

WEAKFISH

Stock Status – Depleted – The most recent stock assessment for weakfish was completed in 2009 and indicates that weakfish are in an extremely depleted state. Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Weakfish Management Board has accepted five conclusions with regard to the weakfish stock report for management purposes: 1) the stock is declining; 2) total mortality is increasing; 3) there is little evidence of overfishing; 4) something other than fishing mortality is causing the decline in the stock; and 5) there is a strong chance that regulating will not, in itself, reverse the decline. Commercial and recreational landings along the Atlantic coast have plummeted in recent years and are currently at the lowest level on record. In North Carolina, commercial landings have mirrored the coastwide decline while recreational landings have been more stable.

Average Commercial Landings and Value 2000-2009 – 848,587 lbs./\$532,929

2009 Commercial Landings and Value – 163,146 lbs./\$163,210

Average Recreational Landings 2000-2009 – 142,969 lbs., **2009** – 103,232 lbs.

Average Number of Citations (5 lbs./24 inches[^]) 2000-2009 – 16, **2009** – 3

Status of Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) – In North Carolina weakfish are included in the interjurisdictional FMP, which defers to ASMFC FMP compliance requirements. Weakfish are currently managed under Addendum IV to Amendment 4 to the ASMFC FMP, adopted in November, 2009. Due to the depleted stock size, Addendum IV requires management measures aimed at aiding in any recovery of the weakfish stock. Addendum IV recognizes that natural mortality, rather than fishing mortality, appears to be the primary culprit in the current stock decline. As a result, the ASMFC Weakfish Management Board has implemented a coastwide limit that includes a one fish daily recreational bag limit and a 100-pound daily commercial trip limit in lieu of a full harvest moratorium.

Research and Data Needs – Studies to further understand the current influences in the stock decline. Stock identification studies are needed to determine coastal movements and the extent of stock mixing. Studies to define spawning locations and habitat preferences are also needed.

Current Regulations – Recreational: 12 inches total length (TL)/1-fish bag limit; commercial: 12 inches TL with a seasonal, 10 inches TL for estuarine pound net and long haul seine fishermen; 100 lbs. commercial daily trip limit.

Harvest Season – Year round

Size and Age at Maturity – 7-8 inches TL/1 year

Historical and Current Maximum Age – 17 years/12 years

Juvenile Abundance Index - 2000-2009 – 44.2, **2009** – 58.9 (not validated)

Habits and Habitats – Weakfish are estuarine-dependent members of the drum family that include Atlantic croaker, spot, red drum, black drum and spotted seatrout. Weakfish migrate south and offshore during winter months and inshore and north during spring and summer. Weakfish spawn throughout the spring and summer and the larvae and juveniles are dependent on estuarine habitat as critical nursery areas. During winter, young-of-the-year move offshore into nearshore ocean waters to overwinter. Following their first winter, the one-year-old fish move into the inlets and sounds to spawn for the first time.

[^]Citation weight requirement reduced from 6 lbs. to 5 lbs. and 24 inch release category added in 2008

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