



Recreational Black Sea Bass:

Management Challenges for an Abundant Stock

Summary

The black sea bass stock from Maine through Cape Hatteras, North Carolina is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring.¹ Abundance has increased and is currently very high, particularly off southern New England. As a result, recreational catches have been relatively high, even under restrictive regulations.

Fishery managers are required to set catch and landings limits to prevent overfishing. Current stock assessment information and catch estimates indicate that catch can't increase beyond recent levels without an increased risk of overfishing. The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) are working to improve black sea bass management.

Stock Status

The most recent stock status information comes from the 2016 stock assessment. Spawning stock biomass (i.e. the abundance of mature females and males) was estimated to be 48.9 million pounds in 2015, which is 2.3 times the target spawning stock biomass level. A recent increase in spawning stock biomass was driven by the 2011 "year class" (i.e. the fish spawned in 2011), which was nearly three times the 1989-2015 average.

Recreational Management

The Council and the Commission cooperatively develop fishery regulations for black sea bass. Annual recreational harvest limits (RHLs) are set based on projections of abundance in future years and are intended to prevent overfishing. Recreational bag limits, fishing seasons, and minimum fish sizes are used to help ensure that recreational harvest does not exceed the RHL each year. Despite best efforts to set appropriate management measures, recreational harvest exceeded the RHL for much of the last decade (Figure 1).

The 2016 stock assessment allowed for a substantial increase in the 2017 and 2018 RHLs, compared to 2016, and brought the RHLs more in line with recent harvest levels (Figure 1). However, the 2018 RHL (3.66 million pounds) is about 15% lower than the 2017 RHL. Biomass projections based on the best available science indicated that spawning stock biomass would decline from 2017 to 2018 due to the declining influence of the large 2011 year class - over time many of those fish died of natural causes (e.g. predation) or were harvested by fishermen. Given this projected decline in abundance, catch and harvest limits must also decrease to prevent overfishing.

Managers use the prior year's harvest to determine whether regulations should be changed. Recreational fishermen harvested 4.16 million pounds of black sea bass in 2017 – about 14% above the 2018 RHL of 3.66 million pounds. As a result, any increase in harvest in 2018 compared to 2017 would cause the 2018 RHL to be exceeded and would increase the risk of overfishing. Recreational bag limits, fishing seasons, and minimum fish sizes in state and federal waters were modified to allow coastwide recreational harvest to achieve, but not exceed, the 2018 RHL.

¹ Overfishing occurs when fish are removed from the population at too fast a rate. A stock is overfished when abundance falls below a certain management target.

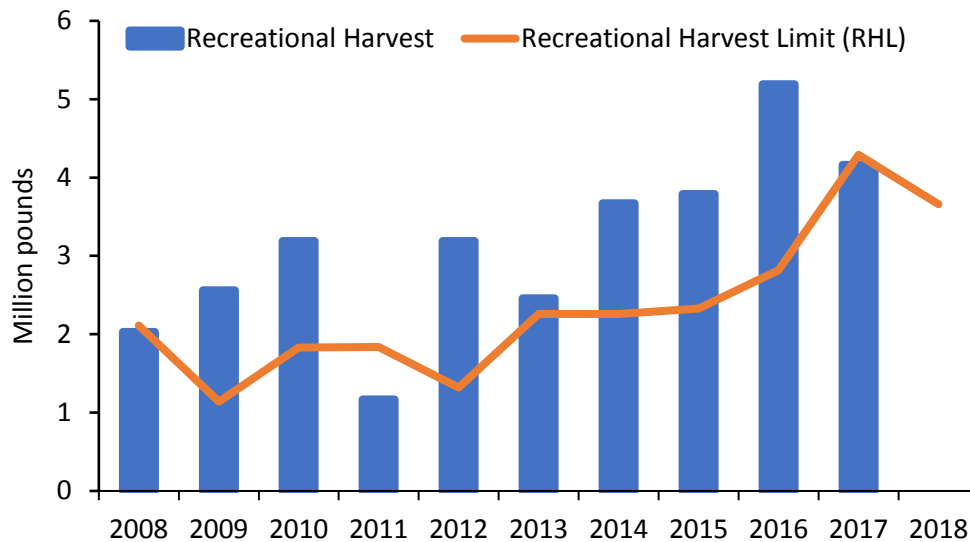


Figure 1. Recreational black sea bass harvest and recreational harvest limits, 2008 to 2018.

Next Steps

The Council and Commission are working on several ways to improve fishing opportunities for recreational fishermen while continuing to ensure that overfishing does not occur.

- ❖ **Stock Assessment Update:** An update to the stock assessment is planned for early 2019. This new information will be used to set catch and landings limits for 2019-2021.
- ❖ **February Fishery:** The Council and Commission provided states the opportunity to open their recreational black sea bass fisheries in February 2018 and will consider doing so for 2019.
- ❖ **Eliminating the Fall Closure:** Starting in 2018, there will be no recreational black sea bass fall closure in federal waters for the first time since 2008.
- ❖ **Alternative Management Strategies:** The Council and Commission are considering the use of conservation equivalency for black sea bass,² the potential use of slot limits, and recreational transit provisions in Block Island Sound.
- ❖ **New Analysis Approaches:** The Council and Commission's Monitoring and Technical Committees continue to improve the way recreational harvest and fishery performance are analyzed and evaluated when developing management measures.

² Under conservation equivalency, federal waters recreational management measures can be waived so that anglers are subject only to the regulations of the state where they land their catch.