



Summer Flounder

2018 Stock Assessment Results and Implications for Recreational and Commercial Management

Summary

The November 2018 benchmark stock assessment found that the summer flounder stock is not overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. Among other changes, the assessment incorporated a revised, higher time series of recreational catch (harvest and discards) that contributed to increased biomass estimates. The higher biomass projections result in a proposed 49% increase in the commercial quota and recreational harvest limit (RHL) for 2019. Although the RHL will increase by 49%, the new revised estimates of recreational landings also increased. As a result, recreational measures cannot be liberalized in 2019.

2018 Stock Assessment Results

The assessment incorporated the revised time series of recreational catch from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), which is 30% higher on average compared to the previous summer flounder estimates for 1981-2017. The MRIP estimate revisions account for changes in both the angler intercept survey and recreational effort survey methodologies. While fishing mortality rates were not strongly affected by incorporating these revisions, increased recreational catch resulted in increased estimates of stock size compared to past assessments.

As described in the [assessment summary report](#), summer flounder spawning stock biomass was estimated at 78% of the revised biomass target in 2017 (not overfished), and the fishing mortality rate was estimated to be 25% below the revised overfishing threshold (not overfishing).

Recruitment of juvenile summer flounder to the fishery has been below-average since about 2011, although the driving factors behind this trend have not been identified. Bottom trawl survey data also indicates a recent trend of decreasing length and weight at age, which implies slower growth and delayed maturity. These factors affected the change in biological reference points used to determine stock status.

Proposed Changes to Catch and Landings Limits

Based on the assessment biomass projections, the Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission recommended new commercial quotas and RHLs for 2019-2021. The proposed commercial quota (prior to deductions for past overages) is 11.53 million pounds, an approximate 49% increase from the current 2019 interim limit of 7.72 million pounds. The proposed RHL is 7.69 million pounds, also a 49% increase from the current interim limit of 5.15 million pounds. Final implementation of these limits by NOAA Fisheries is expected in Spring 2019.

2019 Recreational Measures

As in other recent years, the recreational fishery in 2019 is proposed to be managed under regional conservation equivalency, with state measures remaining mostly unchanged. States may consider minor modifications to their measures if these measures will keep harvest at the same level as 2018.

Why can't recreational measures be liberalized in 2019 if the RHL is increasing?

The completion of the stock assessment marks the full transition to using the revised estimates of recreational harvest in the management process. Each year, recent harvest must be evaluated relative to the following year's RHL to determine how measures can be modified. Under the new MRIP methodology, the preliminary 2018 harvest for summer flounder was 7.17 million pounds, about 7% below the revised RHL of 7.69 million pounds. Because the 2019 RHL is within the coastwide percent standard error (PSE, a measure of precision) of the 2018 estimate, no liberalization is proposed in order to account for uncertainty in the recreational harvest estimate. In other words, the 2019 RHL is increasing, but the estimates of recreational harvest have also substantially increased, leaving little room for changes in 2019.

What will happen with recreational measures going forward?

Recreational measures for 2020 will be considered in December 2019. Whether and how measures could be modified will depend on harvest levels through late summer/early fall 2019, and how projected 2019 harvest compares to the 2020 RHL. Alternative methods for setting recreational measures may be considered in 2020, based on ongoing work by Council contractors and the Monitoring/Technical Committees.

2019 Commercial Measures

No changes are proposed to the commercial minimum fish size (14" inches), minimum mesh size (5.5" diamond or 6.0" square), minimum mesh size possession limit triggers or exemption programs, or other gear requirements for summer flounder in 2019. These measures will be reconsidered later in 2019 for possible changes for 2020, if warranted. The increases in the coastwide commercial quota will be reflected in increases in state quotas, and states may adjust their commercial management measures accordingly.

Additional Resources

- [66th Stock Assessment Workgroup/Stock Assessment Review Committee Assessment Summary Report](#)
- [March 2019 Council and ASMFC Board Meeting Summary](#)
- [MRIP Effort Survey Change Overview](#)
- [Public Comment Instructions & Opportunities](#)

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