



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
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## MEMORANDUM

**Date:** February 21, 2020  
**To:** Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director  
**From:** Matthew Seeley, Staff  
**Subject:** 2021 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 2021 specifications are warranted. The 2021 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 blueline tilefish specifications for 2021.

### Introduction

The Magnuson-Stevens Act 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 (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 (ACL), annual catch targets, discard calculations, management measures and accountability measures. The Council will then make recommendations to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Northeast Regional Administrator based on the SSC and Monitoring Committee recommendations.

### 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 bluefin 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 [here](#)<sup>1</sup> (see subcommittee report and SSC presentation). This document also notes that due to the limited information on recreational bluefin 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, which could change the biological reference points.

The SEDAR 50 benchmark assessment for bluefin tilefish occurred in late 2017. Within the assessment, bluefin 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 the March 2018 SSC meeting, the SSC reviewed the output from the most recent bluefin tilefish DLMTool runs (as recommended by the Joint Mid- and South Atlantic Bluefin 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>2</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), 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

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/april-2016>

<sup>2</sup> The March 2018 SSC meeting report is available at: <http://www.mafmc.org/ssc>.

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 landings through 2019 are presented in Table 1. Commercial landings (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. In 2018, the Council approved an increase in trip limit from 300 to 500 pounds. However, a trigger to reduce the commercial trip limit back to 300 pounds was implemented to assist in ensuring the ACL was not exceeded within this new data limited fishery. As indicated by the advisors, this approach worked well in 2019 because there was an opportunity for fishermen to target more fish without creating a large directed fishery.

Recreational catch described by combined 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 headboats in 2012. Private recreational angler landings are available from the Marine Recreational Information Program, but blueline tilefish intercepts are rare occurrences and the estimates are often associated with very high percent standard errors. As an alternative approach to estimating private angler performance, the Monitoring Committee previously recommended using the Delphi<sup>3</sup> percentage of 105.16% of charter vessel landings to estimate private angler landings. This approach will be revisited again at the upcoming March Monitoring Committee meeting. Finally, pounds are estimated using a 3.65 pound accepted average weight (Amendment 6 to the Tilefish FMP) (Table 3).

### **OFL/ABC Recommendations**

Following the approach detailed above (section: Biological Reference Points, Stock Status, and Projections), in 2018, **the SSC recommended an ABC of 100,520 pounds (45.60 mt)** to the Mid-

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<sup>3</sup> The Delphi method was run in 2016 and offered recreational landings for charter, headboat, and private anglers. The Delphi method was used to develop a recreational time series for blueline tilefish through extrapolation of survey results. A ratio was used to back calculate private recreational landings in relation to charter landings from vessel trip reports. This method had been peer reviewed and accepted as best available science by SEDAR 50 and further recommended by the MC in 2019.

Atlantic management area for 2019-2021. Considering this recommendation and recent fishery performance, **Council staff recommend no changes to the current specifications for the 2021 fishing year.**

### **Private Recreational Permitting and Reporting**

To improve tilefish management, the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) is initiating private recreational permitting and reporting for tilefish anglers. This action was approved in late 2017, but with delayed implementation. A final rule is expected to be published by May 1, 2020 in line with the opening of the recreational blueline tilefish fishing season. Extensive outreach will be provided by GARFO and the Council leading up to the final rule.

**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	13,083
2019	22,483

**Table 2.** Blueline tilefish party/charter VTR landings and reported discards from Maine-Virginia, 2012-2019. Source: NMFS unpublished VTR data.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Trips</b>	<b>Catch (Numbers of Fish)</b>	<b>Reported Discards (Numbers of Fish)</b>
2012	103	10,051	338
2013	120	11,838	128
2014	138	15,849	254
2015	170	14,391	292
2016	158	15,493	246
2017	129	10,164	115
2018	221	12,432	99
2019	167	10,711	176

**Table 3.** Recreational blueline tilefish catch (ME-VA) using VTRs (party/charter) and estimating private/rental with assumed weights (Delphi – 105.16% of charter). The grey boxes represent the private rental estimates staff recommend using for a given year. Pounds are generated using an accepted average weight of 3.65 pounds (Amendment 1 to the Tilefish FMP).

	<b>Party (Numbers)</b>	<b>Charter (Numbers)</b>	<b>Private Rental (MRIP- Numbers)</b>	<b>Private Rental (Delphi - Numbers)</b>	<b>Total (Numbers)</b>	<b>Total (Pounds)</b>
<b>2015</b>	12,138	2,253	4,663	2,369	19,054	69,547
<b>2016</b>	13,476	2,017	116,833	2,121	132,326	482,990
<b>2017</b>	8,564	1,600	12,122	1,683	22,286	81,344
<b>2018</b>	4,702	7,730	2,989	8,129	20,561	75,048
<b>2019</b>	3,183	7,528	4,839	7,916	18,627	67,989