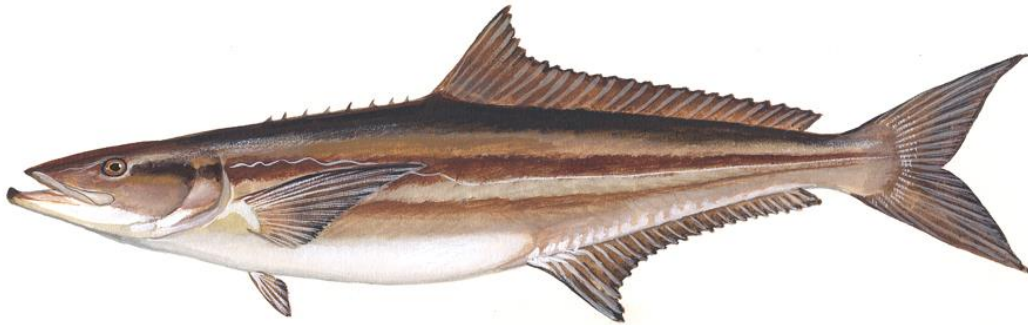


ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION
REVIEW OF THE INTERSTATE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

FOR ATLANTIC COBIA
(Rachycentron canadum)

2022 FISHING YEAR



Prepared by the Atlantic Cobia Plan Review Team

July 2023



Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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I. Status of the Fishery Management Plan

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>Date of FMP Approval:</u> | Original FMP – November 2017 |
| <u>Amendments & Addenda:</u> | Amendment 1 – August 2019 Addendum 1 – October 2020 |
| <u>Management Areas:</u> | The distribution of the Atlantic stock of cobia from Georgia through Rhode Island |
| <u>Active Boards/Committees:</u> | Coastal Pelagics Management Board; Cobia Technical Committee, Plan Development Team, and Plan Review Team; South Atlantic Species Advisory Panel |

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted an [Interstate Fishery Management Plan \(FMP\)](#) for the Atlantic Migratory Group of cobia (Atlantic cobia) in 2017 (ASMFC, 2017). Prior to the FMP, federal management was through the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources (CMP FMP), while New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina had regulations for their respective state waters.

The FMP established a complementary management approach between the ASMFC and SAFMC. Under the ASMFC, Atlantic cobia are managed as part of the Coastal Pelagics Board (Board). Through the FMP, regulations for states with a declared interest were required to reflect several measures established federally through the CMP FMP.

In March, 2019, [Regulatory Amendment 31](#) to the CMP FMP became effective (SAFMC, 2018). This removed Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, resulting in management solely through the ASMFC.

In August, 2019, the Board approved [Amendment 1](#) to reflect removal of Atlantic cobia from the CMP FMP, assume management responsibilities previously accomplished through the SAFMC and CMP FMP, and establish recommendations for measures in federal waters. Amendment 1 stated requirements were to be implemented by July, 2020.

Amendment 1 maintains many regulations of the original Commission FMP and previous CMP FMP. These include a 36-inch fork length (or 40-inch total length) recreational minimum size limit, 1 fish per person recreational bag limit, a recreational daily vessel limit not to exceed 6 fish per vessel, a 33-inch fork length (or 37-inch total length) commercial minimum size limit, and a commercial possession limit of 2 cobia per person not to exceed 6 cobia per vessel.

There are four plan objectives:

- 1) Provide a flexible management system to address future changes in resource abundance, scientific information, and fishing patterns among user groups or areas.

- 2) Promote cooperative collection of biological, economic, and social data required to effectively monitor and assess the status of the cobia resource and evaluate management efforts.
- 3) Manage the cobia fishery to protect both young individuals and established breeding stock.
- 4) Develop research priorities that will further refine the cobia management program to maximize the biological, social, and economic benefits derived from the cobia population.

In February, 2020, the Board approved an annual total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for 2020-2022, based on results from the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 58 stock assessment for Atlantic cobia, allocated to the recreational and commercial sectors based on the Amendment 1 allocation of 92% recreational and 8% commercial. However, states with commercial harvest had an agreement to harvest a smaller portion of that amount in 2020. SEDAR 58 used updated recreational catch estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) 2018 transition and calibration to the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey effort estimates, which replaced those of the Coastal Household Telephone Survey.

Given the increased recreational catch estimates used in the SEDAR 58 assessment, the total annual quota approved by the Board also increased, resulting in increases to both the recreational and commercial quotas. As this increase in recreational harvest did not truly reflect a change in previous effort, only the estimate of that effort, [Addendum I to Amendment 1](#) was approved by the Board in October 2020 to reconsider the percent allocations to the commercial and recreational sectors to better reflect the observed harvest. The Addendum changed the allocation of the resource between the recreational and commercial fisheries from 92% and 8%, respectively, to 96% and 4%, respectively. The calculation of the commercial trigger, which determines when an in season coastwide commercial closure occurs, was also revised. The Addendum established a commercial *de minimis* set aside of 4% of the commercial quota with a maximum cap of 5,000 pounds to account for potential landings in *de minimis* states not tracked in-season against the quota. The Addendum also allowed states that are *de minimis* for their recreational fisheries to choose to match the recreational management measures implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if none are adjacent) or limit their recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or an equivalent total length of 37 inches). Based on maturity data from the SEDAR 58 assessment, this latter regulatory option was updated from 29 inches fork length to 33 inches fork length in Addendum I to allow a greater number of females to spawn before being susceptible to harvest. Addendum I measures were effective January 1, 2021.

In May 2022, the Board changed the cobia quota timeframe from 2020-2022 to 2021-2023, thereby, maintaining the total harvest quota of 80,112 fish for the 2023 fishing season. Per the Addendum I allocation of 96% for the recreational sector, the coastwide recreational harvest target for 2021-2023 fishing seasons is 76,908 fish and results in the following state-specific soft targets:

Georgia - 7,229 fish
South Carolina - 9,306 fish
North Carolina - 29,302 fish

Virginia - 30,302 fish
De minimis - 769 fish

Per the Addendum I allocation of 4% to the commercial sector, the commercial fishery has a coastwide commercial quota of 73,116 pounds (3,204 fish) annually for the 2021-2023 fishing seasons. The current management measures for the commercial fishery include a 33" FL minimum size limit and 2 fish limit per person, with a 6 fish maximum vessel limit. The commercial Atlantic cobia fishery will close once the commercial quota is projected to be reached.

The Board will meet in 2023 to consider setting new specifications for the 2024-2026 fishing seasons.

II. Status of the Stock

SEDAR 58

In 2020, the Board approved the SEDAR 58 Atlantic Cobia benchmark assessment for management use which continued to use the Beaufort Assessment Model (BAM), a forward-projecting statistical catch-at-age model used in the prior assessment, SEDAR 28 (SEDAR 2013). SEDAR 58 provided new reference points and determined that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring (Figures 1 and 2). This assessment had a terminal year of 2017, and used the recalibrated recreational catch data from MRIP, which yielded much higher biomass and spawning stock biomass estimates as compared to SEDAR 28 (Figure 3). Even with the large changes in biomass estimates, the trends of abundance, recruitment, and relative status were very similar between the two assessments. Stock structure also remained unchanged from the SEDAR 28 assessment which established the stock boundary between Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico cobia at the FL/GA border with the Atlantic stock extending northward to Rhode Island.

Updated Reference Points

The assessment proposed updated reference points of $F_{40\%}$ and 75% of $SSB_{F_{40\%}}$ as the threshold reference points (Figures 4 and 5). The reference points were selected as the fishing rate and SSB that allows the population to reach 40% of the maximum spawning potential the stock would have obtained in the absence of harvest. These reference points serve as proxies for maximum sustainable yield-derived relationships due to insufficient data for cobia.

Status of the Stock and Fishery

Spawning stock biomass showed little overall trend throughout the estimated time series, but the terminal year is the lowest in the time series. Age structure estimated by the base run indicated a slight decline in the number of younger fish in the last decade, but the rest of the age structure was above the expected values in 2017. The estimated fishing mortality rates have generally increased through the assessment time frame, peaking in 1996, with the recreational fleet as the largest contributor to total F ($F_{2015-2017}/F_{40\%} = 0.29$).

III. Status of the Fishery

Regulations, by state, for the 2022 fishing year are presented in Table 1. Total Atlantic cobia landings (commercial and recreational) are estimated at about 1.96 million pounds in 2022, which is a 27% decrease from 2021 (Figure 6, Tables 2 and 3). This decrease was driven by a decrease in recreational landings, while commercial landings slightly increased. The commercial and recreational fisheries harvested 3.8% and 96.2% of the 2022 total, respectively.

Commercial landings of Atlantic cobia in 2022 span from Rhode Island through South Carolina (Table 2). Coastwide commercial landings show an increasing trend since low harvests in the 1970s and early 1980s, but comprise a small portion of the total harvest due, in part, to the current 4% allocation of the total annual harvest quota (Figure 6); the commercial allocation was 8% in 2019 and 2020. Coastwide cobia commercial landings in 2022 were estimated at 75,418 pounds, which is a 13% increase from 2021 commercial landings. North Carolina (43%) and Virginia (51%) harvested the majority of the commercial landings (Table 2). The total non-*de minimis* commercial landings (VA, NC, SC) did reach the commercial trigger level for fishery closure, so the commercial fishery in state waters was closed from December 16 through December 31, 2022. The closure applied to all states in the management unit, including *de minimis* states. To ensure complementary management measures in federal waters, NOAA implemented the same closure in federal waters north of the Georgia-Florida border.

Recreational harvests have fluctuated widely throughout the time series, often through rapid increases and declines. Average recreational harvest for the time series is 1.1 million pounds (Figure 6, Table 3) and about 39,000 fish (Figure 7, Table 4). This fishery has grown noticeably over the time series, with average harvests over the last 10 years of 2.1 million pounds and about 74,000 fish. The 2022 recreational harvest was 1.9 million pounds (69,800 fish), which is a 28% decrease by weight from 2021 recreational landings.

Virginia (60% of pounds, 57% of fish) and North Carolina (16% of pounds, 18% of fish) harvested the majority of coastwide recreational landings by pounds and number of fish. South Carolina and Georgia each harvested about 7% by weight and 10% by number of fish of the coastwide total. Average weight (recreational harvest in pounds divided by recreational harvest in numbers) in 2022 was 27.0 pounds per fish—a decrease by an average 1.6 pounds per fish from 2021.

Per Addendum I, each state's recreational landings will be evaluated against state recreational harvest targets at the same time as the specification process, which will occur in 2023 when specifications are considered for 2024-2026.

Recreational releases of live fish have generally increased throughout the time series (Figure 7, Table 5). However, in 2022, 189,608 recreationally-caught fish were released, a 37% decrease from 2021. This aligns with the decrease in recreational landings in 2022. Over the last five years 2018-2022, an average 77% of cobia caught recreationally were released alive each year. This is higher than the average 65% released alive during the previous five-year period of 2013-2017.

IV. Status of Assessment Advice

Current stock status information comes from SEDAR 58 (SEDAR, 2020), which determined the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. Results of this assessment were approved for management use by the Board at their February 2020 meeting, and, as such, have been incorporated into ASMFC's FMP.

The stock assessment could be improved by developing a fishery-independent sampling program for abundance of cobia and other coastal migratory pelagic species. The currently used fishery-dependent index causes notable uncertainty in part due to the lack of an effective sampling methodology. In addition, while the terminal year of the assessment was 2017, due to federal water closures, the index could only be calculated through 2015. The assessment could also benefit from improved characterization of age, reproductive, genetic, and migratory characteristics, tag-based information on natural mortality, and more precise recreational catch estimates.

The next stock assessment for the Atlantic cobia stock is an update assessment scheduled for 2025. The terminal year would likely be 2023 or 2024 and the assessment would likely be available to inform 2026 or 2027 management.

V. Status of Research and Monitoring

There are no monitoring or research programs required annually of the states except for the submission of a compliance report. Fishery-dependent data collections (other than catch and effort data) are conducted in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Data collected includes length, age, and sex data. Fishery-independent monitoring programs conducted by states that may encounter cobia are conducted in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia.

VI. Status of Management Measures and Issues

Fishery Management Plan

No management changes were required or implemented in 2022. States maintained the same management measures as 2021. In 2021, some states implemented new recreational cobia measures based on Addendum I. As approved by the Board, Virginia and North Carolina changed their measures after evaluation of previous landings against their new Addendum I recreational harvest targets. Virginia's 2021 measures were designed to reduce recreational harvest by 42% by lowering the vessel limit from 3 fish to 2 fish, and shortening the season by 30 days (changed to June 15-September 15).

North Carolina liberalized their measures in 2021 based on their harvest target, and the vessel limit was increased for private anglers only to allow 2 cobia per vessel per day in June (previously only allowed in May).

Some *de minimis* states also adjusted their 2021 recreational measures based on the updated *de minimis* requirement in Addendum I. Maryland and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) adjusted their vessel limit and season to maintain consistency with Virginia's, the nearest non-*de minimis* state to them.

New Jersey, Delaware, and Rhode Island have implemented the standard *de minimis* measures (1 fish per vessel/minimum size of 37 inches total length/no seasonal restrictions) rather than using the nearest non-*de minimis* state regulations. Rhode Island's measures were effective January 1, 2022 after joining the Board and declaring an interest in the cobia fishery in 2021.

In 2020, the South Carolina legislature codified the federal regulations for Cobia into the South Carolina Code of Laws. Prior to this, Cobia regulations (outside of the SCMZ) were covered by legal adherence to federal regulations for any species that did not have specific regulations in South Carolina law.

De Minimis

For the recreational sector, the FMP requires adherence to state harvest targets, allocated to non-*de minimis* states from the total harvest quota allocated to the recreational sector. One percent of the quota is designated to account for harvest in *de minimis* states.

The FMP allows states to request recreational *de minimis* status if their recreational landings in two of the previous three years are less than 1% of annual coastwide recreational landings during that time period. If a state qualifies for *de minimis*, the state may choose to match all FMP-related recreational management measures (including seasons and vessel limits) implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if none are adjacent) or the state may choose to limit its recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or 37 inches total length) with no seasonal restrictions. Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Florida requested recreational *de minimis* status through the annual reporting process. All of these states except Maryland meet the recreational *de minimis* qualifications.

Maryland in their compliance report acknowledged their recreational harvest was over the 1% recreational *de minimis* threshold in 2020 (1.8% in numbers of fish) and 2021 (5.6% in numbers of fish), but had 0 landings in 2022. Given variability in landings year to year and that 2020 landings were close to the 1% threshold, Maryland is requesting to continue under recreational *de minimis* status for another year until 2023 recreational harvest can be evaluated.

De minimis status for commercial fisheries may be granted to states if their commercial landings for 2 of the previous 3 years were less than 2% of the coastwide commercial landings for the same time period. Commercial regulations in *de minimis* states are also limited to a minimum size of 33 inches FL with 2 fish per person for a total of 6 fish per vessel (the same requirements as non-*de minimis* states). Commercial *de minimis* states are not required to monitor their in-season harvests. Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida requested *de minimis* status for commercial fisheries through the annual reporting process. All of these states meet the commercial *de minimis* qualifications.

VII. Implementation of FMP Compliance Requirements for 2022

The PRT finds no inconsistencies among states in regards to the Fishery Management Plan.

VIII. Recommendations of the Plan Review Team

Management

The PRT recommends that the Board approve the 2023 FMP Review, state compliance, and all *de minimis* requests from Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and Florida.

The PRT agrees with the rationale provided by Maryland for their recreational fishery to continue under *de minimis* status until 2023 harvest can be evaluated next year.

The PRT emphasizes that multiple states could exceed *de minimis* thresholds over the next few years if cobia landings continue to increase in Mid-Atlantic states due to cobia potentially becoming more available in those areas. For example, New Jersey comprised 1% of recreational landings in 2022, which is the *de minimis* threshold, after landing 0% or less than 1% in previous years. New York, which has not declared an interest in Atlantic cobia to date, comprised 5% of recreational landings (numbers of fish) in 2022, after landing 0 fish in previous years. The PRT notes the management implications of this, including requiring commercial in-season monitoring in more states and adding new states to the calculation of state-specific recreational harvest targets. The PRT also notes the current allocation of recreational quota to each state is based on landings data through only 2015, which may need to be updated to reflect more recent years.

As the Board considers the next stock assessment and future specifications, the PRT recommends the Board discuss whether updates to the state-by-state recreational harvest allocations are warranted.

Finally, the PRT noted New York's recent cobia commercial landings, which were 6.9% of coastwide commercial landings in 2020, 2.6% in 2021, and 2.0% in 2022. Considering these landings, the PRT recommends New York declare an interest in Atlantic cobia. The PRT notes that New York's current commercial regulations of a 37" TL minimum size and 2 fish per vessel limit already meet (and are more restrictive than) FMP requirements for the commercial fishery. The PRT notes that in-season monitoring of New York's cobia landings may need to be implemented in the following years if New York declares an interest in the species and does not have *de minimis* status.

Research

The following are important research recommendations from the PRT:

Define, develop, and monitor adult and juvenile abundance estimates through the expansion of current or development of new fishery independent surveys. This recommendation is especially relevant as it is uncertain that the current abundance index will be able to be updated for the upcoming Atlantic cobia stock assessment scheduled to be completed in fall of 2025.

Continue to collect and analyze current life history data from fishery independent and dependent programs, including full size, age, maturity, histology workups and information on spawning season timing and duration. Increase spatial and temporal coverage of age samples collected regularly in fishery dependent and independent sources. Continue collection of genetic material to continue to assess the stock identification and any Distinct Population Segments that may exist within the management unit relative to recommendations made by the SEDAR 58 Stock ID Process. Expand existing fishery independent surveys in time and space to better define and cover cobia habitats, including conducting otolith microchemistry studies to identify regional recruitment contributions and new and ongoing satellite tagging programs to help identify spawning and juvenile habitat use and regional recruitment sources. Additional work to better understand the impacts of climate change on cobia habitat and range expansion.

Additional research recommendations can be found in Section 2.8 of the [SEDAR 58 stock assessment](#).

IX. References

ASMFC. 2017. Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Migratory Group Cobia. ASMFC, Arlington, VA. 85 p.

SAFMC. 2018. Amendment 31 to the Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagics Resources in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Region. NOAA Award # FNA10NMF441001. Charleston, SC. 209 pp.

SEDAR. 2013. SEDAR 28 – South Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 420 pp. available online at:
http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/Sedar_Workshops.jsp?WorkshopNum=28

SEDAR. 2020. SEDAR 58 – Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 500 pp. available online at: <http://sedarweb.org/sedar-58>

X. Figures

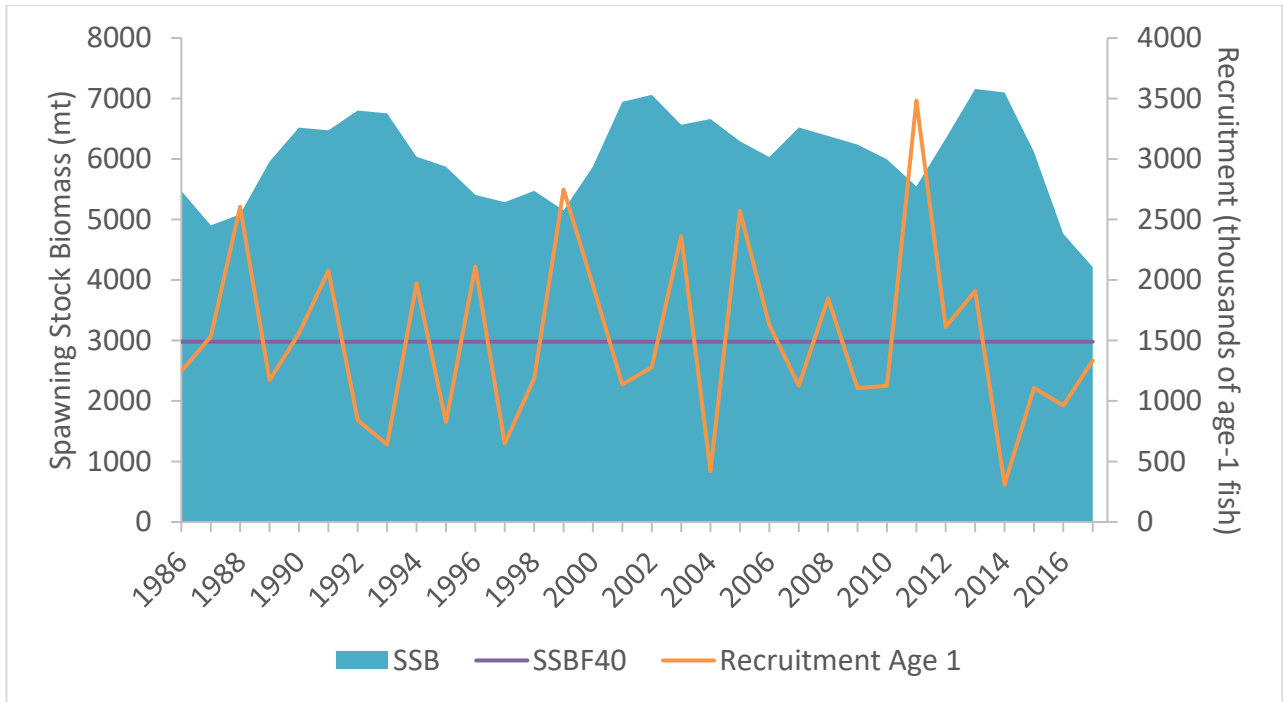


Figure 1. Atlantic Cobia spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment of year 1 fish. (SEDAR, 2020)

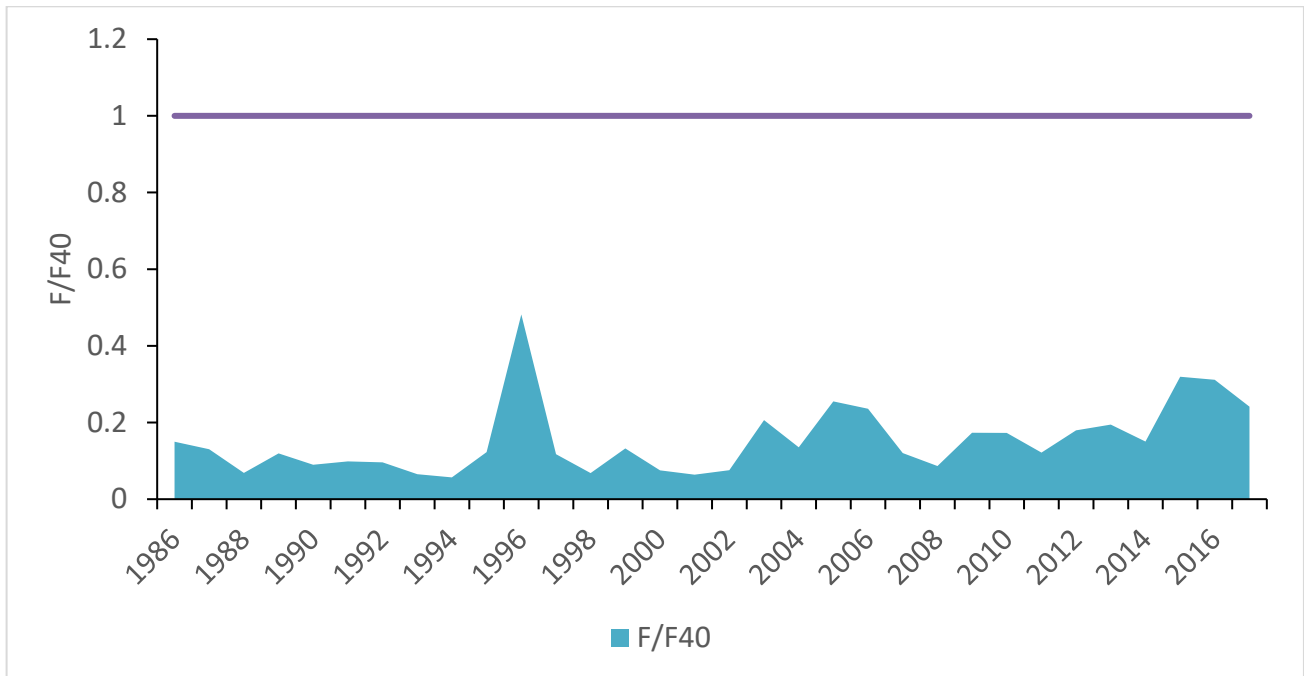


Figure 2. Atlantic Cobia fishing mortality (F) relative to the F40 reference point from 1986-2017. (SEDAR, 2020)

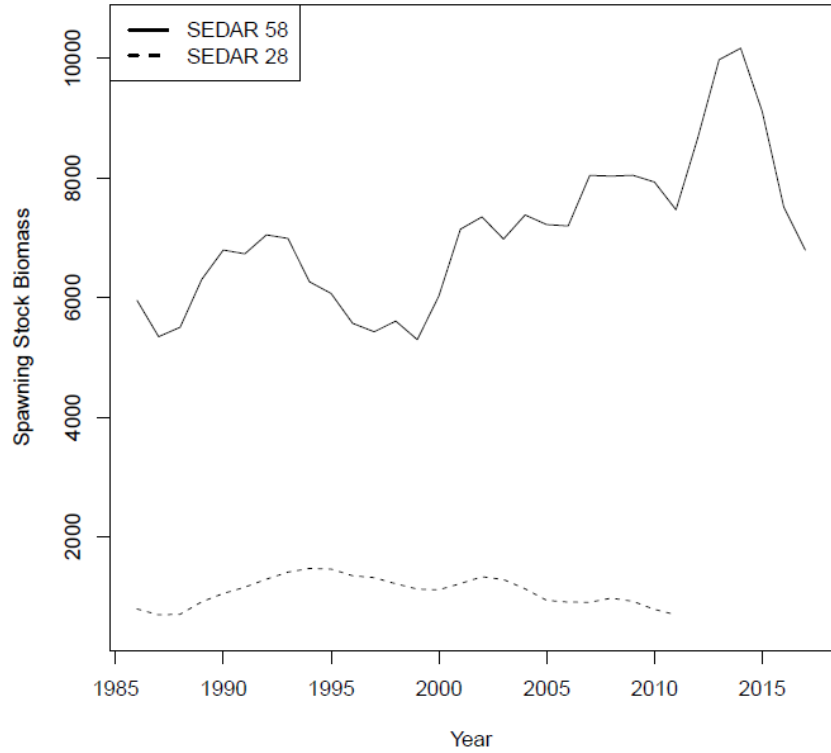


Figure 3. Comparing spawning stock biomass from the current assessment (SEDAR 58) to the last assessment (SEDAR 28). (SEDAR, 2020)

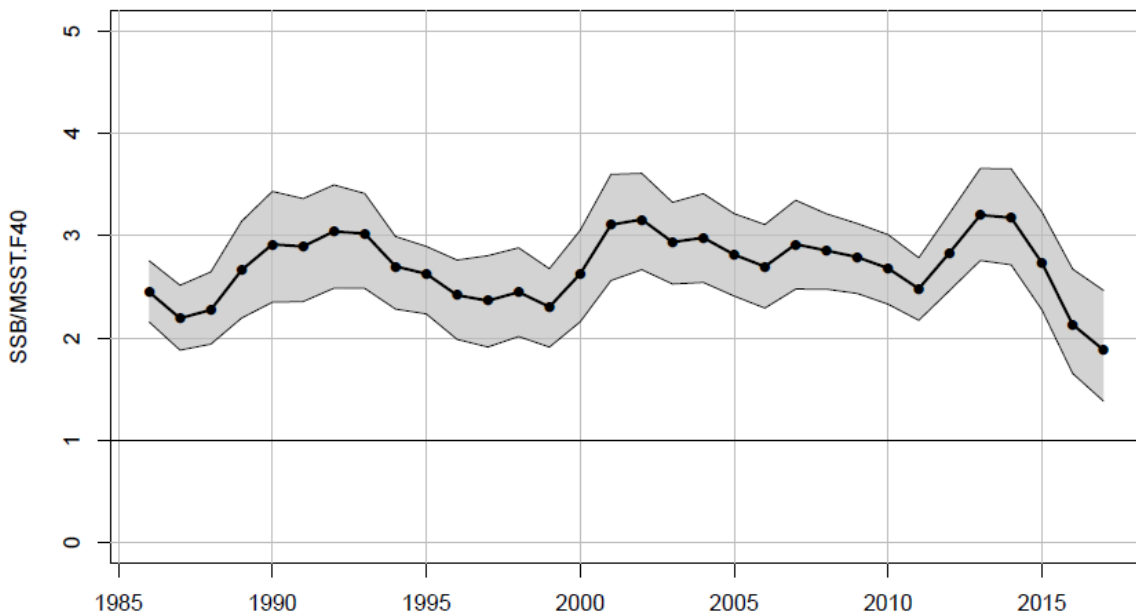


Figure 4. Estimated time series of Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) relative to the Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST) (SEDAR, 2020).

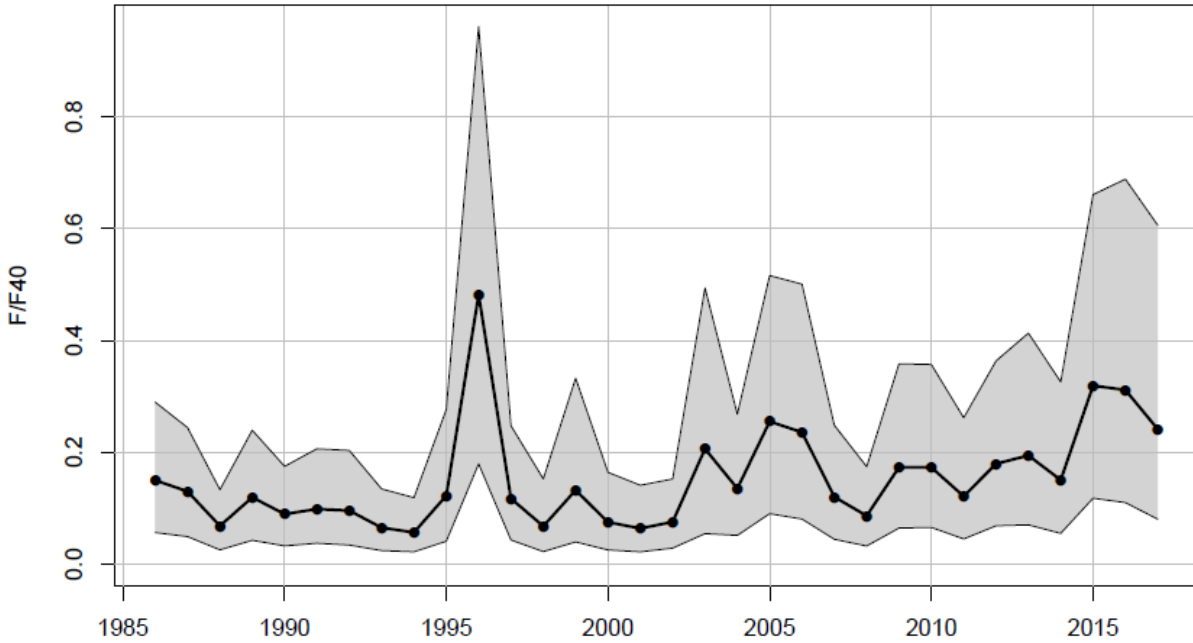


Figure 5. Estimated time series of Fishing Mortality (F) relative to F at Maximum Sustainable Yield (F_{40%}) (SEDAR, 2020).

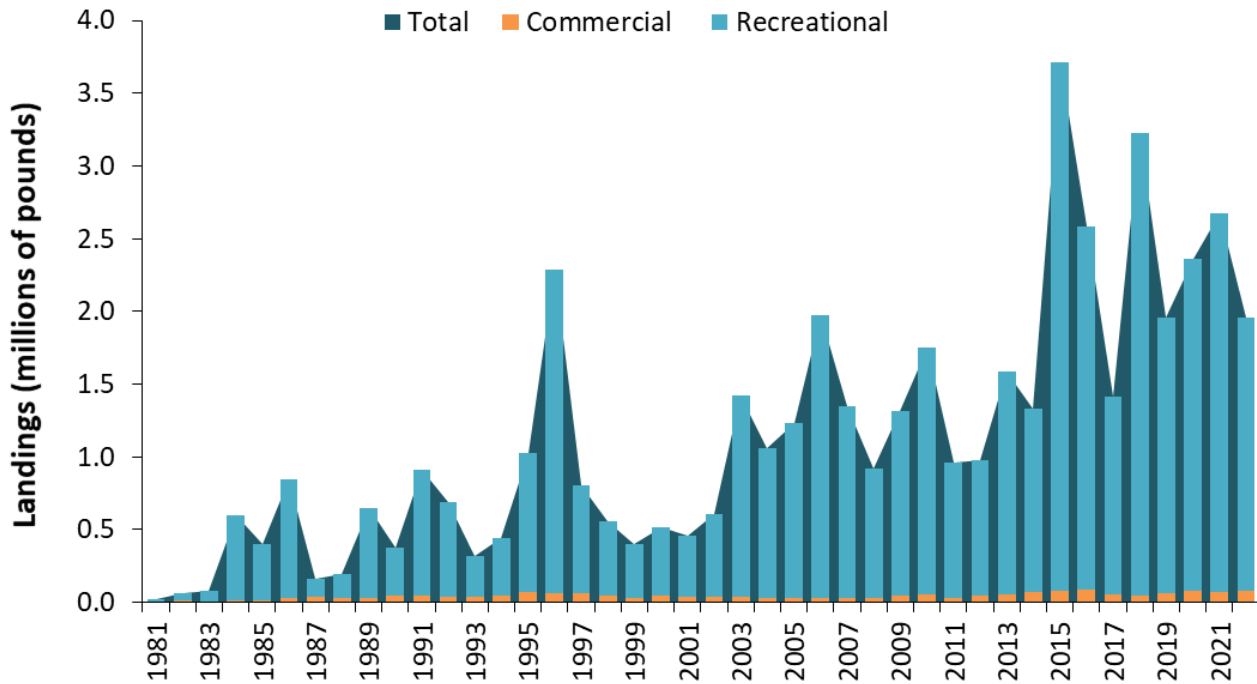


Figure 6. Commercial and recreational landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia. Recreational data not available prior to 1981. See Tables 2 and 3 for data sources and values from the last ten years.

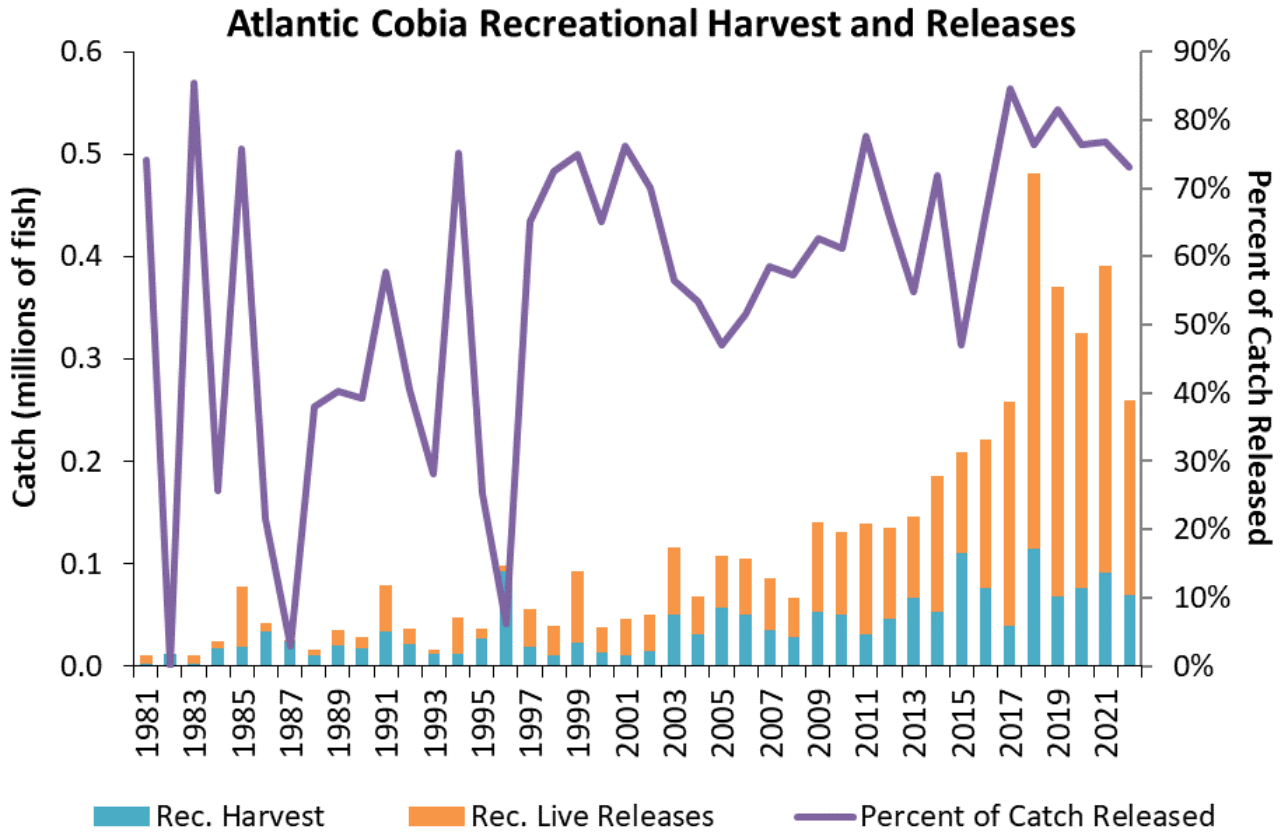


Figure 7. Recreational catch (harvest and live releases) of Atlantic cobia (numbers) and the proportion of catch that is released. See Tables 4 and 5 for data sources and values from the last ten years.

XI. Tables

Table 1. Atlantic cobia regulations for 2022.

| State | Recreational Measures | Commercial Measures |
|-------|--|---|
| RI | <i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round | <u>Coastwide</u> Possession Limit: 2 fish per person Minimum Size: 33 in fork length or 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 6 fish If commercial fishing in state waters is closed, commercial fishing in federal waters will be recommended to mirror state closures <u>Deviations</u> -Rhode Island possession limit is 2 fish per vessel -Virginia possession limit is per licensee rather than per person -North Carolina has 36 minimum fork length -No commercial harvest in South Carolina state waters -Georgia possession limit is 1 fish per person (not to exceed 6 per vessel) and minimum size is 36 in fork length |
| NJ | <i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel Season: year-round | |
| DE | <i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 37 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per vessel Vessel Limit: 1 fish per vessel | |
| MD | <i>De minimis</i> Minimum Size: 40 in total length Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15 | |
| PRFC | Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50" per vessel) Bag limit: 1 per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15 | |
| VA | Minimum Size: 40 in total length (only 1 fish over 50" per vessel) Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 2 fish per vessel Season: June 15-September 15 | |
| NC | Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Season: May 1-December 31 <u>Private Vessel Limit</u> May 1- June 30: 2 fish July 1-Dec 31: 1 fish <u>For-Hire Vessel Limit</u> May 1-Dec 31: 4 fish | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| SC | <p>Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Vessel Limit: 6 fish Season: Open year-round</p> <p><u>Southern Cobia Management Zone:</u> Minimum Size: 36 in FL Season: June 1-April 30 (closed in May) Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Vessel Limit: 3 fish</p> <p>-If recreational fishing in federal waters is closed, recreational fishing in all SC state waters is also closed.</p> | |
| GA | <p>Bag Limit: 1 fish per person Minimum Size: 36 in fork length Vessel Limit: 6 fish Season: March 1-October 31</p> | |
| <p>*Florida has a declared interest in the Atlantic Coastal Migratory Group, but their cobia fisheries are managed as part of the Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group due to cobia stock boundaries.</p> | | |

Table 2. Commercial landings (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2013-2022. (Sources: 2023 state compliance reports for 2022 fishing year; for years prior to 2022, personal communication with Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program [ACCSP], Arlington, VA)

| Year | RI | CT* | NY* | NJ | DE | MD | PRFC | VA | NC | SC | GA | Total |
|------|-----|-----|-------|-------|----|----|-------|--------|--------|-------|----|--------|
| 2013 | 476 | | 840 | 885 | C | C | | 10,900 | 35,456 | 3,829 | C | 53,177 |
| 2014 | C | | 311 | 359 | | C | | 21,255 | 41,798 | 3,492 | C | 68,076 |
| 2015 | C | | 235 | C | | C | | 25,352 | 52,684 | 2,487 | C | 82,117 |
| 2016 | 183 | | 114 | 282 | C | C | | 29,459 | 48,244 | 4,064 | C | 83,583 |
| 2017 | 115 | | 80 | C | C | C | | 26,748 | 16,890 | 4,261 | C | 52,376 |
| 2018 | 290 | C | 388 | 707 | | C | | 21,355 | 16,578 | 2,723 | C | 42,711 |
| 2019 | 352 | | 1,191 | C | C | C | 2,375 | 33,496 | 21,553 | 2,673 | C | 63,467 |
| 2020 | 844 | C | 5,183 | 851 | C | C | 378 | 27,768 | 38,344 | 1,588 | C | 75,303 |
| 2021 | 797 | C | 1,581 | 2,273 | | C | 816 | 29,425 | 29,301 | 2,067 | C | 66,752 |
| 2022 | 83 | | 1,509 | C | | C | 147 | 38,666 | 32,686 | 1,386 | | 75,418 |

C: confidential landings.

*CT and NY do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 3. Recreational harvest (pounds) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2013-2022. Values shown are the new MRIP numbers. (Sources: 2023 state compliance reports for 2022 fishing year; for years prior to 2022, personal communication with MRIP queried June 2023)

| Year | RI | CT* | NY* | NJ | DE | MD | VA | NC | SC | GA | Total |
|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| 2013 | | | | | | | 488,181 | 980,541 | 24,005 | 43,915 | 1,536,642 |
| 2014 | | | | | | | 499,218 | 645,427 | 79,171 | 42,481 | 1,266,297 |
| 2015 | | | | | | | 1,166,000 | 1,925,762 | 434,899 | 102,917 | 3,629,578 |
| 2016 | | | | | | 307 | 1,505,528 | 838,363 | 159,345 | | 2,503,543 |
| 2017 | | | | | | | 488,287 | 872,861 | | 390 | 1,361,538 |
| 2018 | | 4,136 | | | 15,053 | 4,647 | 2,259,661 | 685,962 | 205,647 | 6,081 | 3,181,187 |
| 2019 | | | | | | | 1,573,485 | 254,963 | 64,937 | 1,632 | 1,895,017 |
| 2020 | | 1,595 | | | | 38,991 | 1,541,393 | 407,883 | 247,250 | 44,976 | 2,282,088 |
| 2021 | | | | 6,060 | | 131,129 | 1,722,619 | 356,340 | 217,129 | 170,356 | 2,603,633 |
| 2022 | | | 144,715 | 20,970 | | | 1,129,258 | 306,411 | 139,599 | 142,606 | 1,883,559 |

*CT and NY do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 4. Recreational harvest (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2013-2022. Values shown are the new MRIP numbers. (Sources: 2023 state compliance reports for 2022 fishing year; for years prior to 2022, personal communication with MRIP queried June 2023)

| Year | RI | CT* | NY* | NJ | DE | MD | VA | NC | SC | GA | Total |
|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| 2013 | | | | | | | 24,145 | 37,617 | 1,580 | 2,638 | 65,980 |
| 2014 | | | | | | | 21,585 | 24,601 | 3,883 | 2,168 | 52,237 |
| 2015 | | | | | | | 38,672 | 47,110 | 15,575 | 8,934 | 110,291 |
| 2016 | | | | | | 56 | 43,780 | 26,421 | 5,437 | | 75,694 |
| 2017 | | | | | | | 14,613 | 25,025 | | 19 | 39,657 |
| 2018 | | 569 | | | 581 | 206 | 80,679 | 25,331 | 6,340 | 233 | 113,939 |
| 2019 | | | | | | | 55,770 | 10,090 | 2,381 | 72 | 68,313 |
| 2020 | | 219 | | | | 1,360 | 50,287 | 15,067 | 7,650 | 2,203 | 76,786 |
| 2021 | | | | 250 | | 5,084 | 57,135 | 10,970 | 8,858 | 8,510 | 90,807 |
| 2022 | | | 3,462 | 711 | | | 39,668 | 12,330 | 6,988 | 6,641 | 69,800 |

*CT and NY do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.

Table 5. Recreational live releases (numbers of fish) of Atlantic cobia by state, 2013-2022.
Values shown are the new MRIP numbers. (Sources: 2023 state compliance reports for 2022 fishing year; for years prior to 2022, personal communication with MRIP queried June 2023)

| Year | RI | CT* | NY* | NJ | DE | MD | VA | NC | SC | GA | Total |
|------|----|-----|-------|--------|-----|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|---------|
| 2013 | | | | | | | 35,731 | 35,398 | 7,438 | 1,577 | 80,144 |
| 2014 | | | | | | | 58,092 | 32,184 | 42,811 | | 133,087 |
| 2015 | | | | 416 | | | 40,689 | 44,254 | 12,369 | 283 | 98,011 |
| 2016 | | | | | | 1,075 | 81,482 | 39,237 | 20,255 | 2,917 | 144,966 |
| 2017 | | | | | | | 77,184 | 125,251 | 11,359 | 4,830 | 218,624 |
| 2018 | | | | 2,879 | | 12,090 | 194,865 | 68,219 | 71,020 | 18,056 | 367,129 |
| 2019 | | | | 10,166 | 30 | 251 | 184,716 | 38,285 | 59,724 | 9,080 | 302,252 |
| 2020 | | | 2,979 | | 564 | 8,233 | 146,913 | 51,158 | 23,384 | 15,091 | 245,343 |
| 2021 | | | | | 197 | 12,344 | 187,872 | 40,136 | 39,341 | 20,578 | 300,468 |
| 2022 | | | 722 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 84,150 | 46,777 | 43,131 | 14,828 | 189,608 |

*CT and NY do not have a declared interest in Atlantic migratory cobia.



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Coastal Pelagics Management Board

FROM: Cobia Technical Committee

DATE: July 24, 2023

SUBJECT: Recommendation for 2024-2026 Total Harvest Quota for Atlantic Cobia and July 2023 Technical Committee Report

The Cobia Technical Committee (TC) met via webinar on March 29 and July 17, 2023 to discuss the 2024-2026 total harvest quota, the 2025 stock assessment, and future technical considerations for cobia, specifically trends in state-by-state landings and fisheries.

TC Members in Attendance: Angela Giuliano (Chair, MD), Nichole Ares (RI), Brian Neilan (NJ), Somers Smott (VA), Lee Paramore (NC), Justin Yost (SC), Chris Kalinowsky (GA), Michael Larkin (NOAA)

ASMFC Staff: Emilie Franke, Chelsea Tuohy, Toni Kerns, Pat Campfield

Others in Attendance: Erik Williams (NOAA SEFSC), Shanna Madsen (VA, Board Proxy), Chris Batsavage (NC, Board Proxy), Josh McGilly (VA), Ingrid Braun (PRFC), Will Poston

Current 2021-2023 Total Harvest Quota

The current total harvest quota for Atlantic cobia is 80,112 fish, which results in a coastwide recreational quota of 76,908 fish and a commercial quota of 73,116 pounds (3,204 fish)¹. This total quota level was first approved in February 2020 for the 2020-2022 fishing seasons² following the Atlantic cobia benchmark stock assessment. In May 2022, based on a recommendation from the TC, the Board changed the cobia quota timeframe to 2021-2023, thereby, maintaining the harvest quota of 80,112 fish for the 2023 fishing season³. This change to the quota timeframe aligned with the timing of new recreational measures implemented by some states in 2021 following the change in quota allocation per Addendum I to Amendment 1 of the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic Cobia. The TC noted that maintaining this quota level in 2023 carried a low risk considering the low projected probability of the stock being overfished (0.25), and considering average realized harvest in recent years was below the harvest projections associated with this quota level.

¹ For the commercial portion of the quota, the average annual coastwide commercial average weight from 2015-17 (22.8 pounds) was used to convert the commercial quota from numbers to pounds.

² January 2020 TC Quota Recommendations and Projections:

http://www.asmfc.org/uploads/file/64945ad3Jan2020CobiaTC_Memo_HarvestQuotaOptions.pdf

³ April 2022 TC Quota Timeframe Recommendation:

http://www.asmfc.org/uploads/file/63ee42c4CobiaTC_Report_Apr22.pdf

TC Recommendation on 2024-2026 Total Harvest Quota

Per Amendment 1 to the Interstate FMP for Atlantic Cobia, the Board may specify a new coastwide total harvest quota for up to three years after expiration of previously specified measures, or following a completed stock assessment. Since the current total harvest quota specification expires in 2023, the Board may specify a new total harvest quota for 2024 through 2026.

The TC considered available data to inform the 2024-2026 total harvest quota. The 2020-2023 total harvest quota was informed by the 2020 stock assessment (SEDAR 58) and by additional projections provided by the NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) immediately following the 2020 assessment, which included a range of constant harvest and constant fishing mortality scenarios through 2024. In Spring 2023, the TC requested an updated set of projections from the SEFSC to inform the 2024-2026 total harvest quota. The TC requested that 2019-2022 realized harvest data be incorporated in the projections, and requested the projections be extended through 2026, if feasible.

The SEFSC indicated that new projections are not scientifically justified for two reasons. First, the nine-year forecast from the assessment terminal year of 2017 through 2026 is well beyond the current recommendation to limit analysis to five years. Second, the SEFSC noted that a large portion of cobia removals are now outside the South Atlantic, which is inconsistent with the projection model. The SEFSC recommends the Board extend current quotas since observed harvest in recent years was similar to the level used in previous projections, and the current projection model predicted relatively flat catch and abundance trends through the end of 2024, the last year of the previous projections. Given current harvest levels and the lack of trend in the previous projections, any new projections would likely produce similar advice.

The TC considered this response from the SEFSC and reviewed realized harvest data in comparison to the previous projections (Table 1). The current total harvest quota of 80,112 fish was based on projections of 2.4 million pounds constant annual harvest for 2019-forward. From 2019-2022, realized harvest only exceeded that level in one year (2.7 million pounds in 2021), and the average realized harvest from 2019-2022 was 2.2 million pounds, which is less than the projected level.

Considering these realized harvest data, the lack of new information, and that the current total harvest quota was conservative with a low projected probability of being overfished (0.25), the TC recommends the Board set the 2024-2026 Atlantic cobia harvest quota at the status quo level of 80,112 fish. This results in a coastwide recreational quota of 76,908 fish and commercial quota of 73,116 pounds.

The TC noted that the upcoming 2025 stock assessment should inform future total harvest quota levels. The assessment will be available to inform 2026 or 2027 quota levels, depending on the stock assessment completion date.

2025 Stock Assessment for Atlantic Cobia

The TC discussed initial planning and anticipated challenges for the scheduled 2025 stock assessment for Atlantic cobia. The assessment will be a collaborative effort between the SEFSC and the ASMFC Cobia Stock Assessment Subcommittee (to be formed). Although the 2025 assessment is scheduled as an update, the assessment model approach and methodology will likely need to be updated to address data challenges (e.g., lack of an abundance index) and changes in the distribution of cobia landings.

As a first step, Cobia TC members will compile information on available state datasets in late 2023-early 2024 to start preparing for the assessment. State datasets include state carcass collection programs (VA, NC, SC), which are used for length and age data in the assessment, SC charter boat logbook data, VA recreational reporting program data, and available tagging data.

The anticipated stock assessment completion date is approximately October 2025. The stock assessment schedule is subject to change and will be discussed in more detail in the coming months. If the assessment is completed early enough in 2025, the results could be used to inform the 2026 total harvest quota specification.

Future Technical Considerations for Atlantic Cobia: Trends in State Landings and Fisheries

The TC has previously noted the importance of monitoring year-to-year variability in state landings. In March 2023, there was initial TC discussion about the potential need to consider updating the state-specific recreational allocations since those allocations are based on dated data (50% based on harvest data from 2006-2015 and 50% based on harvest data from 2011-2015). In July 2023, the TC continued this discussion and noted that before any management action is taken, a closer look at state landings and fishery trends is warranted. State-by-state landings over time could be more closely examined, including for *de minimis* states, to characterize fishery trends. TC members noted that although cobia landings have increased in some Mid-Atlantic states, especially since 2018, landings continue to be relatively stable in southern states, which indicates a possible range expansion vs. a stock shift. Additional data and information (e.g., harvested fish size, fishery timing, tagging data) could be used to help characterize state-by-state trends.

The TC recommends examining state-by-state landings and fishery trends more in-depth to characterize changes over time. This could inform future management discussions at the Board level (e.g., recreational harvest allocations).

Table 1. Projected Harvest for the Current Quota vs. Realized Total Harvest

| Year | Projected Harvest for Current Quota (lbs) | Realized Total Harvest (lbs) |
|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 2019 | 2,410,848 | 1,958,484 |
| 2020 | 2,410,848 | 2,357,391 |
| 2021 | 2,410,848 | 2,670,132 |
| 2022 | 2,410,848 | 1,958,977 |