

*Fact Sheet:*

## Summer Flounder Catch and Landings Limits – 2016 Reductions

### Summary

At the August 2015 Council meeting, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission approved a 29% reduction in the summer flounder catch limit for 2016. This recommendation was based on the results of the most recent stock assessment update for summer flounder which indicates that overfishing was occurring in 2014. These findings appear to be largely driven by low recruitment—the stock experienced four below-average year classes in 2010-2013. The assessment update also indicates that fishing mortality rates have been underestimated in recent years. The illegal harvest of summer flounder in the form of unreported landings may have also contributed to this pattern.

Fishery managers are required to set catch and landings limits that will prevent overfishing. Under the Council's normal risk policy, this would entail reducing commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits by about 43% in 2016. However, recognizing that a reduction of this magnitude could have severe social and economic impacts, the Council is recommending that the required reductions be phased in over a three year period. Using this approach, the Council and Commission approved an Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) limit of 16.26 million pounds for 2016. After accounting for projected discards, this ABC is divided into a commercial quota of 8.12 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 5.42 million pounds for the 2016 fishing year.

### Assessment Background and Trends

Summer flounder catch and landings limits are established each year based on current estimates of stock size and projections for upcoming years. The last peer-reviewed benchmark stock assessment was conducted in the summer of 2013. The assessment concluded that in 2012 the summer flounder stock was not overfished and that overfishing was not occurring ([SAW/SARC 57](#), 2013). The assessment also indicated that recruitment, which is an estimate of the number of new fish that enter a population in a given year, was 37 million fish in 2012, about 14% below average. The SSC and Council used the information provided in the 2013 benchmark stock assessment to set summer flounder catch and harvest levels for 2014 and 2015.

In 2014 the Council received a [data update](#) which included updated catch, landings, and fishery independent survey indices but did not provide new estimates of stock status relative to biological reference points. The data update noted that state and Federal survey biomass index trends were variable, but that most had decreased from 2012 to 2013. The data update also indicated that indices of recruitment (age 0 fish) were generally lower over the last 3 years (2011-2013) than in the previous decade. The SSC and Council considered the findings of the data update but did not modify their recommendation for the 2015 fishing year.

In June 2015, the Council received a [stock assessment update](#) (“assessment update”) which incorporated recent data (through 2014) into the population model used for the previous benchmark assessment. The assessment update indicated that in 2014 the summer flounder stock was not overfished but that overfishing was occurring. Fishing mortality rate in 2014 was estimated to be 16% above the fishing mortality threshold reference point.

The 2015 assessment update indicates that the 2013 benchmark assessment overestimated recruitment in 2012 by nearly 40%. Furthermore, the stock appears to have experienced four below average year classes from 2010 to 2013. These revised recruitment estimates resulted in reduced estimates of stock size compared to previous levels. According to the update, estimated biomass has been trending down since 2010. The 2014 year class is currently estimated to be average at 41 million fish.

Although reported landings have equaled or only slightly exceeded commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits in recent years, there is evidence of substantial illegal harvest in the form of unreported, underreported, or misreported landings. In 2013 and 2014, two separate investigations revealed that large quantities of summer flounder were being taken illegally under the cover of quota acquired through the Council’s Research Set-Aside (RSA) program (the Council subsequently suspended the program in order to consider alternative cooperative research options). There may also be substantial non-RSA related illegal/unreported landings, although fewer details are available on the extent of unreported landings outside of the RSA program. While the exact amount of illegally harvested summer flounder is not known, the effect may have resulted in substantial overages of the fishery’s Annual Catch Limits (ACLs).

### Management Implications

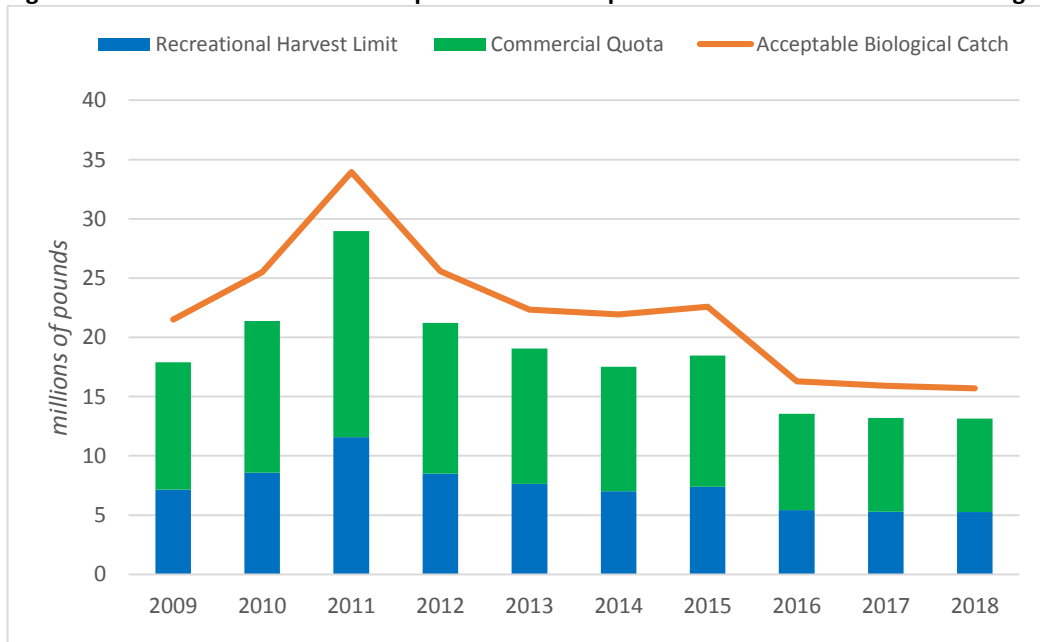
The Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) met July 21-23 to review the assessment update and develop recommendations for next year’s Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) limits. The SSC is required to set the ABC at a level that is expected to address scientific uncertainty and prevent overfishing. Under the Council’s normal risk policy, this would entail reducing commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits by about 43% in 2016 compared to 2015 levels. However, given the likely social and economic impacts of such a large reduction, the Council asked the SSC to deviate from this risk policy. The SSC therefore recommended phasing in the necessary reduction in landings over a period of three years.

At the August 2015 Council Meeting, the Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission approved the SSC’s recommendation and voted to establish an Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) limit of 16.26 million pounds for the 2016 fishing year – an approximate 29% decrease relative to the 2015 ABC. After accounting for projected discards in the commercial and recreational fisheries, this ABC is divided into a commercial quota of 8.12 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 5.42 million pounds for the 2016 fishing year.

The Council also recommended ABCs of 15.86 and 15.68 million pounds for 2017 and 2018, respectively. These recommendations will be reviewed each year along with any new information to determine if changes are warranted. The Council also recommended an expedited benchmark assessment for summer flounder in hopes of improving model performance and reducing the retrospective bias identified in the 2015 assessment update.

These recommendations will be submitted to NMFS for review and publication of proposed and final rules.

**Figure 1. Recommended 2016-2018 specifications compared to 2009-2015 catch and landings limits.**



## Resources

- ❖ [57th Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Workshop \(57th SAW\) Assessment Summary Report](#)
- ❖ [2014 Summer Flounder Data Update](#)
- ❖ [2015 Assessment Update](#)
- ❖ [2015 SSC Meeting Materials](#)
- ❖ [Guide to Fisheries Stock Assessments](#)