

April 2025 Council Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council met by webinar April 8-10, 2025. The following is a summary of actions taken and issues considered during the meeting. Presentations, briefing materials, motions, and webinar recordings are available on the Council's [April 2025 meeting page](#).

HIGHLIGHTS

During this meeting, the Council:

- Approved several changes to the to the recreational fisheries management programs for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish through the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda (joint action with the ASMFC's ISFMP Policy Board)
- Reviewed scoping comments received on the Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment and agreed to address the issues of sector separation and data collection separately (joint action with the ASMFC's ISFMP Policy Board)
- Reviewed the 2025 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem Report and the 2025 EAFM risk assessment summary report
- Completed a required 5-year review of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) provisions for all fishery management plans
- Received an update on development of the Joint Mid-Atlantic and New England Omnibus Alternative Gear-Marking Framework Adjustment
- Presented the Ricks E Savage Award to Captain Adam Nowalsky
- Presented the James A. Ruhle Cooperative Research Award to Mr. Jack Casey

Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Interstate Fisheries Management Program Policy Board (Policy Board) approved modifications to the process for setting recreational measures (bag, size, and season limits), as well as the recreational accountability measures, for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. The Council recommended these changes through a framework action, and the Policy Board adopted these changes through Addendum XXXVI to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and Addendum III to the Bluefish FMP. These changes are part of a broader long-term effort by both the Council and Commission to improve recreational management of these jointly managed species.

The current process for setting recreational measures, referred to as the Percent Change Approach, was implemented in 2023 and will sunset at the end of 2025. During a joint meeting last week in Galloway, New Jersey, the Council and Policy Board discussed several options to improve or replace the Percent Change Approach for 2026 and beyond. After reviewing public comments and recommendations from technical committees and advisory panels, the Council and Policy Board agreed to maintain the current process with several modifications based on lessons learned over the past few years. These changes will be implemented in two phases.

The first phase of changes aims to better account for stock status when setting measures and will create more opportunities for stability in management measures. The current system uses three biomass categories to guide whether measures should change; the revised approach adds a fourth category for stocks near their biomass target and establishes a separate process for overfished stocks. These changes will take effect starting with the

2026 recreational measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. The Council and Policy Board delayed the implementation of these changes for bluefish until 2028 to allow time for development of an appropriate methodology for evaluating the impacts of measures on bluefish harvest and discards. The bluefish stock has been under a rebuilding plan since 2022, and recreational measures will continue to be set based on the rebuilding plan until the stock is declared rebuilt.

The second phase of modifications, which will be implemented for setting 2030 recreational measures and beyond, will update the process to use a catch-based target. Unlike the current process – which focuses on achieving a specific level of predicted harvest – a catch-based approach aims to achieve a target level of total dead catch, including both harvest and dead discards. This approach will allow for more explicit consideration of how measures affect discards. Some advisors and members of the public raised concerns about the potential for this change to create greater instability in management measures. After extensive discussion of each approach, the Council and Policy Board delayed the transition to a catch-based target until 2030 to allow time for additional analysis on the potential impacts to measures.

The Council and Policy Board also approved changes to the recreational accountability measures. These changes will be effective starting in 2026 for all four species. Under these revisions, when an accountability measure is triggered due to recent overages of the recreational annual catch limits, managers will also consider if those overages contributed to overfishing when determining the appropriate response.

The Council will submit the framework to the National Marine Fisheries Service for review and implementation, while the Commission's measures are final for state waters. Additional information about this action is available on the [Council](#) and [Commission](#) action pages.

Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment

The Council and Policy Board reviewed scoping comments on the Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment from public hearings and written comments, as well as input provided by the joint Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass and Bluefish Advisory Panels and the Fishery Management Action Team/Plan Development Team. Based on these comments, the Council and Policy Board agreed that recreational sector separation and recreational data collection should be addressed separately. Further development of the amendment will focus on management options for recreational sector separation, including mode management, as well as consideration of for-hire permitting and reporting requirements.

The Council and Policy Board separated out the recreational data collection and use issue from the amendment due to concerns that the complexity of this issue would cause significant delays in the amendment timeline. Council and Policy Board members also noted there is a need to more clearly define the objectives for recreational data collection improvement. This issue will be explored through a white paper which will consider the feasibility of various approaches and help the Council and Policy Board clarify goals for a potential future action. Additional information and updates are available on the [Council](#) and [Commission](#) action pages.

Ecosystem Updates

Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem Report

Dr. Sarah Gaichas presented key findings from the 2025 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem Report (SOE). This report has been provided annually to the Council since 2017 and gives information on the status and trends of relevant ecological, environmental, economic, and social components of the Mid-Atlantic Bight ecosystem. The report evaluates the performance of different ecosystem indicators relative to management objectives and the potential climate and ecosystem risks to meeting those management objectives. Highlights from the 2025 report include:

- The Council continues to meet many of its species/stock specific management objectives and most stocks are not overfished and overfishing is not occurring.
- Many ecosystem level management objectives are concerning as seafood production continues to decline, commercial revenue is at historic lows, and the majority of commercial and recreational fishing communities rely on highly climate vulnerable stocks.
- The distribution, timing of migration and spawning, and stock productivity for many Mid-Atlantic stocks have changed as ocean conditions continue to change and increase in variability.
- Globally, 2024 was the warmest year on record but ocean temperatures in the Mid-Atlantic and New England were near normal and new ocean climate models suggest a pause in ocean warming for the next 6-7 years.

The public now has the opportunity to contribute to future SOE reports by sharing their observations from out on the water. Information such as record high or low observations, observations that may be different from recent conditions, events that might be affecting fishery operations, or really unique or newsworthy events. Observations can be submitted to northeast.ecosystem.highlights@noaa.gov.

Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) Risk Assessment

The Council reviewed the 2025 EAFM risk assessment summary report. The risk assessment report is updated each spring to provide the Council with a snapshot of the current risks to meeting its management objectives and helps the Council decide where to focus limited resources to address priority ecosystem considerations in its science and management programs. The risk assessment includes 28 risk elements that span biological, ecological, social, economic, and management issues. The updated report includes indicators from the 2025 State of the Ecosystem report and new analyses by NEFSC and Council staff for certain Ecological and Management elements to address feedback from the Council's Ecosystem and Ocean Planning (EOP) Committee and Advisory Panel. Nearly 73% of all risk rankings evaluated in the assessment were considered low or low-moderate risk; while risks associated with distribution shifts, regulatory complexity, discards, and many ecosystem level elements were considered moderate-high or high risk. After reviewing the risk assessment findings, the Council supported further evaluation and analyses to understand the factors driving the higher risks associated with commercial value and commercial fleet diversity.

Essential Fish Habitat 5-Year Review

At this meeting, the Council completed its Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) 5-year Review. This review has been ongoing since 2023 and summarized new and updated information on the 9 required EFH components in the Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) for all the Council's managed species. This review work was collaboratively conducted by the Council's EFH Fishery Management Action Team and the New England Fishery Management Council's Habitat Plan Development Team. The Council approved the EFH Review Summary Report, including its findings and recommendations, and supporting technical component reports. These reports and products will be posted on the Council's website, and a letter will be sent to NMFS transmitting the reports. The Council has already initiated an Omnibus ("all species and FMPs") EFH Amendment. Work on this Amendment to modify the FMPs based on this updated EFH information will begin, with final action expected in early 2026. With the review completed in 2025, the next EFH 5-year review would be scheduled for completion in 2030.

Omnibus Alternative Gear-Marking Framework

The Council received information on the development of the Joint Mid-Atlantic and New England Omnibus Alternative Gear-Marking Framework Adjustment. This action considers providing alternative surface-marking provisions for fixed-gear fisheries in the Greater Atlantic Region to allow the use of fixed gear without a persistent buoy line and reconcile fishery management plan regulations with recent and potential future changes to Marine Mammal Protection Act regulations. The Council initiated this action and discussed various

considerations for allowing the use of on-demand gear. The Regional Administrator clarified that while the Joint Framework Adjustment would create the option to use alternative gear-marking, on-demand gear could not be used unless approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service. Emphasis was placed on the need for alternative gear-marking technology that would be the functional equivalent of a buoy (i.e., providing vessels with information on where fixed gear is located). Additional information and updates on this action can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/actions/gear-marking-framework>.

Council Awards

Ricks E Savage Award

The Council recognized Captain Adam Nowalsky as the recipient of the 2024 Ricks E Savage award. The award is given annually to an individual who has made exceptional contributions to the management and conservation of fishery resources in the mid-Atlantic region.

Nowalsky was appointed to the Council in 2015 and served with distinction for nine years before terming out in 2024. During his tenure, he was one of the Council's most engaged and influential voices, known for his willingness to dive into complex management issues. "Adam's ability to see all sides, to think creatively, and to contribute constructively made him a trusted colleague and a valuable contributor," said Wes Townsend, Council Chair. "He consistently raised the bar for everyone involved in the Council process."

During his time on the Council, Nowalsky was particularly engaged in recreational fisheries management issues. With more than two decades of experience fishing South Jersey waters as a licensed charter operator, he brought practical knowledge and an understanding of anglers' concerns to the Council's decision-making process. Notably, he was a driving force behind the Recreational Reform Initiative, a joint effort launched in 2019 by the Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) which aims to improve management of recreational fisheries for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish.

From 2016 to 2021, Nowalsky chaired the Council's Research Steering Committee, leading efforts to navigate complex decisions about the future of the Research Set-Aside program. His leadership extended beyond the Council as well, serving as New Jersey's Legislative Proxy to the ASMFC since 2010, where he has chaired numerous boards. He also played a central role in bringing the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP) to the Mid-Atlantic region and continues to serve on the MREP Steering Committee.

"Adam's legacy is one of dedication, integrity, and collaboration," said Townsend. "His contributions have left a lasting mark on the Council and the broader Mid-Atlantic fisheries community."



James A. Ruhle Cooperative Research Award

The Council presented the James A. Ruhle Cooperative Research Award to Mr. Jack Casey, in recognition of his pioneering work in cooperative fisheries research and his decades-long contributions to the scientific understanding of shark species along the East Coast. The award is named in memory of Captain Jimmy Ruhle – a commercial fisherman, former Council member, and trailblazer in cooperative fisheries research. The award celebrates individuals or groups who have made exceptional contributions to cooperative research in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Jack Casey's legacy is one of innovation, leadership, and collaboration. A U.S. Navy veteran who began his fisheries career in 1960 with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Casey quickly recognized the untapped potential of working directly with fishermen to advance scientific understanding. In 1962, he launched the Cooperative Shark Tagging Program with fewer than 100 volunteer fishermen. Under his leadership, the program expanded into one of the most successful and enduring partnerships between the scientific and fishing communities, resulting in hundreds of thousands of sharks tagged and an unparalleled body of data on shark movements, behavior, and biology. His efforts helped transform the public's perception of sharks and laid the groundwork for significant advancements in shark science. In addition to founding the tagging program, Casey played a leading role in establishing NOAA's marine fisheries laboratory in Narragansett, Rhode Island, where the Apex Predators Program continues his legacy of collaboration and innovation.

"This award is a fitting tribute to a man whose work helped define what cooperative research can achieve," said Council Chair Wes Townsend. "Jack inspired generations of scientists, many of whom continue to carry forward his commitment to collaboration and innovation."

Upcoming Meetings

The next Council meeting will be held **June 3-5, 2025**, in Virginia Beach, VA. A complete list of upcoming meetings can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events>.



Jack Casey (left) with Council Chair Wes Townsend