



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

Date: April 26, 2023
To: Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director
From: Hannah Hart, Staff
Subject: 2024 Blueline Tilefish Specifications Review

Summary

In 2021, the Council set specifications for blueline tilefish for the 2022-2024 fishing years (Table 1). The specifications were published in the Federal Register on November 3, 2022 (87 FR 66245).¹ As part of the 2022-2024 multiyear specification process, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the Tilefish Monitoring Committee (MC), and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) will review the most recent fishery information to determine whether modifications to the current 2024 specifications set by the Council are warranted. Additional information on fishery performance and past management measures can be found in the 2023 Blueline Tilefish Fishery Information Document and the 2023 Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report developed by advisors.²

The SSC should review the previously adopted 2024 Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) to consider if changes are needed. **Staff recommend no changes to the 2024 ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.6 mt) as there is no new information to suggest a change is required.** Following the SSC's consideration of the 2024 ABC, the Monitoring Committee will review previously adopted 2024 commercial and recreational Annual Catch Limits (ACL), Annual Catch Targets (ACT), and Total Allowable Landings (TAL), and commercial and recreational management measures. **Staff also recommends maintaining the previously adopted 2024 catch and landings limits and no changes to the commercial measures for the blueline tilefish fishery; however, staff recommends modifying the recreational blueline tilefish season from May 1 – October 31 to May 15 – November 14.**

¹ Available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/11/03/2022-23956/fisheries-of-the-northeastern-united-states-mid-atlantic-blueline-tilefish-fishery-final-2022-and>

² Available at: <https://www.mafmc.org/tilefish>

Table 1. Previously adopted 2022-2024 blueline tilefish catch and landing limits as well as 2024 staff recommended limits.

Management Measures	2022-2024 (pounds) <i>staff recommend no change for 2024</i>
ABC	100,520
Com. ACL	27,140
Com. ACT	27,140
Projected com. discards	272
Com. TAL	26,868
Rec. ACL	73,380
Rec. ACT	73,380
Projected rec. discards	1,468
Rec. TAL	71,912

Stock Status and Projections

The most recent stock assessment for blueline tilefish was the [SEDAR 50 benchmark assessment](#) in 2017. SEDAR 50 split the stock at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. For the stock south of Cape Hatteras, it was determined that the stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring and ABC recommendations were set. However, for the stock north of Cape Hatteras, which includes the area managed by the Mid-Atlantic Council, there was insufficient information available to determine stock status and therefore no ABC recommendations were made. To assist in developing an ABC recommendation, the Mid- and South Atlantic Councils/SSCs, as well as staff from the Northeast and Southeast Fisheries Science Centers developed a joint subcommittee to rerun the Data Limited Method (DLM) Toolkit³ previously used during for initial specification setting process for the region north of Cape Hatteras. The results were then partitioned at the Virginia/North Carolina border in order to allocate the full northern region ABC (entire region north of Cape Hatteras, NC) between the Mid-Atlantic managed region (NC/VA border – Maine) and the northern portion of the South Atlantic managed region (Cape Hatteras, NC – NC/VA border). This partitioning was accomplished by applying coastwide catch data from the 2017 Pilot Tilefish survey funded by the MAFMC out of SUNY Stony Brook.⁴

As a result of both the DLM Toolkit and partitioning the total ABC to the Mid-/South Atlantic managed regions, the Mid-Atlantic SSC recommended an ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt). The current ABC has remained status quo since the initial recommendation in 2018. Additional details about the 2018 SSC’s review of the DLM Toolkit and discussion can be found in the [March 2018 SSC meeting report](#). An operational assessment for blueline tilefish through the SEDAR process is expected to start in 2024.

³ DLM Toolkit was a procedure developed by Carruthers et. Al. (2014) to evaluate methods for setting catch limits in data-limited fisheries. More information about the DLM Toolkit and the joint SSC’s review and recommendation is available at:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/511cdc7fe4b00307a2628ac6/t/570ba6fba3360c80a3f22a00/1460381436425/01-01.2_BLT+Subcommittee+Report+20160322.pdf.

⁴ The final 2017 Pilot Tilefish study report is available at:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/511cdc7fe4b00307a2628ac6/t/5a70a2d3652deafd4dbfc8e0/1517331157927/F_RISK_TILEFISH_MAFMC_finalreport_jan2018.pdf.

Recent Catch and Fishery Performance

As shown in Table 2, the commercial fishery landed 13,943 pounds of blueline tilefish in 2022, about 52% of the 2022 commercial TAL of 26,868 pounds. Commercial dead discard estimates are estimated to be about 1% of total landings, as previously recommended by the SSC and MC during Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan. As such, total commercial catch in 2022 was estimated to be 14,082 pounds which is about 52% of the ACL (27,140 pounds). Given the commercial catch did not exceed the ACL, it is not anticipated that the accountability measures will be triggered.

Recreational catch described by combined party/charter vessel trip reports (VTRs) is reported in Table 3. Reported harvest and discards have remained between approximately 10,000 – 16,000 fish since 2012. Previous work with the advisors and other blueline tilefish recreational fishermen has suggested VTR reporting compliance began to encompass at least the primary headboats targeting blueline tilefish in 2012. Recreational landing and discard estimates are available from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), but blueline tilefish intercepts are rare occurrences and the estimates are often associated with very high percent standard errors (Table 4). In an effort to improve tilefish management, the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office initiated private recreational permitting and reporting for tilefish anglers in August 2020. As shown in Table 5, the number of private recreational permits issued and VTRs submitted during the first two full years following implementation have remained relatively similar; however, there seems to be a mismatch between the number of permits issued and the number of trips reported annually. Council staff has been working on continued outreach efforts to try and improve overall awareness of and compliance with these permitting and reporting requirements.

Given the high level of uncertainty in MRIP estimates as well as the limited numbers of private recreational VTRs submitted, the MC has used an alternative approach to estimating private angler performance in past years. This recommendation is based on application of a Delphi Approach⁵ and is calculated by applying 105.16% of charter vessel landings to estimate private angler landings (Table 6). Staff recommends continued use of this approach to evaluate recreational performance for similar reasons stated above.

⁵ The Delphi method was run in 2016 to estimate recreational landings for charter, headboat, and private anglers. The Delphi method was used to develop a recreational time series for blueline tilefish through extrapolation of survey results. A ratio was used to back calculate private recreational landings in relation to charter landings from vessel trip reports. This method had been peer reviewed and accepted as best available science by SEDAR 50 and further recommended by the MC in 2019.

Table 2. Commercial blueline tilefish landings (live weight) from Maine-Virginia by year from 2000-2022. Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

Year	Landings (pounds)
2000	2,446
2001	955
2002	269
2003	7,601
2004	5,827
2005	2,031
2006	3,039
2007	21,068
2008	8,495
2009	9,626
2010	8,388
2011	8,179
2012	9,624
2013	26,781
2014	215,928
2015	73,644
2016	14,235
2017	10,734
2018	13,068
2019	22,759
2020	31,918
2021	26,446
2022	13,943

Table 3. Blueline tilefish party/charter VTR landings and reported discards from Maine-Virginia, 2012-2022.

Year	Number of Trips	Landings (Numbers of Fish)	Reported Discards (Numbers of Fish)	Estimated Discards^a (Numbers of Fish)
2012	103	10,051	338	201
2013	120	11,838	128	237
2014	138	15,849	254	317
2015	170	14,391	292	288
2016	158	15,493	246	310
2017	129	10,164	115	203
2018	221	12,432	99	249
2019	167	10,711	176	214
2020	149	9,670	174	193
2021	222	13,610	69	272
2022	236	13,183	63	264

^a Recreational discards are calculated as 2% of total landings.

Table 4. Recreational blueline tilefish MRIP landings and discard estimates and associated percent standard of error by mode from Maine-Virginia by mode. Source: NMFS unpublished MRIP data.

**Note 2020 MRIP estimates were likely impacted by limited sampling efforts due to COVID-19.*

Year	MRIP Landings (Numbers of fish)	Percent Standard Error (Landings)	MRIP Discards (Number of fish)	Percent Standard Error (Discards)	Mode
2015	4,663	77.2	0	-	Private/Rental
2016	1,222	58.8	0	-	Charter
2016	97,477	86.275	19,356	88.4	Private/Rental
2017	12,122	89.05	0	-	Private/Rental
2018	6	94.5	5	100	Party
2018	2,083	112.85	310	75.3	Charter
2018	2,989	107.8	0	-	Private/Rental
2019	0	0	7	22.5	Party
2019	2,272	88.6	21	107.8	Charter
2019	4,839	85.9	0	-	Private/Rental
2020*	41	94.8	47	66.8	Party
2020*	1,061	119.4	10	123.9	Charter
2020*	481	104.1	0	-	Private/Rental
2021	5,773	78.1	2,887	38.1	Charter
2021	4,4200	87.65	4,595	91	Private/Rental
2022	0	0	7	16.8	Party
2022	25,382	57.45	83	107	Charter
2022	65,714	74.55	19,871	85.4	Private/Rental

Table 5. Private recreational permits, VTRs, and number of blueline tilefish reported each year since private recreational permitting and reporting requirements were implemented. Source: NMFS unpublished CAMS data.

Year	Number of Private Rec. Permits	Number of Private Rec. VTRs	Landings (number of fish)
2020	340	8	84
2021	814	34	319
2022	790 <i>(as of Oct. 2022)</i>	33	396

Table 6. Party and charter blueline tilefish catch (number of fish) from Maine-Virginia using VTR data from 2015-2022 as well as estimates of private/rental catch using the Delphi method (Delphi=105.16% of charter).

Year	Party* (VTR; Number of fish)	Charter* (VTR; Number of fish)	Private Rental (Delphi; Number of fish)	Total catch- Party/charter VTRs and Delphi private/rental estimates (Number of fish)
2015	12,381	2,298	2,417	17,095
2016	13,746	2,057	2,163	17,966
2017	8,735	1,632	1,716	12,083
2018	4,796	7,885	8,291	20,972
2019	3,247	7,679	8,075	19,000
2020	6,045	3,625	3,812	13,482
2021	10,112	3,510	3,691	17,313
2022	9,337	3,846	4,044	17,227

* Recreational discards are calculated as 2% of total landings.

OFL/ABC Recommendations

In 2021, the SSC recommended an ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt) to the Mid-Atlantic management area for 2022-2024. Considering this recommendation, recent fishery performance, lack of an updated assessment, and the high degree of uncertainty within the recreational sector, **staff recommend no changes to the previously adopted ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt) for 2024.**

Recreational Management Measures

The recreational blueline tilefish season is open from May 1 – October 31 and the possession limit depends on the type of fishing vessel. Anglers fishing from private/rental vessels are allowed to keep up to three blueline tilefish per person per trip. Anglers fishing from a for-hire vessel that has been issued a valid federal Tilefish Party/Charter Permit but does not have a current U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection sticker can retain up to five blueline tilefish per person per trip. Finally, anglers on for-hire vessels that have both a valid federal Tilefish Party/Charter Permit and a current U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection sticker can retain up to seven blueline tilefish per person per trip.

Over the past several months, Council staff has received feedback related to the current recreational blueline tilefish season of May 1 – October 31, and suggestions to shift the recreational blueline tilefish season back about two weeks to better match the recreational black sea bass season in most states (Table 7). In some areas, anglers report it is common to catch black sea bass when targeting blueline tilefish or to stop and target black sea bass on their way out to blueline tilefish fishing grounds. Therefore, the recommendation has been to shift the blueline tilefish season to May 15 – November 15 in an effort to minimize regulatory black sea bass discards as well as to help control temporal efforts on both fisheries. It was noted that shifting the blueline tilefish recreational season to better align with the black sea bass season in most states may be particularly important for states with the highest proportion of blueline tilefish landings (Table 7).

For-hire VTR data from 2018-2022 suggests that during the first two weeks of May there are relatively few blueline tilefish fishing trips reported, and most trips occur in states with a mid-May black sea bass season start date. Of the blueline tilefish trips reported in states with a mid-May black sea bass season start date, about 43% of those fishing trips reported catching both blueline tilefish and black sea bass (Table 8). Trips that reported catching both blueline tilefish and black sea bass also reported that proportionally about 33% of their total catch was black sea bass, all which were discarded given the black sea bass season in most states does not open until mid-May in most years. Compared to for-hire VTR data from 2018-2022 from the last two weeks of May, the number of fishing trips targeting blueline tilefish increases as well as the number of trips catching both species; however, proportionally the number of black sea bass caught compared to total catch is relatively the same (Table 9). The combination of angler feedback as well as VTR data suggests shifting the recreational blueline tilefish season to May 15 – November 14 would help reduce black sea bass discards with minimal impact on the recreational fishery and would result in no change to the number of days of the current blueline tilefish recreational season. For these reasons, **staff recommend modifying the recreational blueline tilefish season from May 1 – October 31 to May 15 – November 14.**

Table 7: 2022 and 2023 (proposed) black sea bass seasons by state and associated average reported for-hire landings each year by state from 2012-2022. Source: NMFS unpublished CAMS data. *Note: 2023 black sea bass season adjustments in some states have not gone into effect yet and could potentially be modified depending on state rule making.*

State	2022 BSB Open Season <i>(some states have multiple open/close dates due to season/mode specific bag limits)</i>	2023 <u>Proposed</u> BSB Seasons <i>(some states have multiple open/close dates due to season/mode specific bag limits)</i>	Ave. annual For-hire VTR blueline tilefish landings/year (number of fish)
Maine	May 19-Sept 21; Oct 18-Dec 31	May 19-Sept 21; Oct 18-Dec 31	0
New Hampshire	Jan 1-Dec 31	Jan 1-Dec 31	85
Massachusetts	May 21-Sept 4	May 20-Sept 7	94
Rhode Island	May 22- Dec 31 (private/shore); June 18-Dec 31 (for-hire)	May 22-Dec 31 (private/shore); June 18-Dec 31 (for-hire)	11
Connecticut	May 19-Dec 1 (private/shore) May 19-Dec 31 (for-hire)	May 19-June 23 and July 8- Dec 1 (private/shore); May 19-Dec 31 (for-hire)	6
New York	June 23- Dec 31	June 23-Dec 31	3,374
New Jersey	May 17-Jun 19; July 1- Aug 31; Oct 7-Oct 26; Nov 1-Dec 31	May 17-Jun 19; July 1-Aug 31; Oct 1-Dec 31	15,370
Delaware	May 15-Dec 11	May 15-Sept 30; Oct 10-Dec 31	453
Maryland			643
Virginia		May 15-July 15; July 27-Dec 31	10,992

Table 8: For-hire VTR data from 2018-2022 with reported blueline tilefish and black sea bass catch during the first two weeks of May.

During first two weeks of May when the blueline tilefish (BLT) season is open, and black sea bass (BSB) is closed in most states (2018-2022)	
Number of trips (all states)	17
Number of trips (states with post May 15 BSB season)	14
Number of trips catching both BLT and BSB	6
Total BSB discards (number of fish)	496
Total BLT landed (number of fish)	1,011
Proportion of BSB caught	33%

Table 9: For-hire VTR data from 2018-2022 with reported blueline tilefish and black sea bass catch during the last two weeks of May.

During first two weeks of May when the blueline tilefish season is open, and black sea bass is closed in most states (2018-2022)	
Number of trips (all states)	66
Number of trips catching both BLT and BSB	37
Total BSB discards (number of fish)	2,429
Total BLT landed (number of fish)	4,093
Proportion of BSB caught	37%