



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
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## MEMORANDUM

**Date:** February 25, 2019  
**To:** Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director  
**From:** Matthew Seeley, Staff  
**Subject:** 2020 Blueline Tilefish Specifications Review

### Summary

As part of the 2019-2021 multi-year specifications process for blueline tilefish, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), Tilefish Monitoring Committee, and Council will review the most recent information to determine whether modifications to the current 2020 specifications are warranted. The 2020 Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) recommended in 2018 by the SSC for the Mid-Atlantic management area was 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt). Based on recent fishery performance, Council staff recommend status quo 2020 blueline tilefish specifications.

### Introduction

The Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) as currently amended requires each Council's SSC to provide, among other things, ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for ABCs. The SSC recommends ABCs to the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC or the Council) that address scientific uncertainty such that overfishing is unlikely to occur per the Council's risk policy. The Council's ABC recommendations to NMFS for the upcoming fishing year(s) cannot exceed the ABC recommendation of the SSC. As such, the SSC's ABC recommendations form the upper limit for catches of Council-managed species.

Once the SSC meets and decides on an ABC, the Tilefish Monitoring Committee will convene to discuss if changes to other management measures should be recommended. These measures include Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), Annual Catch Targets (ACTs), discard calculations, and Accountability Measures (AMs). The Council will then make recommendations to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Northeast Regional Administrator based on the SSC and Monitoring Committee recommendations. Finally, NMFS will evaluate the Council's recommendations and upon approval, will publish a Proposed Rule for specifications and then a Final Rule, which may change from the Proposed Rule based on public comment.

## **Regulatory Review**

In June of 2015 emergency regulations were put into place in the Mid-Atlantic to temporarily constrain fishing effort on the blueline tilefish stock. These regulations consisted of a 300-pound commercial trip limit and a recreational seven fish bag limit and were extended through the 2016 fishing year.

In 2016, based on the output of the DLM Toolkit, which simulates stock responses to different harvest strategies, the SSC recommended a 2017 blueline tilefish ABC of 87,031 pounds as meeting the Council's risk policy to best avoid overfishing when guidance from a standard stock assessment is not available. This toolkit has been used previously by the SSC to develop ABC recommendations for black sea bass and Atlantic mackerel. Details on the analysis and rationale of the SSC can be found in the working group's report, available at <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/april-2016> (see subcommittee report and SSC presentation). This document also notes that due to the limited information on recreational blueline tilefish catch, the recreational catch histories used in the toolkit resulted from a Delphi Approach workshop with fishermen to develop an approximation of 2015 recreational catch. Then, a time series was created based on the Delphi Approach estimate and other available data.

In Spring 2017 the SSC recommended a status quo ABC of 87,031 pounds for 2018. Specifications were only recommended for one year as the 50<sup>th</sup> Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review benchmark assessment was anticipated to be completed late in 2017 and change the biological reference points.

The SEDAR 50 benchmark assessment for blueline tilefish concluded in late 2017. Within the assessment, blueline tilefish were split into two separate stocks, north and south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. ABC recommendations were set for the region south of Cape Hatteras (not overfished, overfishing not occurring), but data limitations restricted an ABC recommendation for the region north of Cape Hatteras, which encompasses part of the South Atlantic and the Mid-Atlantic management areas. To assist in developing an ABC recommendation, the Mid- and South Atlantic Councils/SSCs, as well as staff from the Northeast and Southeast Fisheries Science Centers developed a joint subcommittee to rerun the DLMTool for the region north of Cape Hatteras. The results were partitioned at the Council boundaries using coastwide catch data from the pilot tilefish survey funded by the MAFMC out of SUNY Stony Brook.

## **Biological Reference Points, Stock Status, and Projections**

At their March 2018 meeting, the SSC reviewed the output from the most recent blueline tilefish DLMTool runs (as recommended by the Joint Mid- and South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish Subcommittee) as well as the output from the SEDAR 50 benchmark stock assessment and provided recommendations for annual OFL and ABC levels for 2019-2021<sup>1</sup>. The SSC also concluded that the MSY estimate based on the DLMTool analysis for the region north of Cape Hatteras is an estimate of the OFL, not the ABC (as recommended by the joint subcommittee),

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<sup>1</sup> The March 2018 SSC meeting report is available at: <http://www.mafmc.org/ssc>.

which enabled the SSC to use the P\* approach and the Council's risk policy in setting ABC specifications. This was considered a reasonable recommendation for 2019-2021 (with annual reviews) due to limited data and broad uncertainties (e.g. max age, short time series, no estimate of recruitment, etc.) within the fishery.

Since the SSC lacked information on the estimate of stock biomass relative to  $B_{MSY}$ , a ratio of  $B/B_{MSY} = 1$  was applied as a default value for the P\* (i.e.,  $P^* = 0.4$  under the MAFMC's risk policy). The SSC also assumed a typical life history (similar to golden tilefish). Based on this application of the Council's risk policy, the resulting SSC-recommended ABC was 179,500 pounds for 2019-2021 for the region north of Cape Hatteras. The SSC then followed the recommendation of the joint Mid- and South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish Subcommittee to allocate 56% of that ABC to the MAFMC (VA/NC border – north) and 44% to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. The basis for this percentage breakdown came from the catch results and random stratified design of the Pilot Blueline Tilefish Longline Survey (SUNY Stony Brook-Frisk et al. 2018). Using the 56% allocation, the MAFMC ABC for 2019-2021 is 100,520 pounds.

### **Landings**

Commercial dealer reported landings through 2018 are presented in Table 1. Commercial landings (in Maine-Virginia) were generally very low (less than 20,000 pounds) throughout the time series except for 2013-2015, when regulations south of Virginia, the lack of regulations in Federal waters from Virginia north, and the lack of state regulations in New Jersey drove effort northward and into New Jersey. Following implementation of Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan, landings remain constrained within the ACLs.

Recreational catch described by party/charter Vessel trip reports (VTRs) is reported in Table 2. Reported catch and discards have remained consistent since 2012. Previous work with the advisors and other blueline tilefish recreational fishermen has suggested VTR reporting compliance began to encompass at least the primary head boats in 2012.

### **OFL/ABC Recommendations**

The SSC determined that the recommended ABC of 236,329 pounds (107.20 mt) for the region North of Cape Hatteras out of the DLMTTool was more representative of an OFL. Thus, the SSC was able to use the P\* approach to set an ABC.

To appropriately partition the north of Cape Hatteras ABC recommendation to the Mid- and South Atlantic Council's jurisdictions, the subcommittee agreed that using blueline tilefish catch data from the Mid-Atlantic Council funded pilot tilefish survey offered the most updated and reliable stock distribution information. The pilot tilefish survey was conducted using a random stratified design across the Mid-Atlantic from just north of Hudson Canyon to Cape Hatteras. This region was broken into nine strata. Strata 1-3 were removed for blueline tilefish evaluation due to no catch in those regions. Of the 75 blueline tilefish caught, 37 were north of the North Carolina/Virginia border and 38 were between the North Carolina/Virginia border and Cape Hatteras. Incorporating this catch with the sampled stratified area plus a 24.8% area adjustment

(in strata 9 of the survey) to account for the unsampled area within strata 9 resulted in a stratified proportion of 56% - MAFMC and 44% - SAFMC.

Following this approach, the SSC recommended an ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt) to the Mid-Atlantic management area for 2019-2021. Considering this recommendation and recent fishery performance, Council staff recommend no change to the current specifications for the 2020 fishing year.

**Table 1.** Commercial blueline tilefish landings (live weight) from Maine-Virginia. Source: NMFS unpublished dealer data.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Landings (Pounds)</b>
2000	2,446
2001	955
2002	269
2003	7,601
2004	5,829
2005	2,032
2006	3,039
2007	20,459
2008	8,749
2009	9,635
2010	8,360
2011	8,182
2012	9,624
2013	26,780
2014	217,016
2015	73,668
2016	14,203
2017	11,485
2018	12,116

**Table 2.** Blueline tilefish party/charter VTR landings and reported discards from Maine-Virginia, 2012-2018. Source: NMFS unpublished VTR data.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Catch (Numbers of Fish)</b>	<b>Reported Discards (Numbers of Fish)</b>
2012	10,051	338
2013	11,838	128
2014	15,849	254
2015	14,391	292
2016	15,531	246
2017	10,220	115
2018	12,511	96