

## August 2024 Council Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council met August 12-15, 2024, in Philadelphia, PA. The following is a summary of actions taken and issues considered during the meeting. Presentations, briefing materials, motions, and webinar recordings are available at <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/august-2024>.

### **HIGHLIGHTS**

During this meeting, the Council:

- Reviewed management track stock assessments for golden tilefish, black sea bass, and Atlantic surfclam
- Adopted 2025-2027 specifications for golden tilefish
- Adopted (status quo) 2025 specifications for the Mid-Atlantic blueline tilefish fishery
- Adopted 2025 specifications for black sea bass
- Reviewed 2025 specifications for summer flounder and recommended no changes
- Reviewed 2025 specifications for scup and recommended minor increases to the commercial quota and recreational harvest limit
- Reviewed a draft document for public hearings for the Summer Flounder Mesh Exemptions Framework/Addendum
- Received an update on improvements to the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES)
- Reviewed progress on development of the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda and provided guidance on the draft range of alternatives
- Reviewed 2025 specifications for bluefish and recommended no changes
- Reviewed 2025 specifications for Atlantic surfclam and ocean quahog and recommended no changes
- Received a presentation on the [final report](#) from the Council's Program Review and discussed potential next steps
- Developed comments on NOAA Fisheries' draft Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management Road Map
- Received an update on Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel (NTAP) activities
- Received a presentation on the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Electronic Monitoring and Reporting Grant Program

### Golden Tilefish 2025-2027 Specifications

The Council reviewed the stock status and performance of the golden tilefish fishery and adopted multi-year specifications (catch and landings limits) for 2025-2027, as summarized in the table below. The [2024 Management Track Assessment](#) for golden tilefish found that the stock was not overfished in 2023, but overfishing was occurring. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) noted various sources of uncertainty in the assessment, including the absence of a fishery independent survey, gaps in aging data, reliance on multiple separate fishery-dependent indices, and the lack of reliable recreational catch data. The SSC provided two sets of acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations: one with varying ABCs for each year and one with a constant ABC across all three years. The SSC and Monitoring Committee both noted that the constant ABC approach would provide greater stability for the industry. The Council ultimately selected the constant ABC approach, approving an ABC of 1.87 million pounds for each year 2025-2027. The Council recommended that the small projected recreational landings of 54,013 pounds (calculated based on average

recreational landings for the 2022-2023 period) be accounted for under management uncertainty. The Council did not recommend any changes to the current recreational bag limit or commercial/incidental trip limit.

<b>Summary of Golden Tilefish Specifications for 2025, 2026, and 2027</b>	
Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC)	1.87 million pounds
Commercial Quota – IFQ Fishery	1.72 million pounds
Incidental Quota	68,949 pounds
Incidental Trip Limit	500 pounds (227 kg) or 50 percent, by weight, of all fish, including the golden tilefish, on board the vessel, whichever is less
Recreational Bag Limit	8-fish recreational bag-size limit per angler per trip

### Blueline Tilefish 2025 Specifications

The Council adopted status quo 2025 specifications for the blueline tilefish fishery north of the North Carolina/Virginia border. Specifications were set for a single year because an updated stock assessment is expected to be available for management in 2025 to inform multi-year specifications for 2026-2028. The Council’s recommendations are summarized in the table below.

The Council discussed several sources of uncertainty highlighted by the SSC, including the lack of reference points for the portion of the stock north of Cape Hatteras and the lack of reliable recreational catch data. Council members expressed concern about low rates of reporting among private recreational tilefish anglers. A contractor has been hired to identify and recommend solutions to improve awareness and compliance with tilefish permitting and reporting requirements. A final report will be presented to the Council in October.

<b>Summary of Blueline Tilefish 2025 Specifications</b>	
<b>Acceptable Biological Catch</b>	100,520 pounds
<b>Recreational Total Allowable Landings</b>	71,912 pounds
<b>Recreational Trip Limits</b>	Private Boat: 3 fish USCG uninspected for-hire vessel: 5 fish USCG inspected for-hire vessel: 7 fish
<b>Commercial Total Allowable Landings</b>	26,869 pounds
<b>Commercial Trip Limits</b>	500 pounds (until 70% of quota is met, then reduced to 300 pounds)

### Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Specifications

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s (Commission) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) to set 2025 specifications for black sea bass and review previously adopted 2025 specifications for summer flounder and scup. The Council and Board considered recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), Monitoring Committee, and Advisory Panel, as well as comments from members of the public.

#### **Black Sea Bass 2025 Specifications**

The Council and Board received a presentation on the [2024 Black Sea Bass Management Track Stock Assessment](#) and associated projections for 2025. The Council and Board acknowledged that many improvements have been made to the stock assessment in recent years. However, they also expressed concern that the projections are predicting a sharp decline in biomass in the future, necessitating a 20% reduction in the acceptable biological catch (ABC) for 2025, despite generally consistent increases in biomass for the past several years. They also

noted that projections based on the previous assessment model for several prior specifications cycles consistently predicted similarly sharp declines in biomass which were not realized according to the 2024 Management Track Assessment. Concerns were expressed about the negative socio-economic impacts of a 20% decrease in the ABC, increases in discards, and compliance with more restrictive measures. With biomass currently more than double the target level and overfishing not occurring, it is challenging to communicate the conservation need for a 20% reduction in the ABC. The management track assessment will be updated next year, with plans already underway to thoroughly evaluate the projection methodology and make revisions as appropriate. These updates will be used to inform the 2026-2027 catch and landings limits.

The Council is bound by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requirement to set catch limits which do not exceed the recommendations of its SSC. However, the Commission is not bound by this same law. Therefore, the Board voted to suspend the typical joint management process for the 2025 black sea bass specifications, allowing them to adopt different catch and landings limits than the Council. The Board then voted to maintain status quo catch and landing limits for 2025. The Council considered passing a similar motion; however, as this would violate the MSA, the Council ultimately passed a substitute motion to set the 2025 specifications based on the SSC's recommended 2025 ABC, using the same methods as prior years to calculate expected dead discards in each sector to derive the commercial quota and the recreational harvest limit. The values adopted by the Board and the Council are shown in the table below.

The specifications adopted by the Board are final. The specifications adopted by the Council must be reviewed and, if approved, implemented by NOAA Fisheries. If NOAA Fisheries approves and implements the specifications recommended by the Council for 2025, this would create disparities between the state and federal specifications. This would require all federal permit holders to be bound by more restrictive measures than those who are only subject to state measures (e.g., individuals fishing in state waters who do not also have federal permits). The NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Administrator indicated that the agency will use the proposed and final federal rulemaking process to consider what flexibilities are available to ensure alignment between the state and federal regulations consistent with the regulations.

The Council and Board adopted a 5% in-season commercial closure buffer for 2025, meaning the commercial fishery would close if 105% of the quota is projected to be landed prior to the end of the year. They made no changes to any other federal commercial management measures.

<b>Landings limit</b>	<b>Approved by Board for 2025</b> <i>millions of pounds</i>	<b>Approved by Council for 2025</b> <i>millions of pounds</i>
<b>Commercial quota</b>	6.00	4.78
<b>Recreational harvest limit</b>	6.27	4.46

### ***Summer Flounder 2025 Specifications Review***

The Council and Board recommended no changes to the [previously adopted](#) 2025 catch and landings limits for summer flounder. The 2025 limits are the same as those implemented for 2024, including a commercial quota of 8.79 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 6.35 million pounds. The Council and Board made no changes to the commercial management measures for summer flounder.

### ***Scup 2025 Specifications Review***

The Council and Board recommended minor changes to the previously adopted 2025 catch and landings limits for scup. Earlier this year, a small error was discovered in the projections used to set 2024-2025 specifications. Correcting the error resulted in a small increase in the projected ABC and overfishing limit (OFL) for 2025. After reviewing the revised ABC provided by the Council's SSC, the Council and Board adopted a revised commercial quota of 19.54 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 12.31 million pounds for 2025. These updates

represent a minor increase, about 4%, compared to the limits previously approved for 2025. The Council and Board did not recommend any changes to commercial management measures for scup. The Council will forward its recommendations to NOAA Fisheries for final approval, while the Commission's actions for state waters are final.

### Summer Flounder Mesh Exemptions Framework/Addendum

The Council and Board reviewed, and the Board approved, a draft addendum document for public comment for this action. They also indicated support for a regulatory language clarification related to the annual evaluation of the flynet exemption, which would clarify the regulations to be consistent with the language in the Fishery Management Plan. A minimum 30-day comment period and hearing process will be conducted by the Commission. Information regarding public hearing dates and how to provide comments will be posted to the Commission's website later this month. Comments received will be provided to both the Council and Board for consideration prior to final action, scheduled for the week of October 21 at the Commission's Annual Meeting in Annapolis, MD (day and time to be determined).

### Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Update and Listening Session

The Council and Board received a presentation from Dr. Katherine Papacostas, MRIP Program Manager, regarding ongoing improvements to the program's Fishing Effort Survey (FES). These improvements center on re-ordering survey questions about how often people went fishing, as well as increased survey sampling, and are anticipated to result in revised catch data time series estimates in spring 2026, depending on favorable peer review in 2025 of changes being tested in 2024. Until then, NOAA Fisheries has advised that the existing MRIP data should continue to be used where they are currently to inform stock assessments and management. Council and Board members and other attendees also had an opportunity to provide input on a joint federal-state effort to re-envision the recreational fisheries data collection program. This initiative aims to transition to an improved recreational data collection partnership that better meets regional needs. [Click here to learn more or provide input.](#)

### Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda

The Council and the Commission's Interstate Fishery Management Program Policy Board (Policy Board) reviewed progress on development of the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda, which considers changes to the process for setting recreational bag, size, and season limits for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. They reviewed modifications to the draft range of alternatives recommended by the Fishery Management Action Team/Plan Development Team (FMAT/PDT) as well as a summary of a review by the SSC. The Council and Policy Board endorsed the FMAT/PDT recommendation to remove an alternative referred to as the "Biological Reference Point Approach" from further consideration due to its complexity. They also agreed that approaches based on recreational fishing mortality rate targets and options for revising the starting point for measures cannot be fully developed in the time remaining for completion of this action. However, these topics could be further developed through separate management actions if they remain priorities. They also agreed that the work group of Council members and Commissioners will work with the FMAT/PDT to develop language to clarify the role of the RHL in this management action. Prior to the next meeting of the Council and Policy Board in late October, the FMAT/PDT will complete development of the range of alternatives and will develop a draft addenda document for public hearings.

### Bluefish 2025 Specifications Review

The Council met jointly with the ASMFC's Bluefish Management Board (Bluefish Board) to review [previously adopted](#) 2025 specifications for bluefish. Bluefish are in the 3rd year of a 7-year rebuilding program. After considering available information on recent catches and fishery performance, the Council and Bluefish Board

agreed that no changes are needed to the previously implemented specifications, which include a commercial quota of 3.03 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 15.7 million pounds. The Council and Board also made no changes to recreational bag limits (3 fish per day for private anglers and 5 fish per day for for-hire vessels).

### Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog 2025 Specifications Review

The Atlantic surfclam and ocean quahog fisheries are approaching the fifth year of multi-year specifications previously set for the 2021-2026 fishing years. During this meeting, the Council reviewed recent information for both stocks and considered whether any changes to 2025 specifications are warranted. The [2024 Management Track Assessment](#) for Atlantic surfclam found that the stock was not overfished, and overfishing was not occurring in 2024. Based on the assessment results, the Council's SSC recommended that the 2025 and 2026 overfishing limits (OFLs) and acceptable biological catches (ABCs) be revised to reflect the best scientific information available. Although the revised ABC for 2025 is about 17% higher than the ABC originally adopted for 2025, the Council concluded that no changes to the catch target or quota for the upcoming fishing year are warranted. Staff noted that the surfclam fishery has not landed 100% of the quota since 2003, and only 41% of the quota was landed in 2023. The industry has also expressed support for maintaining status quo quotas. To maintain the current measures, the Council voted to recommend the Regional Administrator suspend the minimum shell length for surfclam in 2025. The Council also made no changes to the 2025 catch and landings limits for ocean quahog. These specifications are described in detail in the [final rule](#) published May 13, 2021.

### Council Program Review

Brett Wiedoff and Duncan Wood, from the Parnin Group, presented the results of the [final report](#) from the Council's Program Review. The Council contracted the Parnin Group in 2023 to identify potential ways to improve the process of developing federal fisheries management regulations, particularly regarding responsiveness to climate-change and fisheries-related challenges. While the overall assessment of the Council's regulatory process was positive, the report notes that there are several areas of improvement for the Council to consider. The report provides 17 recommendations to address areas of improvement, ranging from quick fixes to long-term systemic updates. The Council discussed these findings and plans to further consider which recommendations should be included in the Council's 2025-2029 Strategic Plan (to be discussed in October 2024), annual implementation plans (2025 and beyond), and other staff work priorities.

### NOAA Fisheries Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) Road Map

The Council reviewed and developed comments on the revised [EBFM Road Map](#) developed by NOAA Fisheries. The Road Map provides national level guidance for regional implementation of the continued movement toward managing fisheries at the ecosystem level and will guide NOAA Fisheries' EBFM efforts over the next five years.

Overall, the Council was very supportive of the updated Road Map and encouraged the continued development of the science and decision support tools needed to help implement climate-ready fisheries management; however, they noted these efforts should not come at the expense of core fisheries data collection and stock assessment needs. They also encouraged NOAA Fisheries to coordinate, collaborate, and partner with the Council to identify EBFM milestones, develop management goals and priorities, and seek opportunities for management on-ramps. The Council identified a range of additional comments that will be included in a comment letter to be submitted by the comment deadline of August 31, 2024.

## Other Business

### ***Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel (NTAP) Updates***

The Council received an update on recent NTAP activities, including a summary of their most recent meeting held on July 11, 2024, in New Bedford, Massachusetts. At the NTAP meeting the group received several informative presentations, including multiple presentations on long-standing surveys that operate on industry platforms around the United States. These presentations were planned to help inform their continued discussions on the Industry-Based Survey Pilot Project. The NTAP Working Group will continue such conversations at their next meeting on August 22, 2024.

### ***National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Electronic Monitoring and Reporting Grant Program***

Dr. Willy Goldsmith gave a presentation on the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Electronic Monitoring and Reporting Grant Program. This year, the organization anticipates awarding award up to \$4.8 million in grants that catalyze the voluntary implementation of electronic technologies for fisheries catch, effort, and/or compliance monitoring, and improvements to fishery information systems in U.S. fisheries. Additional information is available in the [request for proposals](#). Proposals are due October 2, 2024.

## Next Meeting

The next Council meeting will be held **October 8-10, 2024, in Dewey Beach, DE**. A complete list of upcoming meetings can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events>.

### **Acronyms**

- ABC – Acceptable Biological Catch
- EBFM – Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management
- FES – Fishing Effort Survey
- FMP – Fishery Management Plan
- FMAT/PDT – Fishery Management Action Team/Plan Development Team
- NTAP – Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel
- MRIP – Marine Recreational Information Program
- MSA – Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
- OFL – Overfishing Limit
- RHL – Recreational Harvest Limit
- SSC – Scientific and Statistical Committee