

*Fact Sheet:*

## Summer Flounder Catch and Landings Limits – 2016 Reductions

### Summary

The most recent stock assessment update for summer flounder indicates that overfishing was occurring in 2014. These results appear to be largely driven by low recruitment—the stock experienced four below-average year classes in 2010-2013. While the 2014 year class appears to be average, this estimate may be revised once additional data become available. The assessment update also indicates that fishing mortality rates have been underestimated in recent years. The illegal harvest of summer flounder in the form of unreported landings may have contributed to this pattern.

Fishery managers are required to set catch and landings limits that will prevent overfishing. Under the Council's normal risk policy, this would entail reducing commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits by about 43% in 2016 compared to 2015 levels. However, the Council recognizes that this could have severe social and economic impacts and is therefore pursuing an alternative approach which would phase in the required reductions over a three year period. Using this approach, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) has recommended a 29% reduction in commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits for summer flounder in 2016 compared to 2015.

### Assessment Background and Trends

Summer flounder catch and landings limits are established each year based on current estimates of stock size and projections for upcoming years. The last peer-reviewed benchmark stock assessment was conducted in the summer of 2013. The assessment concluded that in 2012 the summer flounder stock was not overfished and that overfishing was not occurring ([SAW/SARC 57](#), 2013). The assessment also indicated that recruitment, which is an estimate of the number of new fish that enter a population in a given year, was 37 million fish in 2012, about 14% below average. The SSC and Council used the information provided in the 2013 benchmark stock assessment to set summer flounder catch and harvest levels for 2014 and 2015.

In 2014 the Council received a [data update](#) which included updated catch, landings, and fishery independent survey indices but did not provide new estimates of stock status relative to biological reference points. The data update noted that state and Federal survey biomass index trends were variable, but that most had decreased from 2012 to 2013. The data update also indicated that indices of recruitment (age 0 fish) were generally lower over the last 3 years (2011-2013) than in the previous decade. The SSC and Council considered the findings of the data update but did not modify their recommendation for the 2015 fishing year.

In June 2015, the Council received a [stock assessment update](#) ("assessment update") which incorporated recent data (through 2014) into the population model used for the previous benchmark assessment. The assessment update indicated that in 2014 the summer flounder stock was not overfished but that overfishing was occurring. Fishing mortality rate in 2014 was estimated to be 16% above the fishing mortality threshold reference point.

The 2015 assessment update indicates that the 2013 benchmark assessment overestimated recruitment in 2012 by nearly 40%. Furthermore, the stock appears to have experienced four below average year classes from 2010 to 2013. These revised recruitment estimates resulted in reduced estimates of stock size compared to previous levels. According to the update, estimated biomass has been trending down since 2010. The 2014 year class is currently estimated to be average at 41 million fish.

Although reported landings have equaled or only slightly exceeded commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits in recent years, there is evidence of substantial illegal harvest in the form of unreported, underreported, or misreported landings. In 2013 and 2014, two separate investigations revealed that large quantities of summer flounder were being taken illegally under the cover of quota acquired through the Council's Research Set-Aside (RSA) program (the Council subsequently suspended the program in order to consider alternative cooperative research options). There may also be substantial non-RSA related illegal/unreported landings, although fewer details are available on the extent of unreported landings outside of the RSA program. While the exact amount of illegally harvested summer flounder is not known, the effect may have resulted in substantial overages of the fishery's Annual Catch Limits (ACLs).

### Management Implications – What Happens Next?

As a result of the assessment update results, commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits for summer flounder will be substantially lower in 2016 than they have been in previous years. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) met July 21-23 to review the assessment update and develop recommendations for next year's Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) limits. The SSC is required to set the ABC at a level that is expected to address scientific uncertainty and prevent overfishing. Under the Council's normal risk policy, this would entail reducing commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits by about 43% in 2016 compared to 2015 levels. However, given the likely social and economic impacts of such a large reduction, the Council asked the SSC to deviate from this risk policy. The SSC therefore recommended phasing in the necessary reduction in landings over a period of three years, resulting in an ABC recommendation of 16.3 million pounds for 2016—a 29% reduction from the 2015 ABC.

In August 2015 the Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission will review the SSC and Monitoring Committee recommendations and recommend Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) for the commercial and recreational fisheries. Combined, the commercial and recreational ACLs cannot exceed the ABC recommended by the SSC. The Council and Commission's recommendations will then be submitted to NMFS for review.

### Resources

- ❖ [57th Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Workshop \(57th SAW\) Assessment Summary Report](#)
- ❖ [2014 Summer Flounder Data Update](#)
- ❖ [2015 Assessment Update](#)
- ❖ [2015 SSC Meeting Materials](#)
- ❖ [Guide to Fisheries Stock Assessments](#)