



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Sciaenids Management Board
FROM: Black Drum Technical Committee
DATE: October 15, 2024
SUBJECT: 2024 Black Drum Data Update

Background

The 2023 Black Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment determined the Atlantic coast stock was not overfished nor experiencing overfishing in the terminal year of the assessment (2020). However, the assessment acknowledged lack of contrast in black drum data sets coupled with high uncertainty in model-based estimates. To this end, the Black Drum Technical Committee (TC) recommended close monitoring of empirical stock indicators annually between stock assessments to identify any concerning trends in a timely manner. The next black drum stock assessment is tentatively scheduled for 2027. Should any concerning trends occur, the TC may recommend an expedited assessment.

Indicators developed during the stock assessment include abundance (young-of-year, age 0-1, subadult, and exploitable abundance), range expansion, recreational live releases and harvest, and commercial landings. Additional details on these indicators are available in Section 6 of the [2023 stock assessment report](#). At the conclusion of the assessment, indicators overall did not appear negative.

The first data update was completed and presented to the Sciaenids Board (Board) at their October 2023 meeting. The update showed mixed signs of stability and declines since the assessment, but the TC did not believe there was cause for concern and recommended no change to the current black drum stock assessment schedule. During the meeting, the Board requested the TC consider the frequency of data updates given the long lifespan of the species and make any recommended changes during the next data update.

This memo provides results and recommendations from the second data update since the assessment with data through 2023.

Results

Overall, indicators showed similar conditions to the terminal year of the assessment, with signs of increases in 2023 in the South Atlantic.

- Mid-Atlantic abundance indicators (all YOY) have varied around their time series means during the three update years (Figure 1).

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- South Atlantic abundance indicators were all below their time series means, but two indicators showed consistent increases from lows in 2021 to levels above the terminal year of the assessment (Figure 2).
- The MRIP CPUE (exploitable abundance indicator) increased above the time series mean in 2023 and just below levels in the terminal year of the assessment after the previous two update years were below the mean (Figure 3).
- The range expansion indicator was not available for 2021 and remained below the time series mean in 2023 at levels similar to 2022 (Figure 4).
- Recreational live releases varied around the time series mean in the Mid-Atlantic, and in 2023 were slightly below the time series mean and the level in the terminal year of the assessment. Recreational live releases in the South Atlantic remained above the time series mean during update years and increased for the first time in five years during 2023 to levels above that in the terminal year of the assessment (Figure 5).
- Recreational harvest has varied slightly during update years within regions, with all update years below the time series mean and levels during the terminal year of the assessment in the Mid-Atlantic and all update years above the time series mean and levels during the terminal year of the assessment in the South Atlantic (Figure 6).
- Commercial landings have shown a similar pattern to the recreational harvest with all update years below the time series mean in the Mid-Atlantic and above the time series mean in the South Atlantic (Figure 7). South Atlantic commercial harvest in 2023 increased markedly and was the highest since 2008.

Recommendations

The TC met on October 2, 2024 to discuss the data update to the indicators and make recommendations to the Board for their October 2024 meeting. The TC agreed that, generally, there were no concerning trends in the indicators relative to coastwide stock status at this time, as the 2023 data continued to fall within their respective historical ranges. The TC did note increases in black drum recreational and commercial landings in the south, which could indicate higher availability of fish, that fishing pressure is increasing, or both, and that some of these increases may be driven by more localized (e.g., state-specific) changes that could cause concern at these localized levels. An example was provided for North Carolina where increased regulations for other species (i.e., southern flounder) may be leading to increased fishing pressure on black drum. The TC recognizes this will be important to follow in future years.

Following the Board's direction to the TC at their October 2023 meeting, the TC next discussed the appropriate timeline for future updates to the indicators. When considering how frequently the indicators should be updated, the TC also considered the timing of future stock assessment update and benchmark stock assessments. **The TC recommends scheduling the next data update to the indicators in 2026, and moving the scheduled black drum stock assessment from 2027 to 2028.** At that time, based on the results of the stock assessment, the TC will discuss the future schedule of data updates to the indicators.

The following points were discussed by the TC, as a part of making this recommendation:

- TC members agreed the indicators do not need to be updated annually at this time, especially as the TC decided at their October 2023 call that there would need to be several years of decline to cause concern. As a result, the TC discussed moving the next data update to 2026. However, it was noted that the TC would also be gathering data for the tentatively scheduled 2027 assessment at that time. The TC felt it was unnecessary to update the indicators if an assessment is scheduled to be complete the following year. It would be more appropriate to schedule an indicator update in between assessments, unless concerning trends suggested otherwise.
- It was noted by several TC members that there will likely not be a lot of new information on black drum or new stock assessment methodologies to consider for a stock assessment in 2027. In fact, it was noted that Delaware age data collections have actually been reduced due to decreased demand for black drum. Black drum is not a high priority species for ASMFC member states, and so a majority of the research recommendations from the 2023 benchmark stock assessment will not be addressed before the tentatively scheduled stock assessment in 2027.
- The TC also discussed the possibility of delaying the assessment further, due to the aforementioned lack of new information. Several TC members opposed any delays beyond one or two years due to the issues that can arise with the stock when it is not closely examined in a full stock assessment regularly (i.e., lack of updated stock status estimates).
- Updates to Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data are expected to be released in 2026. Since black drum is primarily a recreational species, it will be important to incorporate these updated MRIP data into the next black drum stock assessment. There is always the potential for a delay in the release of results by MRIP staff, so shifting the stock assessment to 2028 will ensure the updated MRIP data will be available for use in the assessment.

Figures

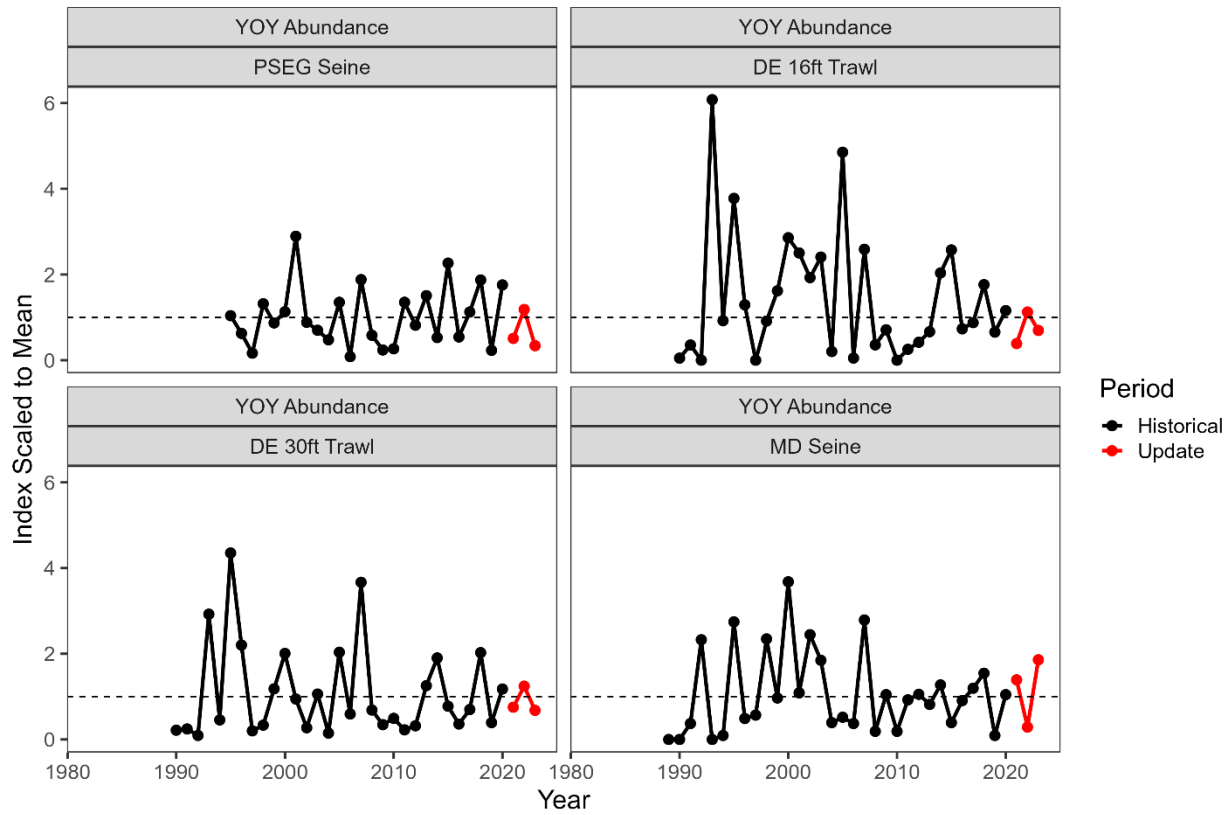


Figure 1. Mid-Atlantic abundance indicators. The dashed line is the time series mean.

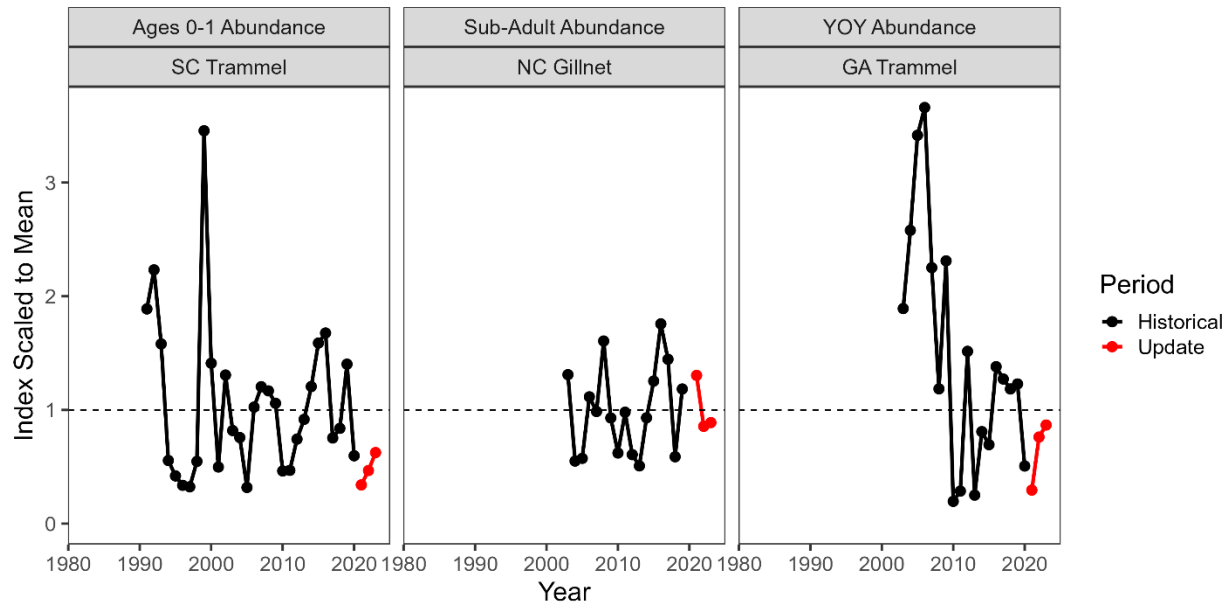


Figure 2. South Atlantic abundance indicators. The dashed line is the time series mean.

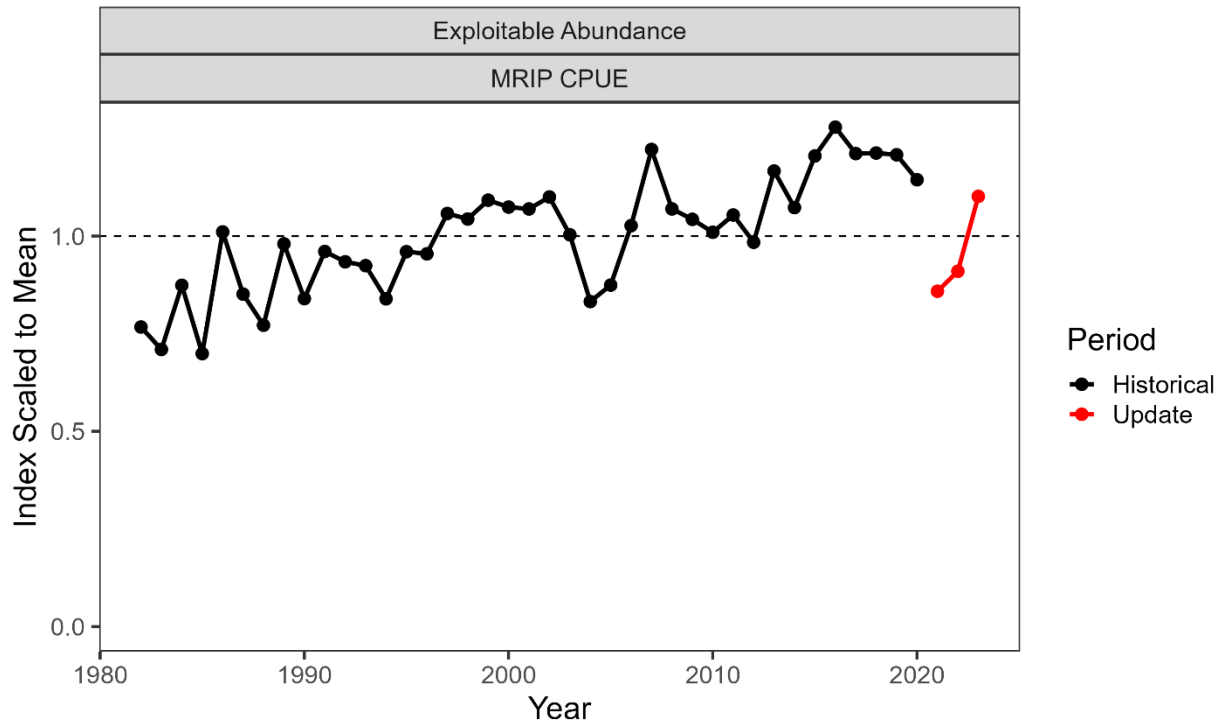


Figure 3. Coastwide abundance indicator. The dashed line is the time series mean.

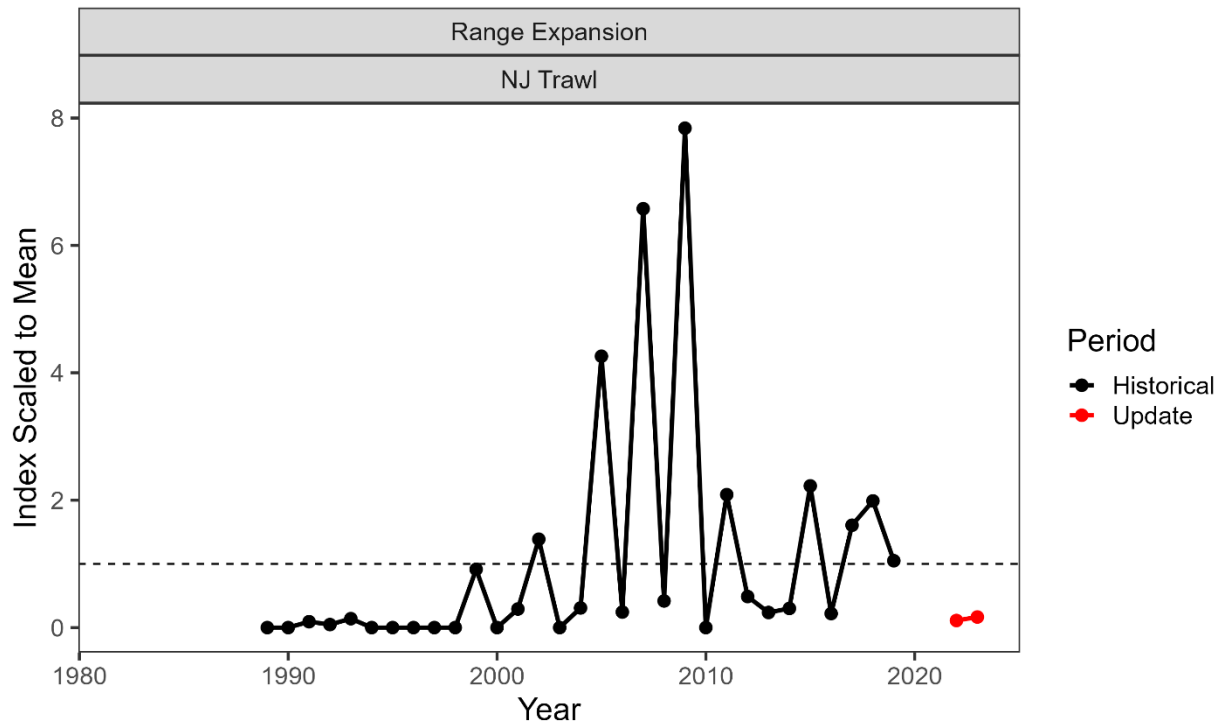


Figure 4. Range expansion indicator. The dashed line is the time series mean.

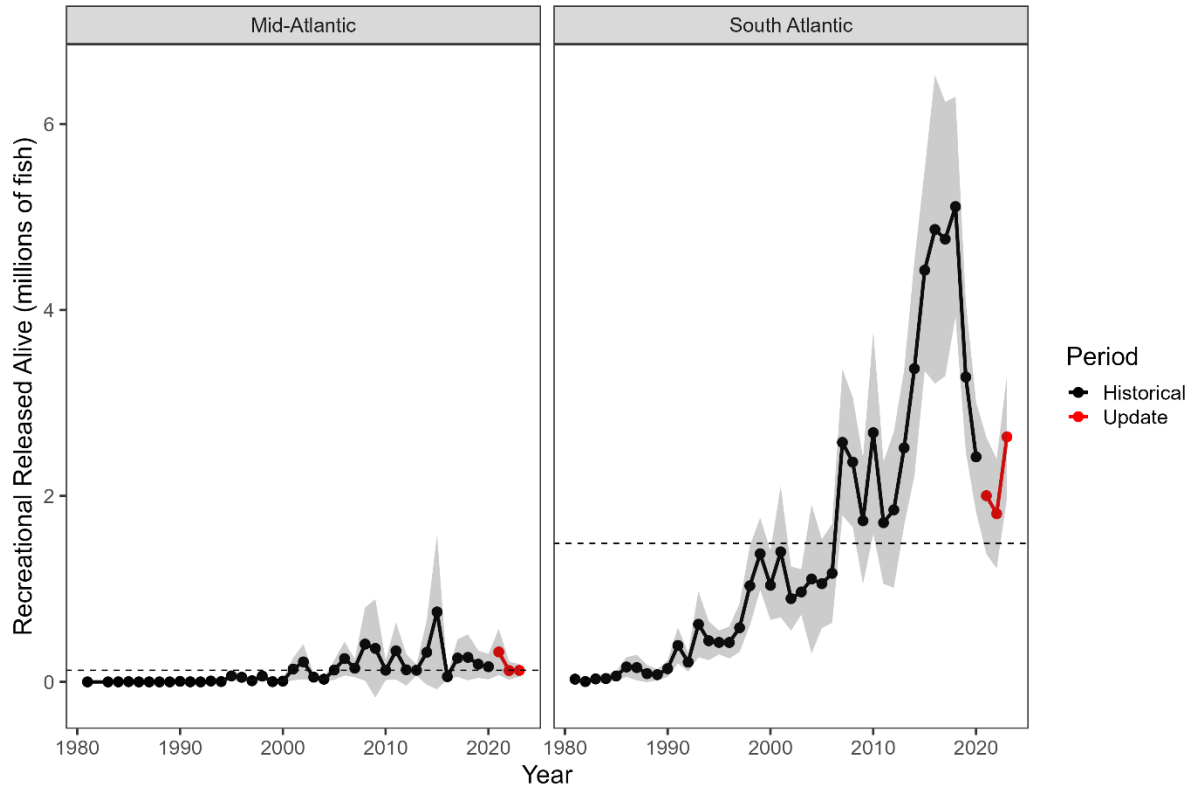


Figure 5. Recreational live release indicators. The dashed line is the time series mean.

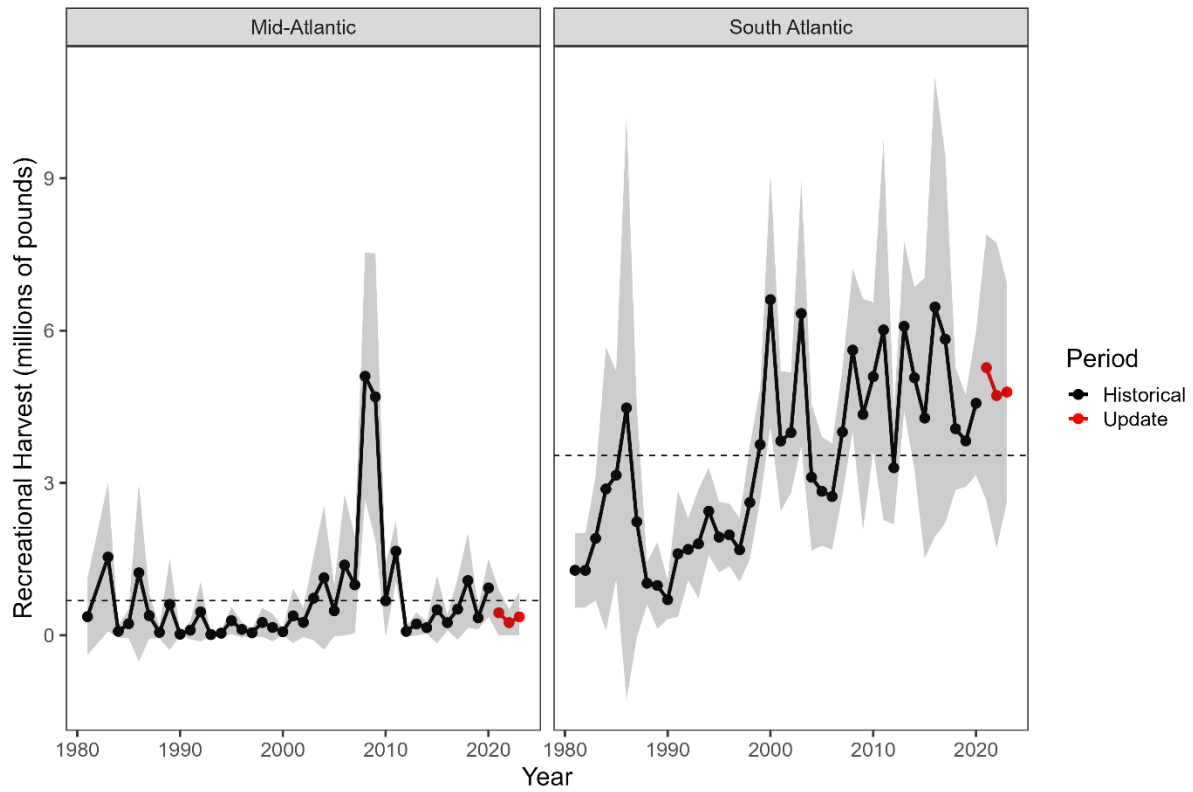


Figure 6. Recreational harvest indicators. The dashed line is the time series mean.

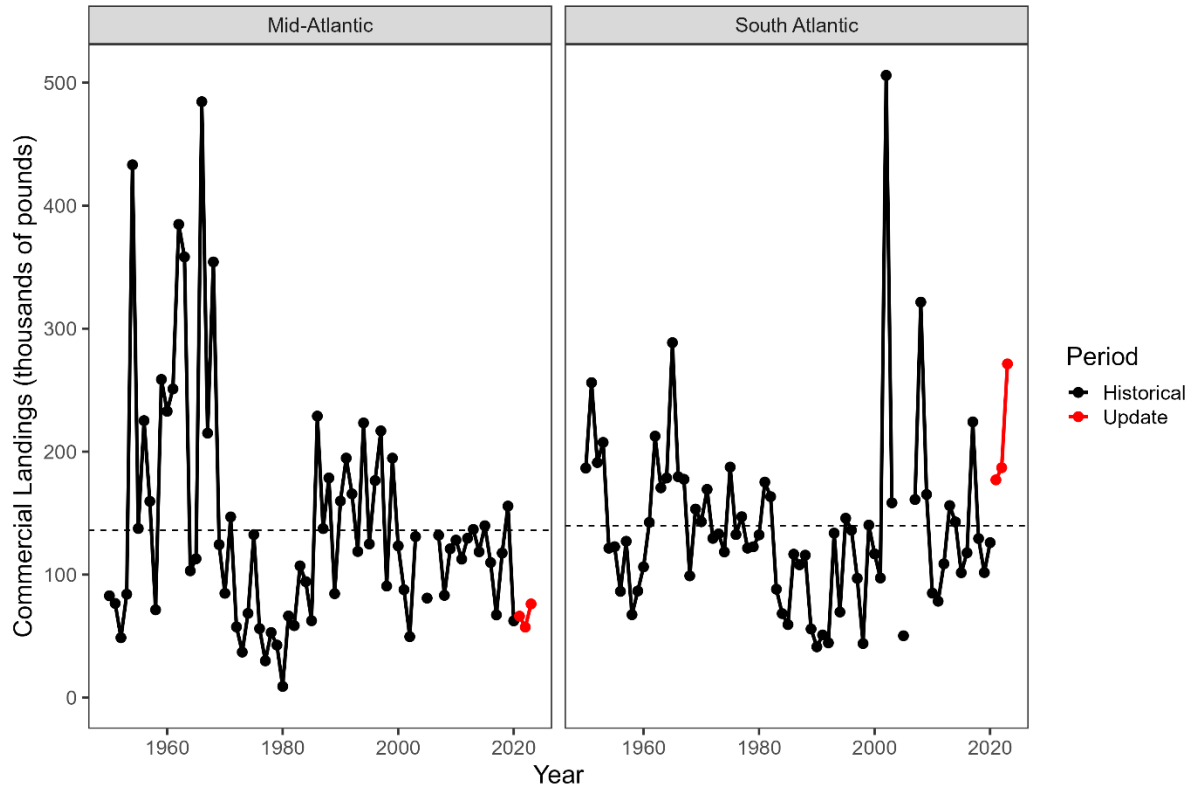


Figure 7. Commercial landings indicators. The dashed line is the time series mean.