



# Mid-Atlantic Blueline Tilefish Management *Scoping Document*

<http://www.mafmc.org/actions/blueline-tilefish>

May-June-July 2015



Photo Credit: Duane Raver, Jr.

## WHAT IS SCOPING?

**Scoping** is the process of identifying issues, potential impacts, and reasonable alternatives associated with the issue at hand. It provides the first and best opportunity for the public to make suggestions or to raise issues and concerns as development of an action begins.

This is the public's opportunity to inform the Council about: blueline tilefish and/or other deep-water fisheries, actions that the public believes should or should not be taken, or any other concerns the public has.

Your comments early in the process will help us identify management issues and develop effective alternatives that address issues of public concern in a thorough and appropriate manner.

No management measures have yet been analyzed for their effectiveness or impacts. Please comment on which kinds of management measures may or may not be useful or practical, and explain your rationale. Please also comment on any other issues you believe should be addressed and the appropriate level of environmental analysis. The list of relevant issues may be expanded as suggestions are offered during the scoping process.

## INTRODUCTION

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The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (“Council”) is seeking public input for the development of a fishery management plan (FMP) for blueline tilefish and/or other deepwater species, or adding blueline tilefish to the existing golden tilefish FMP. This potential action will likely focus on the management of blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic, and follows a Council request to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for emergency limits on blueline tilefish landings from waters off the Mid-Atlantic (i.e. north of North Carolina).

Blueline tilefish management was identified as a priority during a February 2015 special webinar-based Council meeting (<http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/2015/february-2014-blueline-tilefish-webinar-meeting>), and the Council is now seeking public input to inform development of management for blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic. The Council would like your comments on the appropriate range of issues, information that should be considered, and level of environmental analysis.

### **WHY IS THIS ACTION BEING PROPOSED?**

The Council is proposing to develop this action because there is currently (as of June 1, 2015) no permanent federal management of blueline tilefish north of North Carolina and no state management north of Maryland. NMFS has implemented emergency regulations north of North Carolina, limiting commercial vessels to 300 pounds (whole weight) per trip and recreational fishermen to 7 fish per person per trip, as well as requiring commercial and party/charter permitting for blueline tilefish (<http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/nr/2015/June/14tileblemergencyactionphl.pdf>).

Emergency measures can generally only remain in effect for 366 days. Because of this timing constraint, the Council is moving ahead promptly with scoping to begin development of long-term management and conservation measures for blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic through the normal rule-making process. Since other deep-water species (e.g. sand tilefish, snowy grouper, and black-bellied rosefish) may have similar management issues in the future, the Council is also considering development of a deep-water species complex FMP.

### **CURRENT OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTION**

- Consider management of blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.
- Consider management of other deepwater species off the Mid-Atlantic by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

## **WHAT APPROACHES MAY BE CONSIDERED?**

The Council is likely to consider a variety of measures for managing blueline tilefish and/or other deep-water species off the Mid-Atlantic. These could include, *but would not be limited to*:

- Definition of the stocks and/or geographic range to be managed
- Limits on total catch: Acceptable Biological Catches (ABCs) and Annual Catch Limits (ACLs)
- Criteria for overfished/overfishing determinations
- Permitting and reporting requirements
- Commercial and recreational trip/possession limits
- Essential fish habitat designation and related management measures
- Other management measures as required or allowed under law and deemed appropriate by the Council<sup>1</sup>

A draft Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement will be developed for public comment and used by the Council to evaluate any proposed measures. The Council will consider the biological and socio-economic impacts of any management measure before making a final decision.

## **STAKEHOLDER INPUT**

The Council would like your input on the range of issues and information that should be considered during development of this action, including the specific issues identified in this document, as well as any other issues that might be of concern to you regarding blueline tilefish or other deep-water fisheries. Please also comment on the level of environmental assessment/impact analysis you believe would be appropriate (an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement - <http://www.epa.gov/reg3esd1/nepa/eis.htm>). If there are any particular kinds of analyses you believe would be important to help evaluate measures for blueline tilefish, please also comment on those.

## **LEARN MORE**

Find additional information and background documents about the action at: <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/blueline-tilefish>. Please contact Jason Didden at 302-526-5254 or [jdidden@mafmc.org](mailto:jdidden@mafmc.org) if you have any additional questions.

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<sup>1</sup> See required and discretionary provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act - [http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/magact/MSA\\_Amended\\_2007%20.pdf](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/magact/MSA_Amended_2007%20.pdf)

## GET INVOLVED

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### **ATTEND A SCOPING HEARING**

Public scoping hearings will be held on the following dates:

Date	Time	Location
<i>Monday</i> <b>June 1, 2015</b>	<b>6:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Hyatt Place Long Island/East End</b> 451 E Main St, Riverhead, NY 11901. Telephone: (631) 208-0002.
<i>Tuesday</i> <b>June 2, 2015</b>	<b>6:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Congress Hall Hotel</b> 251 Beach Ave, Cape May, NJ 08204. Telephone: (888) 944-1816.
<i>Tuesday</i> <b>June 16, 2015</b>	<b>6:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Dare County Administration Building</b> Commissioners Meeting Room, 954 Marshall C. Collins Drive. Manteo, NC 27954. Telephone: (252) 475-5700.
<i>Wednesday</i> <b>June 17, 2015</b>	<b>6:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront</b> 3001 Atlantic Ave, Virginia Beach, VA, 23451. Telephone: (757) 213-3000.
<i>Thursday</i> <b>June 18, 2015</b>	<b>5:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Ocean City Chamber of Commerce</b> Eunice Q. Sorin Visitor & Conference Center. 12320 Ocean Gateway, Ocean City, Maryland 21842. Telephone: (410) 213-0552.

### **SUBMIT WRITTEN COMMENTS:**

In addition to providing comments at any of the scoping hearings, you may submit written comments. Written comments are due by July 6, 2015, 11:59 p.m., EDT and may be sent by any of the following methods:

1. **ONLINE** at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/blueline-tilefish>
2. **EMAIL** to [jdidden@mafmc.org](mailto:jdidden@mafmc.org)
3. **MAIL** to Chris Moore, 800 North State Street, Suite 201, Dover, DE 19901
4. **FAX** to 302.674.5399

*Please include "Blueline Tilefish Scoping Comments" in the subject line if using email or fax or on the outside of the envelope if submitting written comments.*

All comments, regardless of submission method, will be compiled into a single document for review and consideration by the Council.

## BACKGROUND AND RECENT FISHERY DEVELOPMENTS

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*To assist the public in developing comments, background information on the blueline tilefish fishery is provided below, with a focus on the Mid-Atlantic. Detailed information on the historical blueline tilefish fishery is available in the Environmental Assessment for Amendment 32 to the South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Fishery<sup>2</sup>. Catches of other relevant deep water species in the Mid-Atlantic such as wreckfish, barrelfish, sand tilefish, snowy grouper, and black-bellied rosefish appear to be low in recent years, but if the public has comments regarding management of these or other deep-water species in the Mid-Atlantic, then the Council will consider such comments.*

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) manages blueline tilefish south of Virginia, but there is currently no permanent management of blueline tilefish in Federal waters north of North Carolina. Two states, Virginia and Maryland, have enacted tilefish regulations that apply to vessels landing in their states, with both implementing 300 pound incidental commercial trip limits and a 7-fish recreational possession limit for all tilefish species combined. These measures were designed to proactively prevent a large directed commercial fishery and constrain fishing mortality in the recreational fishery for blueline tilefish that emerged in the early 2000s. There are currently (as of June 1, 2015) no state regulations for blueline tilefish north of Maryland. The Council recently expressed concern to the other Mid-Atlantic and southern New England states that this unmanaged loophole fishery was used to dramatically increase landings in 2014 of blueline tilefish caught off the Mid-Atlantic and poses a threat to the sustainability of this resource.

While some other states may follow Virginia's and Maryland's lead, the lack of coordinated federal management tailored to the characteristics of the fishery off the Mid-Atlantic has undermined effective conservation thus far. Blueline tilefish are susceptible to overfishing due to their life history (relatively long-lived, sedentary, and slow growing) so the Council is considering developing management measures. These potential measures could be considered via an amendment to the Council's golden tilefish FMP, or a new FMP for blueline tilefish and/or other deep-water species.

### **MID-ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL EMERGENCY ACTION REQUEST**

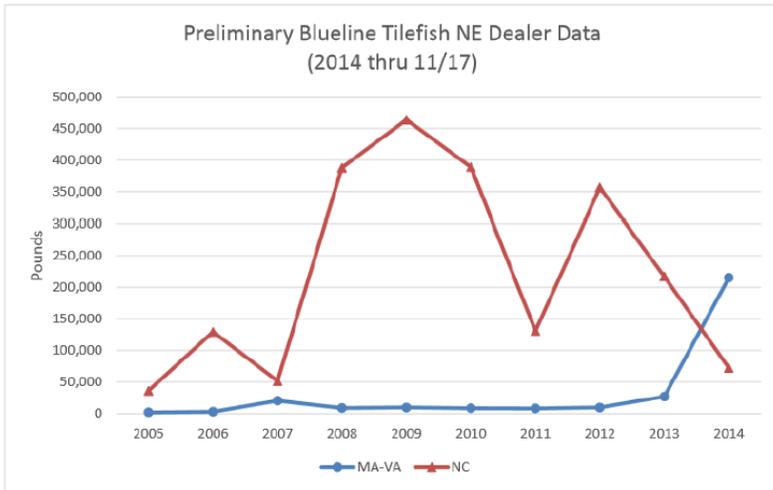
In response to the catch increases allowed by lack of federal management north of North Carolina, the Council requested that NMFS take emergency action to implement a 300 pound (whole weight) commercial trip limit and a seven fish per-person recreational possession limit for blueline tilefish in Mid-Atlantic waters north of North Carolina. This request was the result of a February 25, 2015 Council Meeting, the details of which (including the emergency request letter) may be found at: <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/2015/february-2014-blueline-tilefish-webinar-meeting>.

NMFS implemented this request on June 4, 2015 - <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/2015/february-2014-blueline-tilefish-webinar-meeting>. The emergency measures are intended to prevent depletion of blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic on an interim basis (generally for a maximum of 366 days) while the Council develops long-term management measures through the normal rulemaking process. The Council's request was based on the life history of blueline tilefish, and observations of both where blueline tilefish were being landed (Figure 1) and where they were being caught in the Mid-Atlantic (Figure 2, Tables 1 and 2). The Council has also noted that 2014 Vessel Trip Report (VTR) catch off Delmarva (Statistical Areas 625, 626, 621, and 622) was more than 32 times the 2001-2013 average

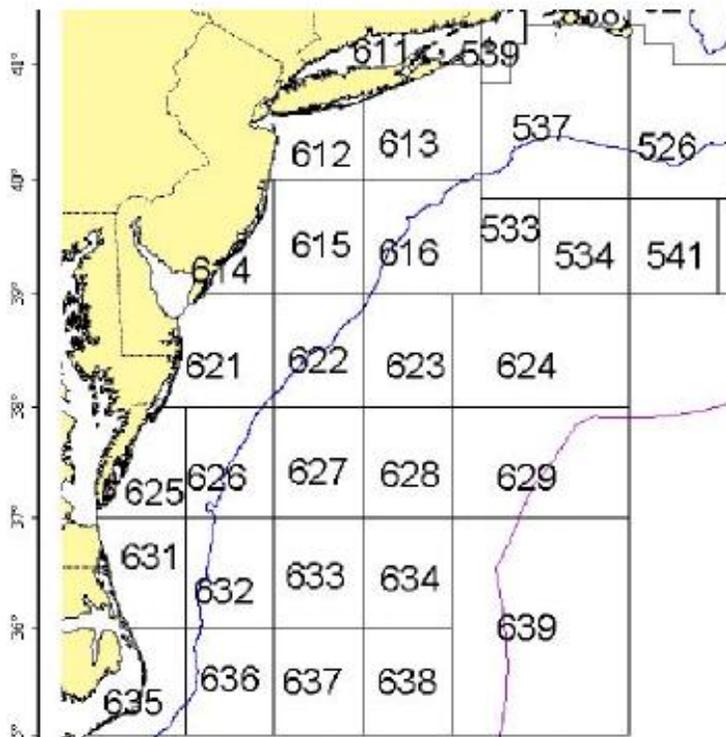
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<sup>2</sup> [http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable\\_fisheries/s\\_atl/sg/2014/am32/documents/pdfs/sg\\_am32\\_ea.pdf](http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/s_atl/sg/2014/am32/documents/pdfs/sg_am32_ea.pdf)

and that this level of catch off Delmarva is a recent development relative to the history of the blueline tilefish fishery.



**Figure 1. Mid-Atlantic/New England Blueline Tilefish Landings (source: unpublished NMFS northeast (NE) dealer weighout data)**



**Figure 2. NMFS Northeast Statistical areas used on Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs) (source: unpublished NMFS NE VTR data)**

**Table 1. Blueline tilefish NE VTR commercial kept catch in pounds by statistical area and year, 2001-2014**  
 (source: unpublished NMFS NE VTR data)

YEAR	Statistical Areas			Total
	635, 636, 631, 632	625, 626, 621, 622	Other	
2001	629	427	0	1,056
2002	18,131	28	1,326	19,485
2003	23,853	2,574	3,181	29,608
2004	1,435	1,882	5,330	8,647
2005	2,209	592	983	3,784
2006	9,958	1,334	489	11,781
2007	6,806	12,459	638	19,903
2008	9,910	6,905	1,404	18,219
2009	12,502	2,659	1,825	16,986
2010	65,838	4,020	1,713	71,571
2011	28,029	4,588	2,324	34,941
2012	39,290	4,063	4,423	47,776
2013	42,994	17,416	4,010	64,420
2014	44,116	146,347	5,181	195,644

**Table 2. Blueline tilefish NE VTR recreational party-charter kept fish by statistical area and year, 2002-2014**  
 (numbers of fish) (source: unpublished NMFS NE VTR data)

YEAR	Statistical Areas			Total
	635, 636, 631, 632	625, 626, 621, 622	Other	
2002	2,564	0	0	2,564
2003	1,683	1	0	1,684
2004	25	0	0	25
2005	780	21	0	801
2006	1,002	27	0	1,029
2007	3,421	1,160	83	4,664
2008	1,038	495	7	1,540
2009	1,215	3,811	2	5,028
2010	513	2,101	68	2,682
2011	719	3,232	118	4,069
2012	115	9,844	207	10,166
2013	814	10,576	496	11,886
2014	1,408	13,975	460	15,843

## **AMENDMENT 32 AND THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL'S EMERGENCY ACTION REQUEST**

Through the SAFMC's Amendment 32 to the Snapper-Grouper Fishery, and in response to an assessment that found overfishing to be occurring<sup>3</sup>, NMFS implemented a 112 pound (whole weight) commercial trip limit and a one fish per boat per trip recreational trip limit (with a limited season) for the South Atlantic (waters south of the North Carolina/Virginia border). The SAFMC also requested that the Amendment 32 rules be extended north for all Federal waters off the U.S. East Coast via an emergency rule, but as described above NMFS has implemented emergency action based on the Mid-Atlantic request.

## **ADDITIONAL MID-ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

While this action is considered, the Council has committed to funding a genetic analysis of the blueline tilefish population along the east coast of the U.S that will begin this year. NMFS is also coordinating development of a deepwater survey throughout the range of the blueline tilefish fishery that, together with the genetics analysis, will provide additional information regarding the abundance and distribution of blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic region.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable\\_fisheries/s\\_atl/sg/2014/am32/](http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/s_atl/sg/2014/am32/)

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

After the initial phase of information gathering and public comment, if the Council decides to proceed, the Council will evaluate potential management alternatives for inclusion in an FMP or amendment.

The Council will then develop a draft FMP or amendment, incorporating the identified management alternatives for public review. The Council will also prepare draft environmental analyses as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and subject those analyses to review and comment by the public as appropriate.

Finally, the Council will choose preferred management measures for submission with the appropriate environmental analyses to the Secretary of Commerce for review and consideration for approval. Approved management measures would be implemented through publication of proposed and final rules, which include additional opportunity for public comment. While there are many opportunities for public comment in the process, this scoping comment opportunity is particularly important for assisting the Council in establishing the overall focus and direction of this action.

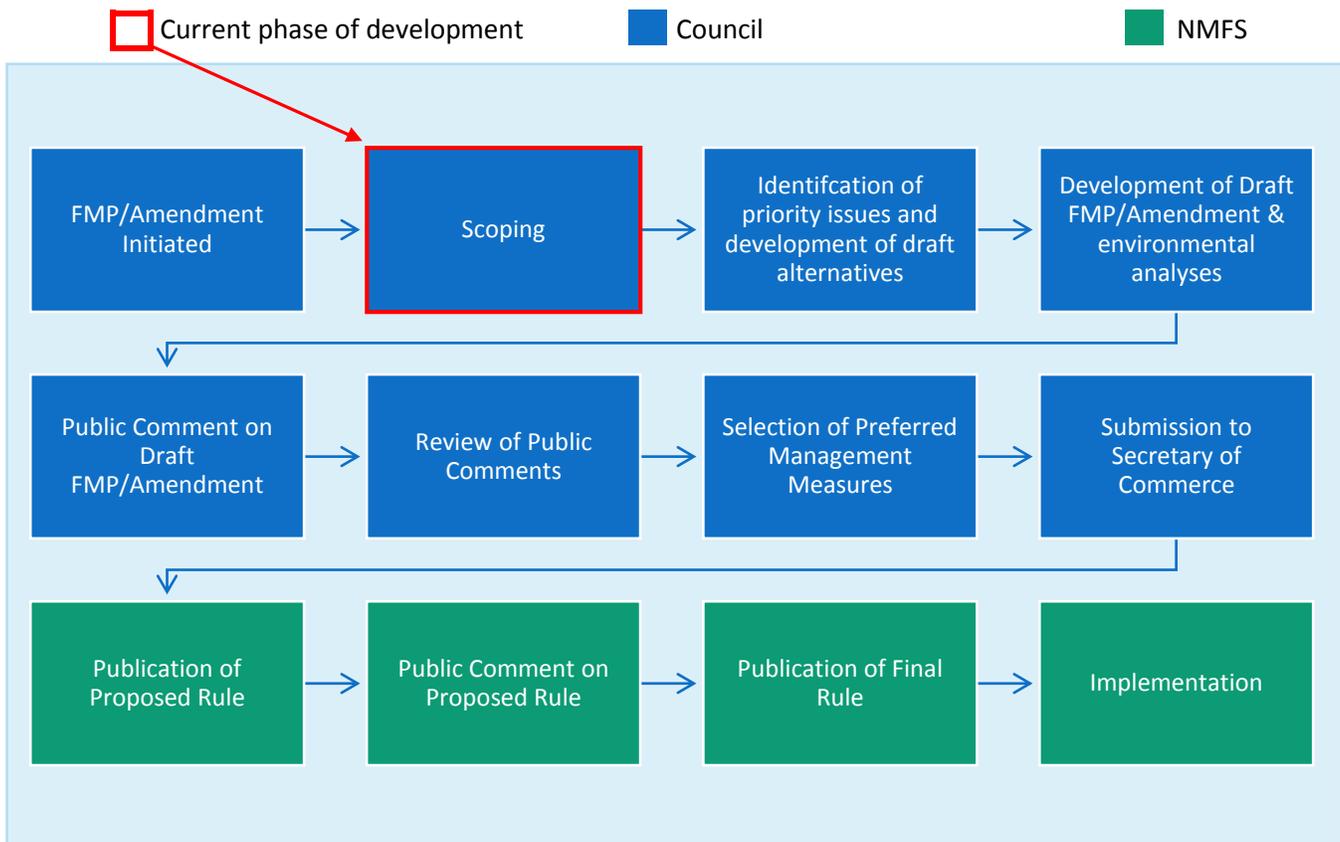


Figure 3. Action Development Process (for an FMP or FMP amendment)