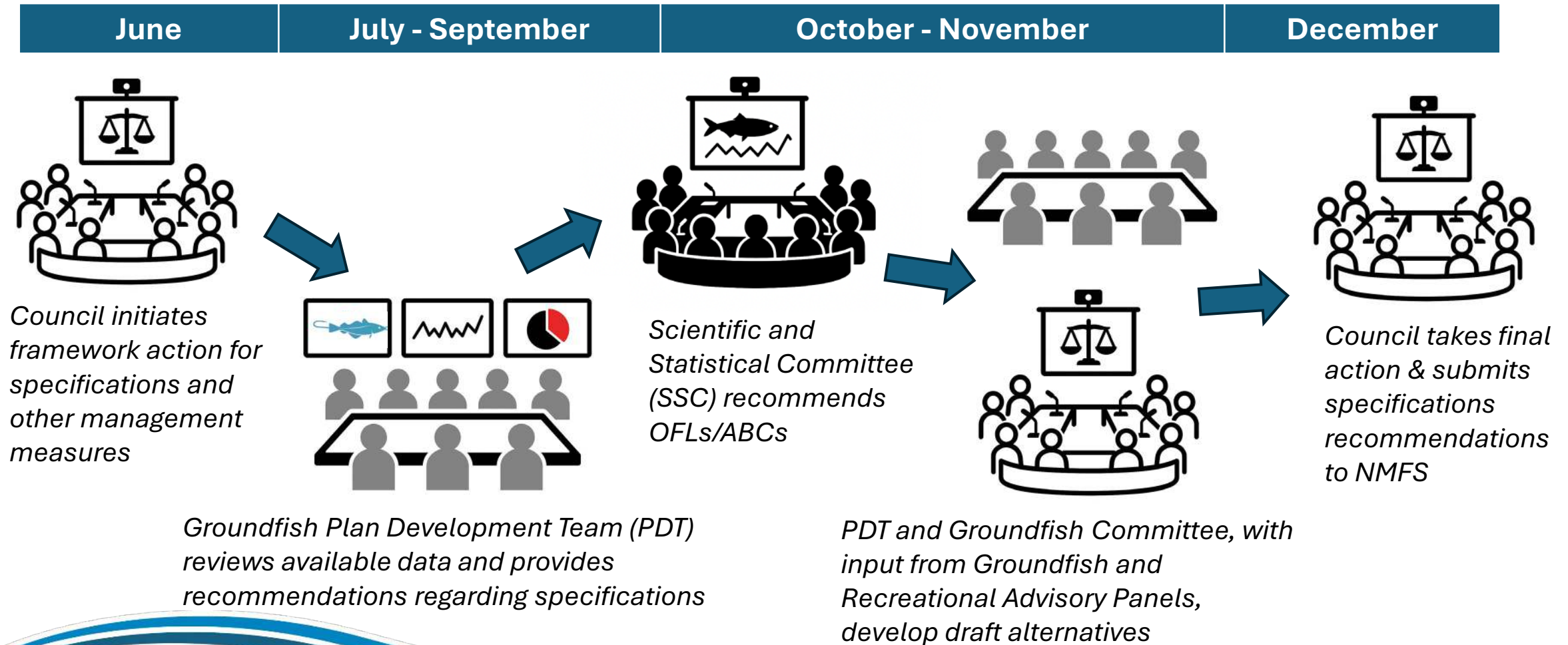
Frequency and duration –

- Determined by stock assessment and specifications schedule
- Expect to be determined every two years, but generally OFLs, ABCs, and ACLs set for least three years in case of a delay in determining future values
- Beginning in 2025 → set for up to five years, with the expectation that will be revisited sooner (i.e., by year 3)



NEFMC SPECIFICATIONS PROCESS - GROUNDFISH

DEVELOPMENT OF FRAMEWORK ACTION FOR SPECIFICATIONS

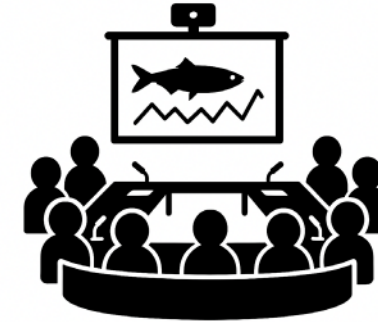
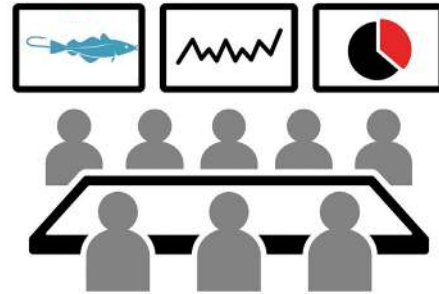


NEFMC SPECIFICATIONS PROCESS - GROUNDFISH

DEVELOPMENT OF OFLS/ABCS



After Management Track Stock Assessments and peer review



PDT prepares OFL/ABC options for SSC consideration:

- Generally following [Groundfish ABC Control Rules](#)
- Provides relevant information (catch trends, etc.), describes uncertainty and risk

SSC recommends OFLs/ABC:

- Guided by Terms of Reference (TORs) prepared by the Council
- Consistent with Groundfish ABC Control Rules and rebuilding plans
- Considers Council's [Risk Policy](#) along with other information

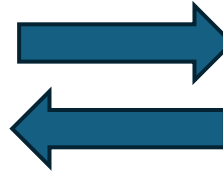
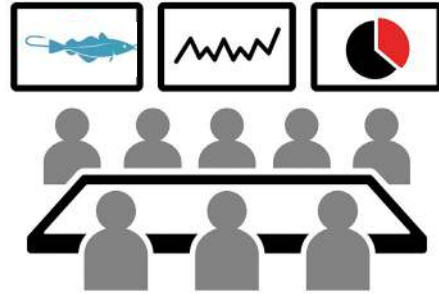


NEFMC SPECIFICATIONS PROCESS - GROUNDFISH

DEVELOPMENT OF ACLS

October - November

After SSC recommends
OFLs/ABCs



Forwards
recommendations
to the Council to
take final action



PDT provides recommendations for distributing ABCs to fishery components to determine ACLs:

- Conduct “**sub-component review**” to determine expected state waters and other fisheries catches
 - Typically use 3-year recent average catch
 - Compare to current sub-component percentage and recommend whether to adjust
- Evaluate **management uncertainty** to set sub-ACLs for fisheries with allocations

Groundfish Committee considers PDT recommendations for ACLs (including sub-component review):

- May request additional analysis or information to consider alternative approaches for determining state or other sub-components on a stock-by-stock basis



New England Fishery
Management Council

Distribution of ABCs to ACLs

GOM Winter Flounder
SNE/MA Winter Flounder



OFL

ABC

Step 1

Step 2

State water
fisheries

"Other"
fisheries

Commercial
Groundfish Fishery
sub-ABC

Step 3

- 5% **buffer**

Commercial
Groundfish Fishery
Sub-ACL

Sub-components

- Expected catches
- No accountability measures
- No adjustment for management uncertainty

Sub-ACLs

- Subject to accountability measures
- Management uncertainty adjustment (default is 5%)

ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

- Accountability measures required for sub-ACLs, but not for sub-components
- Sub-components not subject to specific catch controls by the Groundfish FMP
➡ although in many instances states do adjust their measures accordingly
- For stocks that are highly utilized by the federal groundfish fishery ➡ increased potential that catches in the state waters or other federal fisheries could result in an overage of the total ACL
 - AMs applied to the fisheries that have an allocation (e.g., federal commercial groundfish fishery) ➡ even if the overage resulted from state or other sub-component catches
- However, utilization by the federal groundfish fishery for both SNE/MA and GOM winter flounder stocks has been low ➡ not been an issue to date



Proposed Modifications to Process

- Commission and Council staff discussed the concerns raised by the TC and Board
- Staff do not recommend any formal changes to the FMP at this time
- Instead, will work on improving communication and collaboration between the NEFMC and Board
- During a NEFMC specs setting year, Commission staff will keep the Board informed of all Council meetings
 - Will allow the Board to evaluate prior to the Council setting the state sub-component whether changes to state management measures are needed, and communicate that information to the Council
- Staff will also inform the TC of Groundfish PDT meetings, particularly when they meet to discuss the state sub-components

Questions?





Atlantic States
Marine Fisheries
COMMISSION

Winter Flounder Technical Committee Report: Bag Limit Analysis

Winter Flounder Management Board

August 4, 2026

- Background
- Potential Stock Implications
- Analysis of MRIP data
- Technical Committee Recommendations



Background

- At the February 2026 meeting, Winter Flounder Board tasked the TC with assessing the potential for increasing the SNE/MA recreational bag limit from 2 to 4 fish
- Tasking in response to public input and Board interest
- TC met via webinar on March 17, May 15, and June 16



Cornell Cooperative Extension Eelgrass Program

Stock Implications

- Winter flounder have high spawning site fidelity, can become concentrated in inshore state waters spawning grounds
 - Makes it easy for anglers to locate/remove → vulnerable to localized depletion
 - Concentrated fishing effort on spawning females can result in a larger net loss to the population, loss of reproductive subpopulations
 - High fishing effort on spawning populations can reduce spawning success and subsequent recruitment
 - Any changes to management, such as a higher bag limit, which may result in an increase of targeting winter flounder could increase potential for localized depletion, particularly where relatively larger spawning aggregations still occur, and further reduction in stock productivity

Stock Implications

- Although the winter flounder stock was considered rebuilt by the 2023 date, this is due to an adjustment to how projections/BRPs are calculated, and does not reflect any positive changes in stock status.
- Perception of stock has not changed, SSB continues to be estimated at record lows

Stock Implications

- Any increase in fishing effort targeting winter flounder is expected to increase overall mortality
- TC feels this is inconsistent with past management goals to promote rebuilding of SSB and reduce fishing pressure and mortality on spawning fish

MRIP Data Analysis

The TC conducted a exploration of SNE/MA winter flounder MRIP data, focusing on:

1. Comparison of effort and harvest pre- and post- the 2010 reduction in bag limit
2. PSEs of harvest estimates
3. Comparison of discards and releases to landed fish

MRIP Data Analysis

- Management measures relevant to this analysis include:
 - Amendment 1 (2005): Established minimum size limit, shortened seasons, and lowered trip/bag limits.
 - Addendum 1 to Amendment 1 (2009): Established the two-fish recreational bag limit.
 - Addendum 2 (2012): Expanded the recreational season to the entire year.

MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- Based on the limited available data in any given year, particularly in the last 26 years, the TC did not believe there was enough data to perform a bag limit analysis similar to those conducted for other species
- However, these data may still be informative to the Board based on trends in recreational effort and catch.

Year	N trips	Total obs. Catch	Mean per angler	Year	N trips	Total obs. Catch	Mean per angler
1982	431	3,551	5.21	2004	114	326	2.21
1983	517	3,570	4.06	2005	71	164	1.9
1984	664	5,526	4.97	2006	42	110	1.96
1985	511	4,354	4.93	2007	31	55	1.51
1986	688	3,636	3.67	2008	39	85	1.99
1987	383	2,466	3.83	2009	31	71	1.82
1988	648	3,600	3.22	2010	37	61	1.38
1989	922	3,892	3.02	2011	33	66	1.55
1990	813	3,915	3.28	2012	38	77	1.61
1991	565	2,995	3.14	2013	16	18	1.11
1992	370	1,495	2.63	2014	34	49	1.34
1993	485	1,760	2.29	2015	18	23	1.25
1994	297	1,254	2.62	2016	33	41	1.14
1995	186	919	2.88	2017	35	46	1.2
1996	273	1,249	2.84	2018	27	30	0.99
1997	222	1,150	3.11	2019	5	5	0.8
1998	151	900	3.53	2020	30	33	1.02
1999	153	579	2.42	2021	16	16	0.96
2000	71	220	2.48	2022	9	27	1.55
2001	158	678	2.36	2023	7	7	0.9
2002	93	269	2.24	2024	12	12	0.82
2003	116	605	3.72	2025	3	2	0.52

MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- Observed number of trips, total catch, and mean SNE/MA winter flounder caught per angler were explored by MRIP wave and by state, summed across all years 1982-2025

Wave	N Trips	Total Obs. Catch	Mean Per Angler
2	3,695	18,917	3.33
3	2,673	16,094	3.53
4	655	2,613	2.49
5	1,231	5,255	2.84
6	1,144	7,027	4.05

State	N Trips	Total Obs. Catch	Mean Per Angler
Massachusetts	357	1,618	3.14
Rhode Island	1,132	5,687	3.06
Connecticut	1,457	7,642	3.15
New York	4,878	25,159	3.34
New Jersey	1,541	9,686	3.89
Delaware	8	18	1.39
Maryland	5	21	1.85
Virginia	20	75	1.74

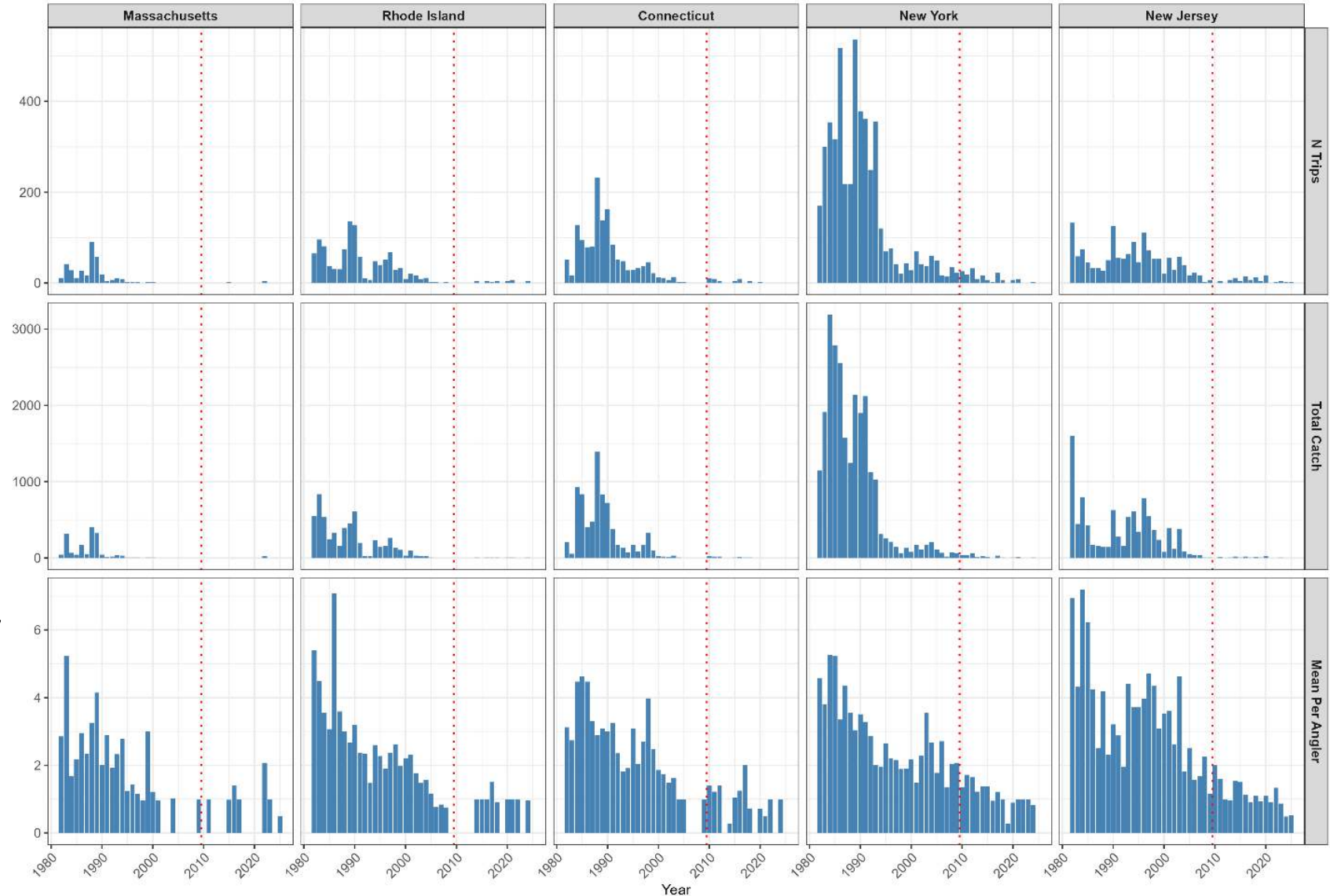
MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- Observed trips by mode, summed across all years (1982-2025)
- Majority of observed recreational trips and catch in SNE/MA were from the private/rental boat mode (53% of observed trips and 72% of total observed catch), followed by the shore mode (14%)

Mode	N Trips	Total Obs. Catch	Mean Per Angler
Charter Boat	19	38	1.71
Headboat	362	541	1.41
Private/Rental	5,051	36,225	3.96
Shore	2,398	6,986	2.40
NA	1,568	6,116	3.33

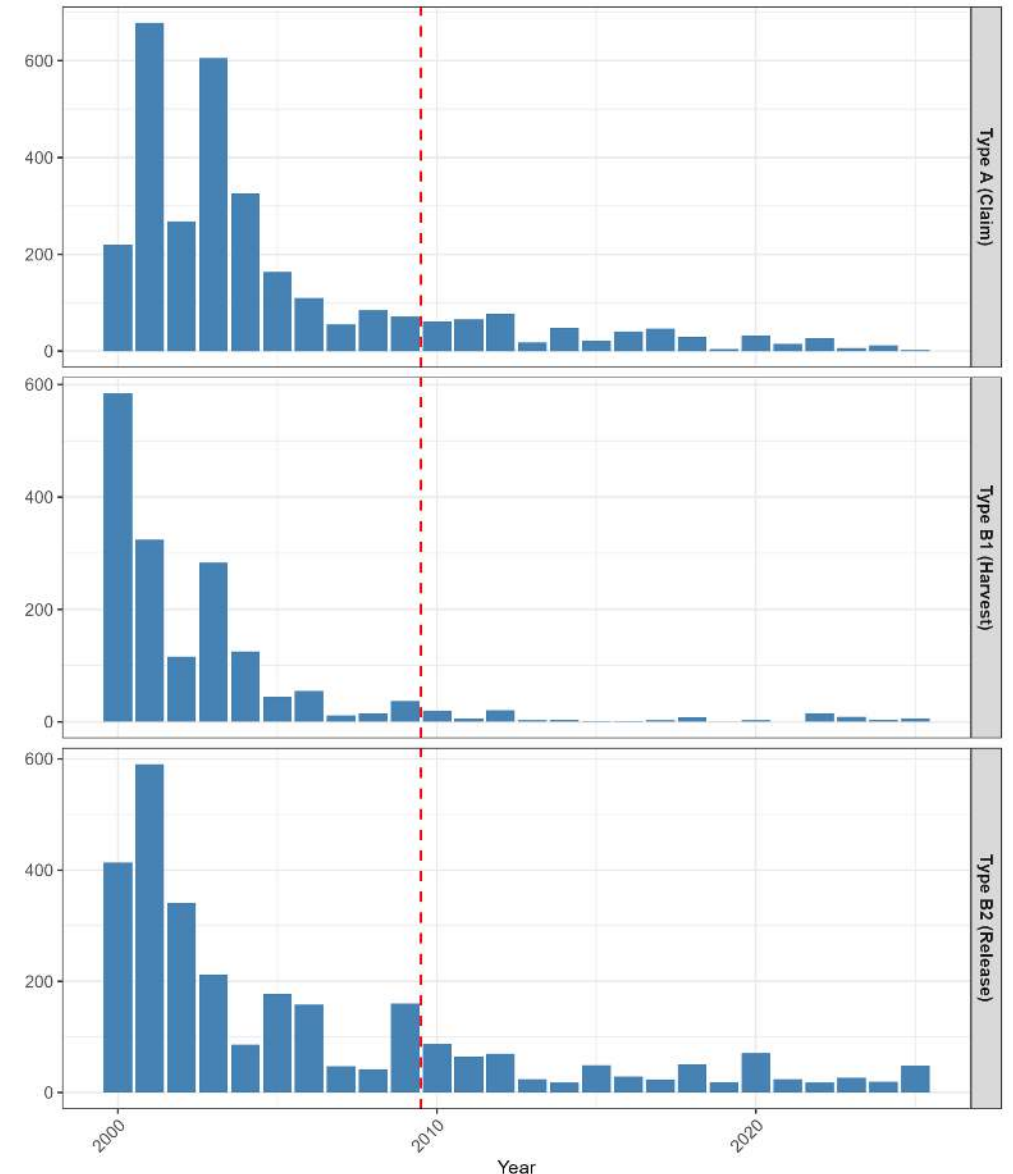
MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- The number of observed trips, catch, and the mean catch per angler by state
- All began a steep decline well before implementation of the 2-fish bag limit in ~2010 and fell below 2 fish around 2005
- Provides evidence that the 2-fish bag limit is likely not the only factor limiting recreational effort and catches in the SNE/MA



MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- Reported harvest and releases also show a steep decline well prior to implementation of the 2-fish bag limit in ~2010
- Reported harvest began declining around 1994, and releases began declining around 1995

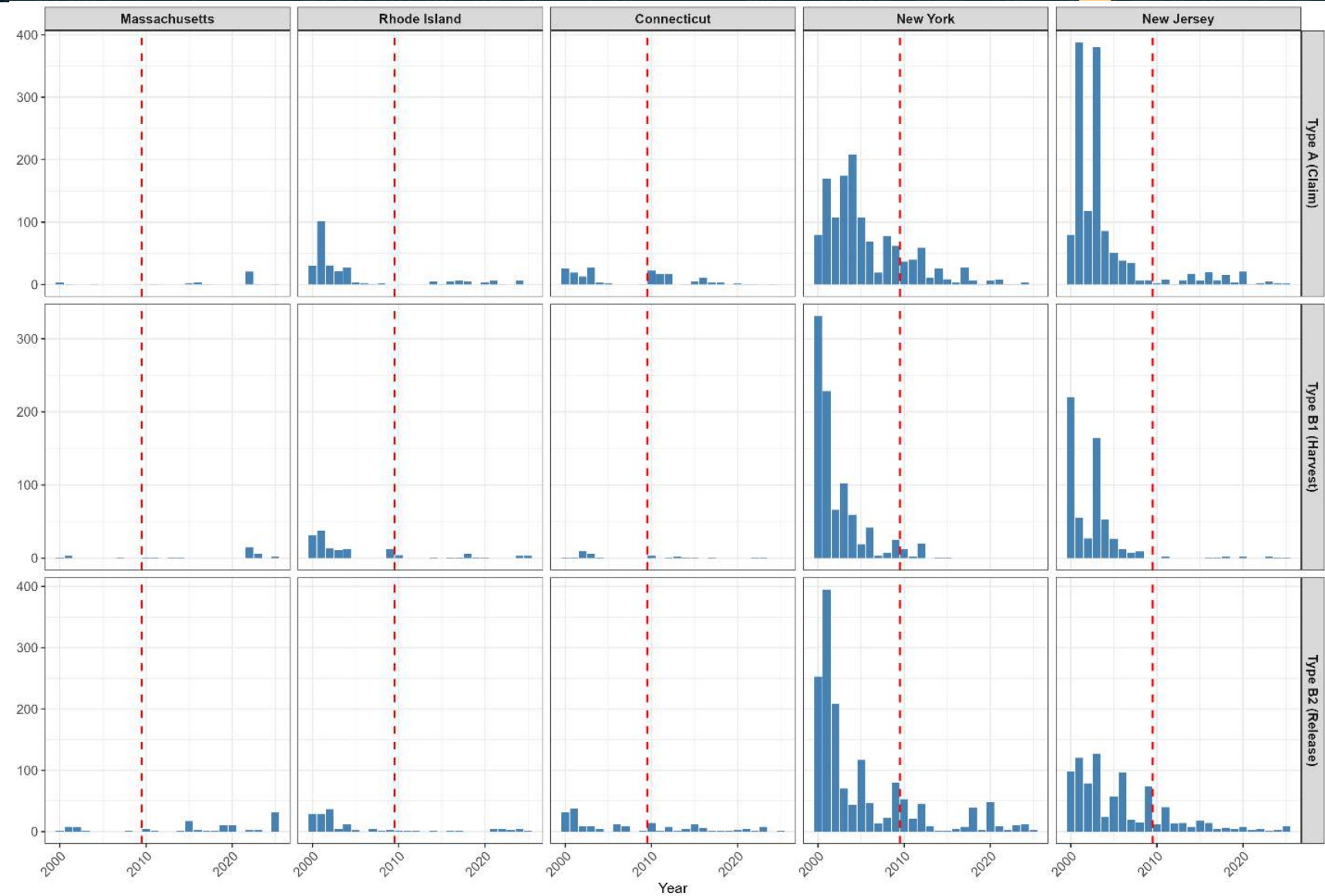


MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

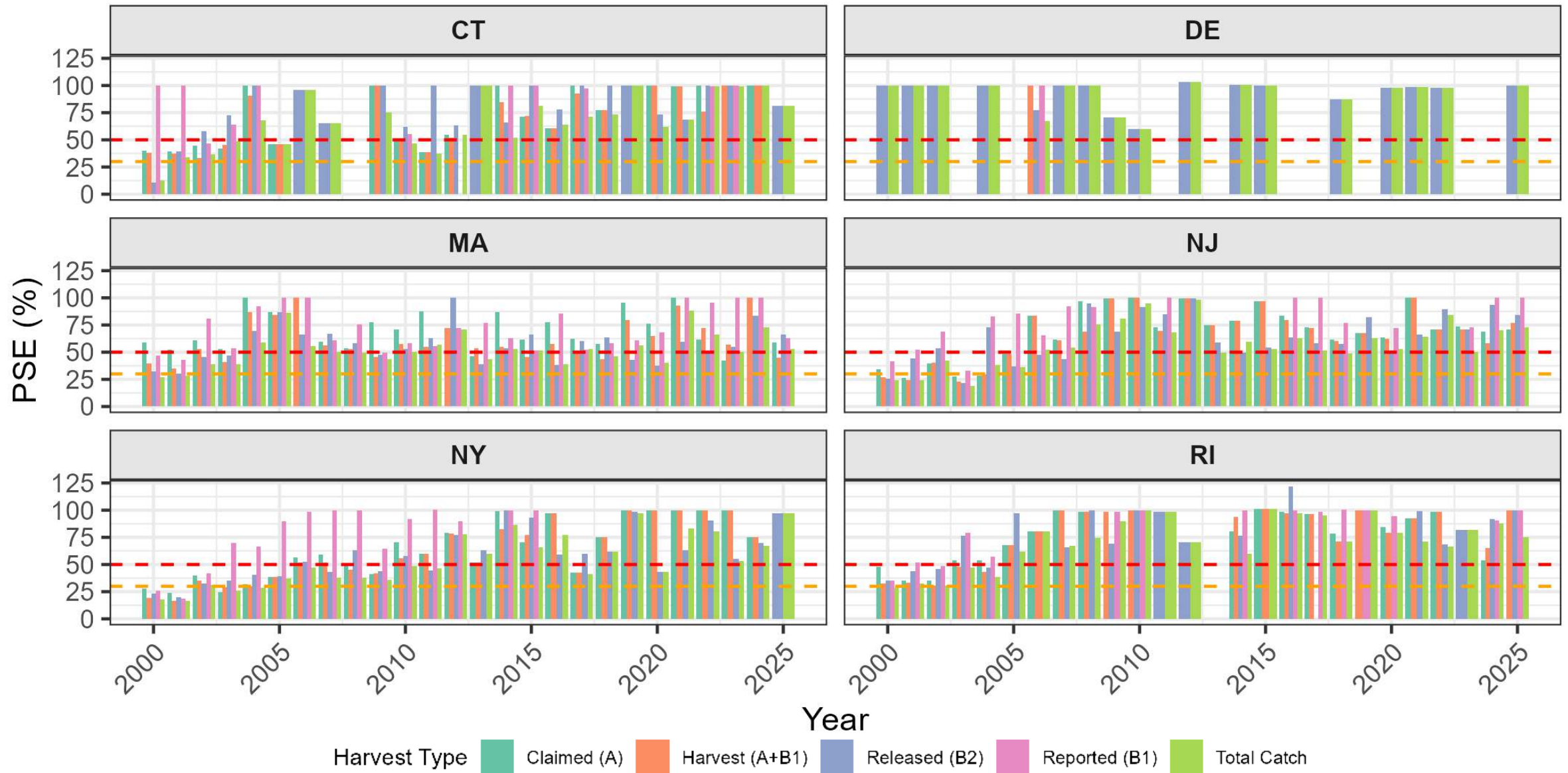
Year	Type A (Claim)	Type B1 (Harvest)	Type B2 (Release)	Year	Type A (Claim)	Type B1 (Harvest)	Type B2 (Release)
1982	6,732	1,495	1,380	2004	346	151	107
1983	5,364	1,588	2,183	2005	192	60	211
1984	6,485	1,634	2,606	2006	172	69	207
1985	4,887	994	2,159	2007	106	58	107
1986	4,452	2,637	2,502	2008	210	136	155
1987	3,455	1,176	1,610	2009	113	154	283
1988	4,529	2,169	2,299	2010	124	82	223
1989	5,756	2,362	2,654	2011	104	94	155
1990	4,661	3,127	3,443	2012	79	75	106
1991	3,301	3,161	3,037	2013	96	60	91
1992	1,802	1,318	1,540	2014	143	58	124
1993	2,132	1,272	2,635	2015	164	61	196
1994	1,427	619	1,500	2016	140	45	216
1995	1,092	707	1,356	2017	150	69	83
1996	1,407	928	1,100	2018	227	55	136
1997	1,285	825	1,260	2019	133	121	91
1998	994	530	1,001	2020	254	64	149
1999	656	565	681	2021	87	148	150
2000	287	656	574	2022	167	68	49
2001	713	434	764	2023	75	53	56
2002	346	153	433	2024	49	34	34
2003	661	324	258	2025	281	193	217

MRIP Data Analysis: Effort and Harvest Pre- and Post-Bag Limit

- Similar pattern observed when data are broken out by state



MRIP Data Analysis: PSE on Harvest Estimates



MRIP Data Analysis: PSE on Harvest Estimates



MRIP Data Analysis: PSE on Harvest Estimates

- Overall, PSE values for all harvest types, including total catch, harvest (A+B1), and releases (B2), by state and mode, have been above 30% PSE since approximately 2002, and a majority of PSEs have fallen above 50% since approximately 2006.
- The TC does not believe such highly imprecise data would be appropriate for use in a bag limit analysis.

MRIP Data Analysis: Size Composition Analysis

- The number of individual SNE/MA winter flounder measured in MRIP, by year and release disposition

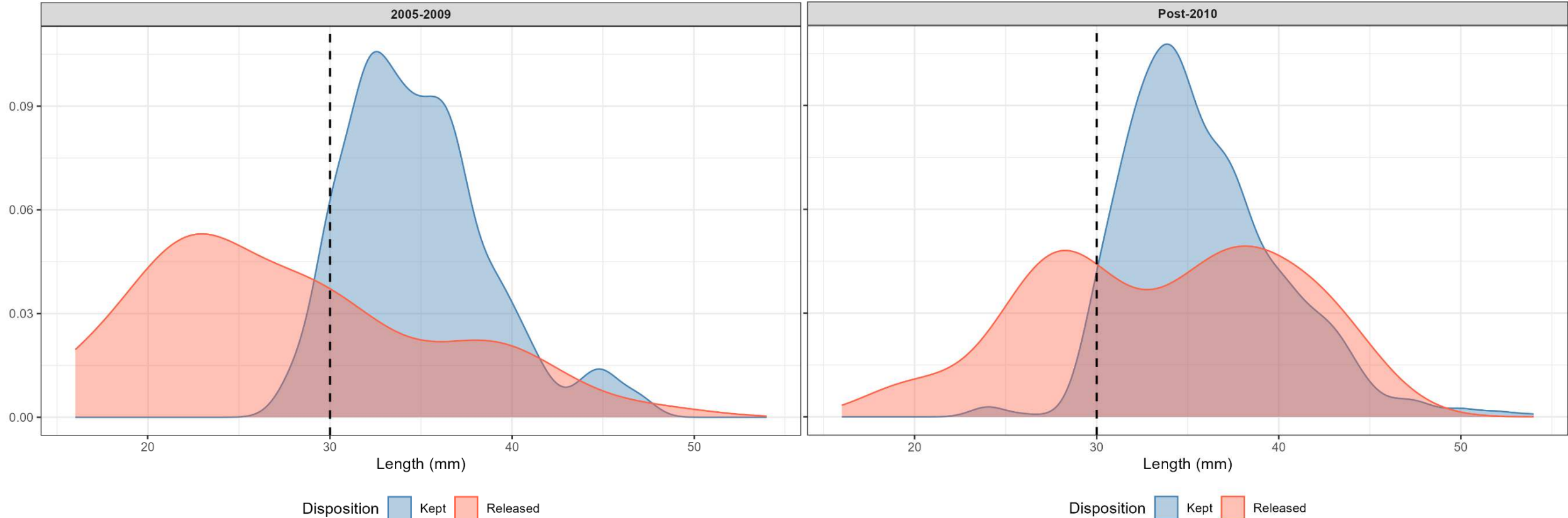
Year	Kept	Released
2005	208	21
2006	146	3
2007	70	5
2008	101	11
2009	101	12
2010	81	14
2011	71	5
2012	98	11
2013	22	2
2014	54	1
2015	27	0
2016	51	3
2017	50	8
2018	40	9
2019	6	0
2020	39	9
2021	16	10
2022	21	4
2023	16	3
2024	18	3

MRIP Data Analysis: Size Composition Analysis

- Total number and percentage of SNE/MA winter flounder measured in MRIP, by release disposition and length above/below 12-inch minimum size limit

Regulatory period	Disposition	Legal (≥ 12 in)	Sublegal (< 12 in)	Total N
2005-2009	Kept	96%	4%	626
	Released	32.7%	67.3%	52
Post-2010	Kept	98.4%	1.6%	610
	Released	64.6%	35.4%	82

MRIP Data Analysis: Size Composition Analysis



- Overlaid length frequency distributions of kept and released fish before and after the implementation of the 2-fish bag limit

MRIP Data Analysis: Size Composition Analysis

- Length distribution of recreational discards is a source of uncertainty in the available data
- Very little length information to be able to characterize recreational discards
- This much reduced sampling of the SNE/MA recreational fishery could be an issue for the stock assessment in the future

Summary

- The Board tasked the TC with examining whether increasing the SNE/MA bag limit from 2 to 4 fish would be considered risky for the stock
- TC Recommendations
 - The TC does not recommend increasing the recreational bag limit due to high risk to a SNE/MA winter flounder population at time series lows
 - The TC does not believe it would be appropriate to conduct a bag limit analysis using available SNE/MA winter flounder MRIP data, which are highly imprecise due to very low intercepts
- Possible Next Steps:
 - No action, keep SNE/MA bag limit as is
 - If there is still interest, states could submit individual CE proposals or take Board action to increase the SNE/MA bag limit

Questions?

