

**New Jersey Marine Fisheries Council Virtual Meeting
December 18, 2024**

Council Attendees

Dr. Eleanor Bochenek
Dr. Patrick Donnelly
Warren Hollinger
Walter Johnson III

Jeff Kaelin
Kevin Wark
Robert Rush
Richard Herb

DEP and Division of Fish and Wildlife Attendees:

Joseph Cimino – Administrator, Marine Resources Administration (MRA)
Jeffrey Brust – Chief, Bureau of Marine Fisheries (BMF)
Heather Corbett – Supervising Biologist, BMF
Maryellen Gordon – Principal Biologist, BMF
Brian Neilan – Principal Biologist, BMF
Jen Pyle - Senior Biologist, BMF
Jamie Darrow - Senior Biologist, BMF

Public Attendees:

Kenneth Berry
Tameeka Chang
Kieran Golden
William Clark

The meeting was called to order. Notice of the Marine Fisheries Council (Council) meeting was filed with the Secretary of State on December 5, 2024.

Atlantic Cobia Management

Staff presented about the ASMFC required management change for the Atlantic Cobia recreational fishery. Cobia Addendum II established a new regional recreational allocation framework resulting in new regional harvest targets based on the current coastwide total recreational harvest quota in place through 2026. To determine 2025-2026 measures for each region, the average 2021-2023 recreational harvest for each region was compared against its regional harvest target. The Northern Region's (Rhode Island through Virginia) average harvest was above its target, requiring a 15.9% reduction in harvest. The Cobia Technical Committee (TC) developed a suite of recreational management options for the

Northern Region estimated to meet the required 15.9% reduction. Each option is comprised of three components: regionwide size limit, regionwide vessel limit, and a season for Maryland, Potomac River Fisheries Commission, and Virginia. Data are not available to calculate any reduction associated with implementing a season for Rhode Island through Delaware. The Board approved TC's methodology for developing recreational options to meet the Northern Region reduction. States in the Northern Region will coordinate to select a regionwide size limit, regionwide vessel limit, and season for Maryland, PRFC, and Virginia. States will then submit implementation plans for Board consideration by January 1, 2025, and must implement the new measures by April 1, 2025. If States in the Northern Region cannot come to a consensus on which measures to implement, a virtual Board meeting will be scheduled to select measures.

Staff presented the options table (Table 1 below) that was presented to the council at the previous MFC meeting along with an additional option. The additional option was requested to be calculated by the TC by Maryland and Virginia. The new option was 43-inch total length size limit with a 2 fish vessel limit and a June 15th to September 20th season for MD and VA. This new option was the region's preferred option that had the support of VA, MD, DE, NY, RI, CT, PMRC, and DC.

Dr. Bochenek asked staff if going to a larger size would increase discards. Staff responded stating the length frequency data from the NJ Ocean Trawl survey along with MRIP data showed that 85% of fish that had been observed are above the proposed size limit of 43 inches total length. Therefore, the increase in discards for NJ would be minimal.

Mr. Rush questioned how the northern region is catching more fish than the southern region and where the data came from. Staff responded that within the Atlantic Coastal stock of Cobia there are two main spawning aggregations, one being in Virginia near the Chesapeake Bay and the other in South Carolina. Due to Virginia being within the northern region and because they have the largest harvest of Cobia along the coast, it justifies the northern region's high catch data. Mr. Rush asked why NJ was allocated to the Northern

Region. Staff mentioned it was because the Cobia that are caught in NJ are fish from the Chesapeake Bay spawning aggregation.

Motion made by J. Kaelin to select the region's preferred option of 43-inch total length size limit with a 2 fish vessel limit and a June 15th to September 20th season for MD and VA. Motion seconded by Dr. Donnelly.

Mr. Rush proposed an alternative option with a 40-inch minimum size, but there was little support since other states in the region had already expressed support for the 43 inch minimum, and Mr. Cimino indicated it was unlikely NJ would be able to convince other states to change their choices since NJ has low data and this is Virginia's most important fishery.

The floor was opened for public comment, but no public attendees provided comment.

Motion made by Mr. Kaelin was carried unanimously.

Mr. Brust asked the council if they had any additional questions.

Mr. Rush requested verification that no actions were required for Striped Bass for the 2025 season. Mr. Brust stated that at the ASMFC meeting they decided to start an addendum, and any changes that may occur would not be implemented until January of 2026.

Mr. Hollinger inquired about the new Endangered Species ruling that might affect tidal water access and expressed his concerns about how that could affect fishing and aquaculture in the state. Mr. Brust stated he would reach out to ENSP and get more information about the ruling. Dr. Bochenek expressed disappointment that the Marine Fish Council was not included in the development of this ruling. Mr. Kaelin suggested that the

information be circulated well in advance of the next council meeting. Mr. Brust agreed and stated that he would see if someone from ENSP could come to the next council meeting.

Mr. Johnson inquired about the REAL Rules program and whether there was an update. Mr. Brust agreed to find out more information.

Mr. Rush asked if the ASMFC meeting resulted in any priority needs for other special meetings. Mr. Brust said a summer flounder meeting is in the works.

Mr. Donnelly agreed with Mr. Kaelin about receiving more info about the ENSP ruling prior to the next meeting. He then thanked Joe Cimino, Jeff Kaelin and Adam Nowalsky for their work at the ASMFC meeting. He also requested an earlier meeting for Striped Bass in 2025. Mr. Brust said he will plan a meeting as soon as it is relevant. Dr. Bochenek requested more information about the economic impacts on the fishery to be prepared for potential reductions. Mr. Kaelin said all of the options are in the memo and that the council may want to see the memo for their interest.

Dr. Bochenek requested that the Angler Survey Subcommittee begin collecting data on summer flounder and black sea bass for 2025 and need to meet in January to get something out by April.

Mr. Rush asked if there is a summary of the public comments made for the last striped bass meeting.

The meeting was adjourned.

Table1. Atlantic Cobia Management Options

Size Limit for RI-VA (TL)	Vessel Limit for RI-VA	Season for MD-VA*	Total Estimated Cumulative Reduction
NJ MFC Preferred Options:			
40" minimum	1-fish	June 8 – September 15, OR June 15 – September 22	-16.6%
40" minimum	2-fish	June 15 – August 25**	-16.7%
40" - 51" slot	2-fish	June 15 – September 15	-16.4%
Region Preferred Option:			
43" minimum	2-fish	June 15 – September 20	-16.3%
Other Available Options:			
40" minimum	2-fish	June 30 – September 15	-24.40%
41" minimum	2-fish	June 15 – August 31, OR June 27 – September 15	-17.5% -17.1%
42" minimum	2-fish	June 15 – August 31, OR June 27 – September 15	-20.4% -20.1%
43" minimum	2-fish	June 15 – September 15	-20.5%
40" - 52" slot	2-fish	June 15 – August 31, OR June 20 – September 15	-23.4% -17.3%
40" - 54" slot	2-fish	June 15 – August 31 OR June 27 – September 15	-19.3% -18.9%
40" - 55" slot	2-fish	June 15 – August 27, OR June 30 – September 15***	-18.3% -27.4%
41" - 52" slot	2-fish	June 15 – September 15	-19.1%
42" - 54" slot	2-fish	June 15 – September 15	-17.8%