



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

1050 N. Highland Street • Suite 200A-N • Arlington, VA 22201
703.842.0740 • 703.842.0741 (fax) • www.asmfc.org

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