

ASMFC: BLACK SEA BASS (from page 5)

Fisheries change seasonally with changes in fish distribution. Inshore and more southern commercial fisheries primarily use fish pots and handlines, and when fish move offshore in the winter, they are primarily caught in trawl fisheries targeting summer flounder, sup and Loligo squid.

Recreational fisheries generally occur during the period that sea bass are inshore (May to September), but season duration varies among the states. Since the FMP's approval in 1997, the black sea bass commercial fishery has operated under a quota. The recreational fishery is restricted by a coastwide RHL.

Commercial landings have been recorded since the late 1800s. Fish were primarily harvested by handlines until the early 1950s. From 1887 through 1948, commercial landings north of Cape Hatteras fluctuated around 6 million pounds. By 1952, with the emergence of the trap fishery, landings peaked at 22 million pounds. Since 1998, commercial landings have been primarily influenced by the commercial quotas. Between 1998 and 2007, landings averaged 2.8 million pounds. From 2008 to 2012, reduced quotas resulted in average landings of only 1.6 million pounds.

Landings have since increased, reaching a high of 3.8 million pounds in 2017, and 3.3 million pounds in 2018.

Commercial fishery discards historically represented a small fraction of total fishery removals from the stock at least than 0.4 million pounds per year, but have increased in recent years. In 2017, commercial discards were 1.78 million pounds. Otter trawls and fish pots/traps have accounted for the majority of the landings in most states. Other important gear include handlines and lobster pots.

Black sea bass are also an important recreational species in the Mid-Atlantic, commonly caught using squid and natural bait. In 2965, over half of the total catch of black sea bass was credited to recreational fishing. Angling pressure increased markedly in the mid-1980s. In 1998 and 1999, recreational landings decreased substantially, which may be partly attributed to an increase in minimum size limits. Landings started to increase in 2000 and averaged 4.4 million pounds from 2000 to 2009. Recreational landings increased rapidly and peaked in 2016 at approximately 12 million pounds, and in 2017 dropped slightly to 11.4 million pounds. Recreational discards have also increased to about 85% of total catch over the past

10 years. Assuming a 15% hook and release mortality, in 2018, estimated mortality from recreational discards were estimated at 3.13 million fish, equal to 44% of the total recreational removals (harvest plus dead discards).

STOCK STATUS

An operational assessment that incorporated new recreational harvest estimates was peer reviewed in August 2019. The assessment found the black sea bass stock north of Cape Hatteras was not overfished nor experiencing overfishing in 2018 relative to revised reference points.

Starting in 2007, SSB increased rapidly and reached a peak in 2014 at over 76 million pounds, then decreased slightly. SSB in 2018 was estimated at 73.65 million pounds, 2.4 times the biomass target of 31.07 million lbs. The average fishing mortality in 2018 was 0.42, 91% of the fishing mortality threshold of 0.46. To account for the fact that black sea bass change sex from female to male, the assessment defined SSB as the total of male and female mature biomass to adjust for changes in sex ratio.

Recruitment of the 2017 year class at age 1 in 2018 was estimated at 16 million fish, well below the time series average. The 2011 year class was estimated to be the largest in the time series at 144.7 million fish and the 2015 year class was the second largest at 79.4 million fish. Despite uncertainty associated with the most recent year estimates, exploitable biomass is expected to decrease in coming years due to poor recruitment by the 2017 year class along with declining abundance of the 2015 year class. Over the past decade, the distribution of the fishery and catches has generally expanded northward.

ATLANTIC COASTAL MANAGEMENT

Black sea bass is managed jointly by the ASMFC and the MAFMC under Amendment 1 to the Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (August 2002) and its subsequent addenda (Addenda XII-XXXII). The objectives of the FMP are to reduce fishing mortality to assure overfishing does not occur and allow immature black sea bass to increase SSB; improve yield from the fishery; promote compatible regulations, and uniform and effective enforcement among states and between federal and state jurisdictions; and minimize regulations necessary to achieve the stated objectives.

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