



Credit: Duane Raver, Jr.

## **Blueline Tilefish - Advisory Panel Information Document<sup>1</sup> February 2018**

### **Management System**

A final rule was published to establish management measures for the blueline tilefish fishery north of the Virginia/North Carolina border through Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan. This rule also publicized status quo management measures for 2018. The intended effect of this action was to establish permanent management measures for the fishery consistent with the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. This rule became effective on December 15, 2017. Under this rule commercial vessels can fish year-round until closure and are limited to 300 pounds gutted (heads and fins attached) weight. The recreational blueline tilefish season runs from May 1 through October 31 and the possession limit depends on the type of vessel being used. Anglers fishing from private vessels are allowed to keep up to three blueline tilefish per person per trip. Anglers fishing from a for-hire vessel that has been issued a valid Tilefish Charter/Party Permit but does not have a current U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection sticker can retain up to five blueline tilefish per person per trip. Finally, anglers on for-hire vessels that have both a valid Tilefish Charter/Party Permit and a current U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection sticker can retain up to seven blueline tilefish per person per trip.

### **Basic Biology**

Blueline tilefish are primarily distributed from Campeche, Mexico northward through the Mid-Atlantic (Dooley 1978, NMFS survey and observer data). Several recently-completed studies suggest that blueline tilefish from the eastern Gulf of Mexico through the Mid-Atlantic are comprised of one genetic stock (<http://sedarweb.org/sedar-50-data-workshop>). Blueline tilefish inhabit the shelf edge and upper slope reefs at depths of 46-256m (Sedberry et al. 2006) and temperatures between 15-23°C. Blueline tilefish are considered opportunistic predators that feed on prey associated with substrate (crabs, shrimp, fish, echinoderms, polychaetes, etc.) (Ross 1982). They are considered relatively sedentary and thought not to undertake north-south migrations along the coast. The species constructs burrows in sandy areas in close association with rocky outcroppings in the South Atlantic Bight (SEDAR 50 Stock ID workshop). Blueline tilefish, like other tilefish species, are a large, long-lived fish, reaching sizes up to about 900 mm. This species also exhibits dimorphic growth with males attaining larger size-at-age than females. Males are predominant in the size categories greater than 650 mm FL. An aging

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<sup>1</sup> This document was prepared by the MAFMC staff. Data employed in the preparation of this document are from unpublished National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Dealer, Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs), Permit, and Marine Recreational Statistics (MRFSS/MRIP) databases.

workshop conducted to support the new blueline tilefish assessment (SEDAR 50) has called into question the ability to accurately age blueline tilefish, so previous age determinations may have substantial error. They are classified as indeterminate spawners, with up to 110 spawns per individual based on the estimates of a spawning event every 2 days during a protracted spawning season from approximately February through November.

The Council funded a pilot survey for golden and blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic to develop better information about the state of the golden and blueline tilefish stocks off the Mid-Atlantic. A review committee is analyzing the final report to identify significant findings and provide recommendations on next steps.

The SAFMC's SSC has provided an updated blueline tilefish ABC for the region south of Cape Hatteras (172,000, 175,000, 178,000 pounds whole weight for 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively). Genetic work done for SEDAR 50 suggests a genetically homogenous population off the entire Atlantic coast, but does not suggest what catch may be appropriate off various parts of the coast.

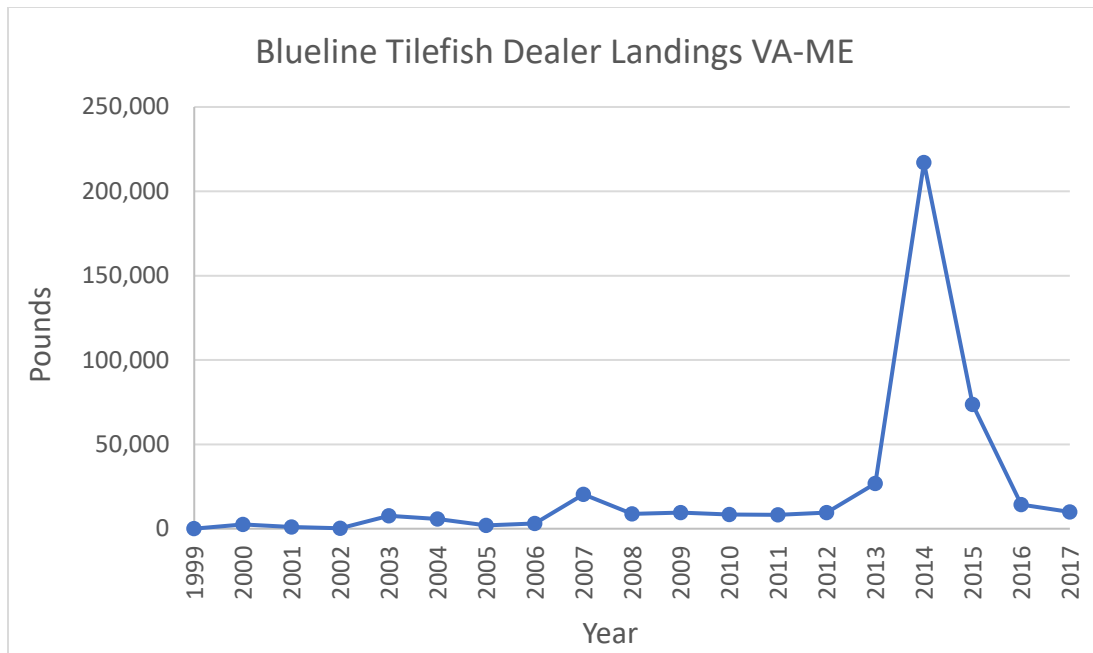
Given the differences between the blueline tilefish fisheries off the Mid- and South Atlantic, and the gaps in information on blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic incorporated in the last stock assessment, the results of SEDAR 50 (similar to those of SEDAR 32) are not sufficient for management off the Mid-Atlantic (north of Cape Hatteras). The MAFMC and SAFMC have formed a blueline tilefish subcommittee to assist in making ABC recommendations to their respective SSCs using the Data Limited Toolkit. This will offer an opportunity to partition blueline tilefish ABCs that cross the two management areas. The SSC will develop the 2019-2021 blueline tilefish ABC recommendations using recommendations from the subcommittee at its March meeting.

### **Status of the Stock**

NMFS lists blueline tilefish as overfished, but not overfishing from the SEDAR 32 assessment ([http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries\\_eco/status\\_of\\_fisheries/status\\_updates.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries_eco/status_of_fisheries/status_updates.html)). Updated stock status information was identified through SEDAR 50, the 2017 benchmark assessment. The blueline tilefish stock, which was split into north and south of Cape Hatteras stocks, was determined to be not overfished with overfishing not occurring for the region south of Cape Hatteras. Unfortunately, this assessment did not provide stock status information relevant to the Mid-Atlantic management area due to insufficient data. This is being addressed by the joint Mid- and South Atlantic blueline tilefish subcommittee.

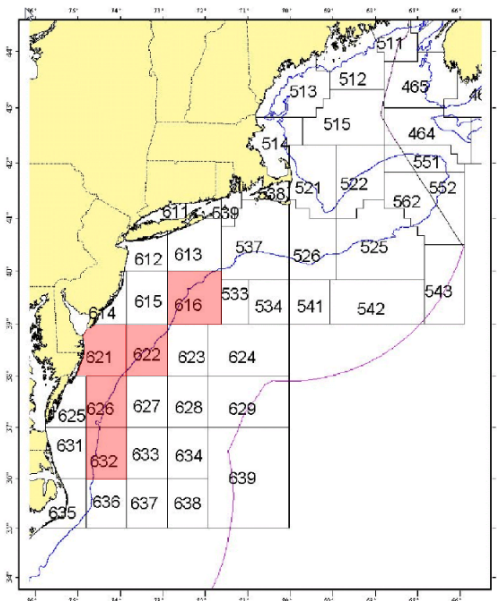
### **Fishery Performance**

Landings into VA-ME (Figure 1) were generally very low 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 somewhat northward and landings into New Jersey.



**Figure 1. Commercial U.S. Blueline Tilefish Landings (live weight) from Maine-Virginia, 1999-2017.** Source: 1999-2017 NMFS unpublished dealer data.

Landings were low and variable from VA-MA except for the higher NJ landings in 2013-2015. Further breakdown by year/state may violate data confidentiality rules (especially for 2016) Landings in 2017 were 9,957 pounds.

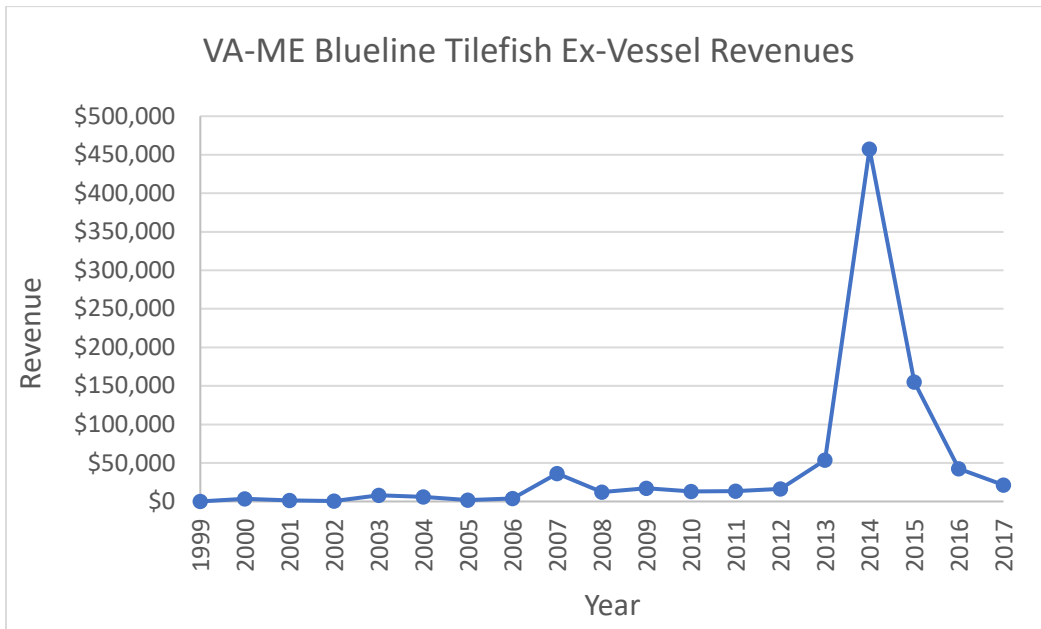


Landings from the entire time-series are approximately 2/3 from bottom longline, with most of the remaining landings coming from bottom trawl and handline. Over half of all landings in the time series were bottom longline into New Jersey in 2013-2015. Landings from all other gear types are low and variable from year to year.

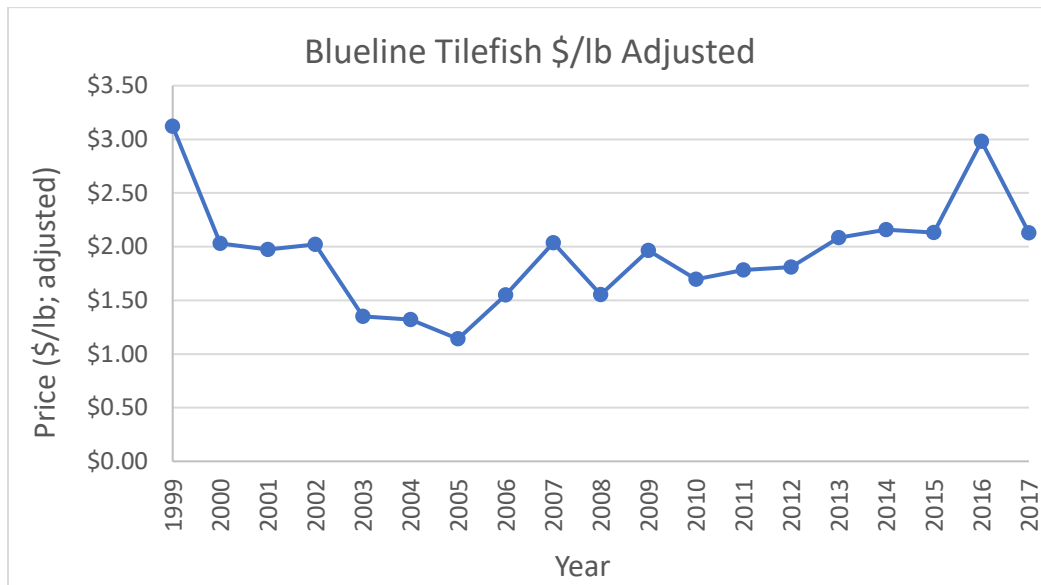
For location of catch, Statistical Areas 616, 621, 622, 626, and 632 accounts for the majority of catch in years without substantial trend other than the overall ramp up in the recent years in areas 621, 626, and 632. Further breakdown by year/area may violate data confidentiality rules (especially for 2016 and 2017).

**Figure 2. NMFS statistical areas accounting for the majority of blueline tilefish landings, 1994-2017 (Commercial and VTR).**

Commercial blueline tilefish ex-vessel revenues (nominal) and price (inflation adjusted to 2016 dollars) are described in the two figures immediately below.



**Figure 3. Ex-Vessel Revenues for blueline tilefish, Maine through Virginia combined, 1999-2017.**



**Figure 4. Price for blueline tilefish, Maine through Virginia combined, 1999-2017.** Note: Price data have been adjusted by the GDP deflator indexed for 2016 (2017 – unadjusted).

## Recreational Fishery

The recreational fishery is relatively small. Blueline tilefish intercepts in the MRIP program are an exceedingly rare event, but in 2016 MRIP estimates were 10,644 fish for Maryland, 3,040 fish for New Jersey, and 14,240 fish for Virginia. Preliminary 2017 MRIP estimates are 3,444 fish (all Virginia).

It is believed that VTR reporting compliance for blueline tilefish has been low, especially historically and for charter vessels. Table 1 provides the available VTR reports for blueline tilefish since 2012, when 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.

Year	Frequency	Number of Fish
2012	103	10,051
2013	120	11,838
2014	138	15,849
2015	170	14,391
2016	160	15,531
2017	112	9,682

**Table 1. Blueline tilefish VTR landings from ME-VA, 2012-2017.**