Bluefish Fishery Information Document

May 2025 – revised June 2025

This Fishery Information Document provides a brief overview of the biology, stock condition, management system, and fishery performance for Atlantic bluefish with an emphasis on 2024. Data sources include unpublished National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Catch Accounting and Monitoring System (CAMS) data,[1] observer data, permit data, Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), and stock assessment information. Data for 2024 should be considered incomplete and preliminary. Due to adjustments and corrections to the data over time, some values may differ from the values used in previous years and for final catch accounting. For more resources on bluefish management, including previous Fishery Information Documents, please visit http://www.mafmc.org/bluefish/.

Key Facts

- The bluefish stock entered a stock rebuilding plan in 2022. Based on the management track assessment (data through 2023), the stock was no longer overfished; however, not yet fully rebuilt to the biomass target.
- Recreational landings were 12.39 million pounds in 2024, a 1.36 million pound increase compared with 2023.
- In 2024, 79% of recreational bluefish catch (in number of fish) was released while 21% was harvested, with the majority of harvest occurring from the shore mode and in state waters.
- Commercial landings were 1.89 million pounds in 2024, a 0.94 million pound decrease compared with 2023.
- Average coastwide ex-vessel price of bluefish was $0.93/pound in 2024, a $0.31 increase compared with 2023.

Basic Biology

Bluefish are found worldwide in tropical and subtropical waters, but in the western North Atlantic range from Nova Scotia and Bermuda to Argentina. Bluefish travel in schools of like-sized individuals and undertake seasonal migrations, moving into the Middle Atlantic Bight (MAB) during spring and then south or farther offshore during fall. Within the MAB they occur in large bays and estuaries as well as across the entire continental shelf. Juvenile stages have

[1] CAMS data provided by Sara Turner (GARFO, Analysis and Program Support Division Monitoring and Analysis Branch) unless otherwise noted.

been recorded in all estuaries within the MAB, but eggs and larvae occur in oceanic waters (Able and Fahay 1998). Bluefish have fast growth rates and reach lengths of 3.5 ft and can weigh up to 27 pounds (Bigelow and Schroeder 1953). Bluefish live to age 12 and greater (Salerno et al. 2001).

Bluefish eat a wide variety of prey items. The species has been described by Bigelow and Schroeder (1953) as "perhaps the most ferocious and bloodthirsty fish in the sea, leaving in its wake a trail of dead and mangled mackerel, menhaden, herring, alewives, and other species on which it preys."

Bluefish born in a given year (young of the year) typically fall into two distinct size classes suggesting that there are two spawning events along the east coast. Studies suggest, however, that spawning is a single, continuous event, but that young are lost from the middle portion resulting in the appearance of a split season (Smith et al. 1994). As a result of the bimodal size distribution, young are referred to as spring-spawned or summer-spawned. In the MAB, spring-spawned bluefish appear to be the dominant component of the stock.

Status of the Stock

In December 2022, a bluefish research track assessment was peer reviewed and accepted which found that the stock was not overfished, however not fully rebuilt, and overfishing was not occurring in 2021 (NEFSC 2022). This assessment underwent several updates and evaluated new datasets and model changes to develop an improved stock assessment for bluefish. This assessment served as the basis for the 2023 management track assessment.

The 2023 management track assessment (MTA) used data through 2022 and provided updated stock status and biological reference points to be used for management in 2024-2025. The MTA found that the bluefish stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring in 2022. Spawning stock biomass (SSB) in 2022 was estimated to be 52,747 mt which is 60% of the biomass target (SSB_{MSY} proxy = 88,131 mt). The 2022 fully selected fishing mortality was estimated to be 0.152 which is 64% of the overfishing threshold (F_{MSY} proxy = 0.239).

The 2025 MTA is scheduled for peer review on June 24, 2025.[2] Results from the 2025 MTA will be used for setting bluefish specifications for the 2026-2027 fishing years.

Management System and Fishery Performance

Management

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) work cooperatively to develop fishery regulations for bluefish off the east coast of the United States. The Council and Commission work in conjunction with the NMFS, which serves as the federal implementation and enforcement entity. This cooperative

[2] For additional details see: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/event/peer-review-2025-june-management-track-assessments.

management endeavor was developed because a significant portion of the catch is taken from both state waters (0-3 miles offshore) and federal waters (3-200 miles offshore, also known as the Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ). The management unit for bluefish is the U.S. waters in the western Atlantic Ocean.

The Bluefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) was implemented in 1990 and established the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's management authority over the fishery in federal waters. Amendment 1, implemented in 2000, addressed stock rebuilding and created the Bluefish Monitoring Committee which meets annually to make management measure recommendations to the Council. Amendment 3 incorporated the development of annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) into the specification process and Amendment 4 modified recreational accountability measures to accommodate uncertainty in recreational management and catch estimation. The original FMP and subsequent amendments and frameworks are available at: http://www.mafmc.org/fisheries/fmp/bluefish.

Until 2022, the annual catch limit was split 83 percent and 17 percent into recreational and commercial limits, respectively, and the discarded component of that catch was deducted to arrive at recreational and commercial total allowable landings (TAL). Additionally, landings above the expected recreational harvest could be "transferred" from the recreational to the commercial fishery as long as the final commercial quota did not exceed 10.5 million pounds. In June 2021, the Council and ASMFC's Bluefish Board took final action on the Bluefish Allocation and Rebuilding Amendment (Amendment 7). This action allocates 14 percent of the fishery annual catch limit to the commercial fishery and 86 percent to the recreational fishery, which is a 3-percentage point shift to the recreational sector from the prior allocations. This amendment also adjusted the commercial state quota allocations and allows bi-directional quota transfers. Amendment 7 documentation is available at: https://www.mafmc.org/actions/bluefish-allocation-amendment.

The Council's SSC (Scientific and Statistical Committee) reviews stock assessment results and the Advisory Panel's fishery performance report and sets the ABCs (acceptable biological catch) on a two-year cycle with a review occurring between those two years. The Council's Bluefish Monitoring Committee develops and recommends specific coastwide management measures (commercial quota, recreational harvest limit) that will achieve the catch target and makes further adjustments to total catch as needed based on management uncertainty. Finally, the Council and Board meet jointly to develop recommendations to be submitted to the NMFS.

Fishery Performance Relative to Management Measures

The recreational and commercial landings and implemented management measures through 2025 are provided in Table 1. In 2024, the recreational fishery landed 12.39 million pounds compared to the 11.96 million pounds RHL and the commercial fishery landed 1.89 million pounds compared to the 2.45 million-pound quota.

Recreational Fishery

In July 2018, MRIP released revisions to their time series of recreational catch and landings estimates based on adjustments for a revised angler intercept methodology and a new effort estimation methodology (i.e., a transition from a telephone-based effort survey to a mail-based effort survey). The revised estimates of catch and landings are several times higher than the previous estimates for shore and private boat modes. `All recreational estimates in this document reflect revised MRIP estimates except where otherwise noted. Recreational harvest estimates for 2020 were impacted by temporary suspension of shoreside intercept surveys due to the COVID-19 pandemic. NMFS used imputation methods to fill gaps in 2020 catch data with data collected in 2018 and 2019.

Trends in recreational trips associated with targeting or harvesting bluefish from 2015 to 2024 are provided in Table 2. During the past ten years, the lowest annual estimate of bluefish trips was 6.03 million (2023) and the highest annual estimate of bluefish trips was 10.63 million in 2016. Over the last 5 years (2020-2024), the number of bluefish trips averaged 6.95 million trips and the number of trips has been decreasing in recent years. In 2024, 6.26 million bluefish trips were taken, the second lowest value in the 2015-2024 period.

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, recreational harvest declined about 70% (avg. 1981-1983 = 156.34 million pounds; avg. 1991-1993 = 46.14 million pounds). Recreational harvest continued to decline at a slower rate until reaching a low level in 1999-2000 but then grew to a peak of over 46 million pounds in 2010. From 2000 to 2010 landings were relatively stable, however, recreational landings have been trending downward since 2010 (Table 2 and Figure 1). Since 2018, recreational harvest dropped to the lowest values of the time series with a 2018-2024 average harvest of 12.81 million pounds. In 2024, landings were 12.39 million pounds.

Recreational catch and harvest estimates by state for 2024 are provided in Table 3. The greatest catches (harvest plus discards) occurred in North Carolina with 8.17 million fish, followed by Florida with 4.79 million fish, New York with 2.92 million fish, and New Jersey with 2.18 million fish.

The greatest harvest of bluefish by weight in 2024 occurred in Now York with 2.64 million pounds, followed by Florida, North Carolina, and New Jersey with a little over 1 million pounds harvested. In 2024, 79% of recreational bluefish catch was released while 21% was harvested, however this varied by state (Table 3 and Figure 2).

Table 1. Summary of bluefish catch, harvest, and management measures, 2015 – 2025 (Values are in millions of pounds). In 2019, recreational landings were provided using new MRIP estimates while the RHL was developed using old MRIP estimates so cannot be directly compared.

Management Measures	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024[2]	2025
ABC	**21.54**	**19.45**	**20.64**	**21.81**	**21.81**	**16.28**	**16.28**	**25.26**	**30.62**	**17.48**	**21.83**
Comm. Quota	5.24	4.88	8.54	7.24	7.71	2.77	2.77	3.54	4.29	2.45	3.03
Comm. Landings	4.02	4.10	3.64	2.20	2.78	2.16	2.07	2.16	2.83	1.89	--
Rec. Harvest Limit	12.95	11.58	9.65	11.58	11.62	9.48	8.34	13.89	14.11	11.96	15.70
Rec. Harvest, Old MRIP	11.67	9.54	9.52	3.64	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Rec. Harvest, New MRIP	30.10	24.16	32.07	13.27	15.56	13.58	12.46	11.35	11.03	12.39	--
Rec. Possession Limit (# fish)	15	15	15	15	15	Private (3); For-Hire (5)	Private (3); For-Hire (5)	Private (3); For-Hire (5)	Private (3); For-Hire (5)	Private (3); For-Hire (5)	Private (3); For-Hire (5)
Total Catch[1]	18.65	16.09	15.65	6.96	23.50	19.93	21.25	17.85	19.08	17.67	--
Overage/Underage	-2.89	-3.36	-4.99	-14.85	N/A	+3.65	+4.97	-7.41	-11.54	+0.19	--

[1] Recreational discards were calculated with the coastwide mean weight of fish harvested in a given year multiplied by the MRIP B2s and the assumed discard mortality rate from the stock assessment (15% through 2021, 9.4% starting in 2022). Recreational discards from 2023+ are from MTAs.[2] Catch and landings values are preliminary and are not the final values to be used for catch accounting.

Table 2. Number of bluefish recreational fishing trips, landings per trip, harvest, catch and releases for the past 10 years, ME-FL. Source: MRIP.

Year	Bluefish trips[1] (N)	Landings per trip	Rec. harvest (N)	Rec. harvest (pounds)	Released (N)	Catch (N)
2015	9,406,704	1.46	13,725,106	30,098,649	28,423,854	42,148,960
2016	10,626,957	1.40	14,899,723	24,155,304	27,629,023	42,528,746
2017	9,952,090	1.39	13,845,806	32,071,432	28,317,327	42,163,133
2018	7,169,536	1.43	10,245,710	13,270,862	20,682,992	30,928,703
2019	8,250,853	1.47	12,137,290	15,555,889	26,494,646	38,631,936
2020	8,745,993	1.07	9,336,222	13,581,218	21,345,604	30,681,826
2021	7,409,375	0.83	6,183,783	12,462,781	23,566,217	29,750,000
2022	6,324,069	1.00	6,353,081	11,354,535	25,930,541	32,283,622
2023	6,029,395	0.76	4,555,594	11,026,225	17,456,096	22,011,690
2024	6,262,527	0.82	5,143,009	12,388,696	19,068,092	24,211,101

[1] Estimated number of recreational fishing trips where the primary target was bluefish or bluefish were harvested regardless of target.

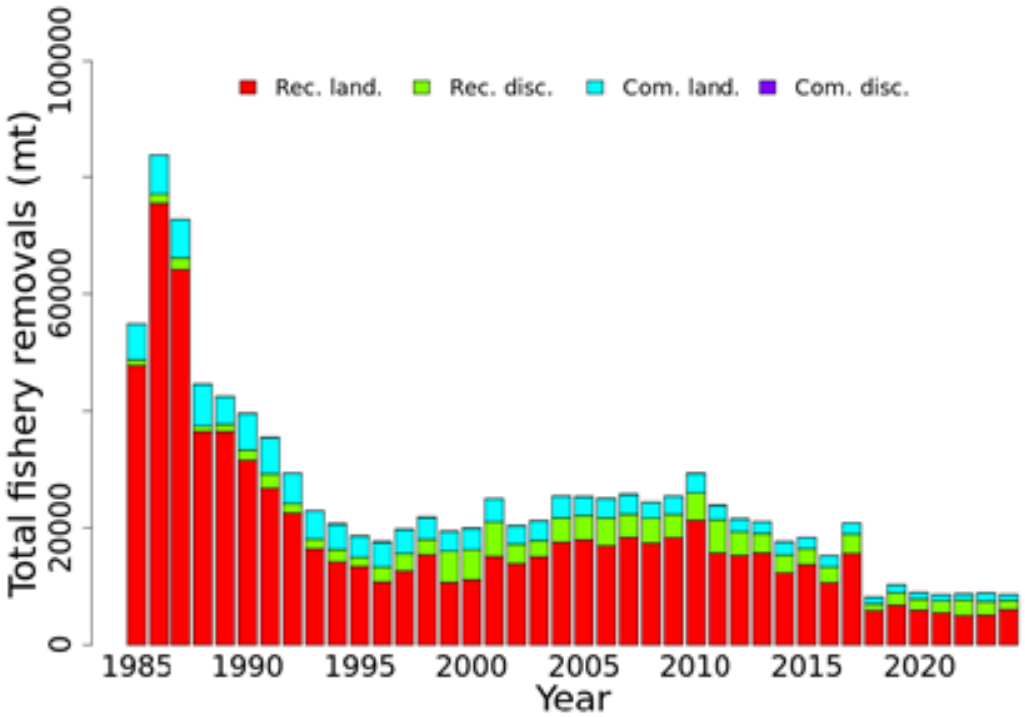

Figure 1. Total catch of Atlantic Bluefish between 1985 and 2024 by fleet (Recreational and Commercial) and disposition (landings and discards). Source: Anthony Wood, NOAA Fisheries, Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

Table 3. MRIP estimates of 2024 bluefish recreational harvest, catch, and discards by state. Harvest is in numbers of fish and pounds, while total catch, and discards are in numbers of fish. A discard mortality rate of 9.4% is assumed for the recreational fishery based on the most recent stock assessment.

State	Harvest		Catch (Number)	Total released (Number)	Dead discards (Number)
	Pounds	Number			
ME	3,512	1,466	2,933	1,467	138
NH	--	--	575	575	54
MA	755,101	144,417	864,953	720,536	67,730
RI	286,397	59,632	182,837	123,205	11,581
CT	321,294	83,566	313,654	230,088	21,628
NY	2,641,026	522,432	2,915,776	2,393,344	224,974
NJ	1,318,358	400,705	2,183,486	1,782,781	167,581
DE	164,883	64,496	313,199	248,703	23,378
MD	640,482	237,004	731,668	494,664	46,498
VA	924,968	410,933	1,195,980	785,047	73,794
NC	2,422,414	1,629,097	8,172,522	6,543,425	615,082
SC	302,259	380,821	2,332,992	1,952,171	183,504
GA	12,625	17,529	207,316	189,787	17,840
FL	2,595,377	1,190,911	4,793,207	3,602,296	338,616
Total	12,388,696	5,143,009	24,211,098	19,068,089	1,792,400

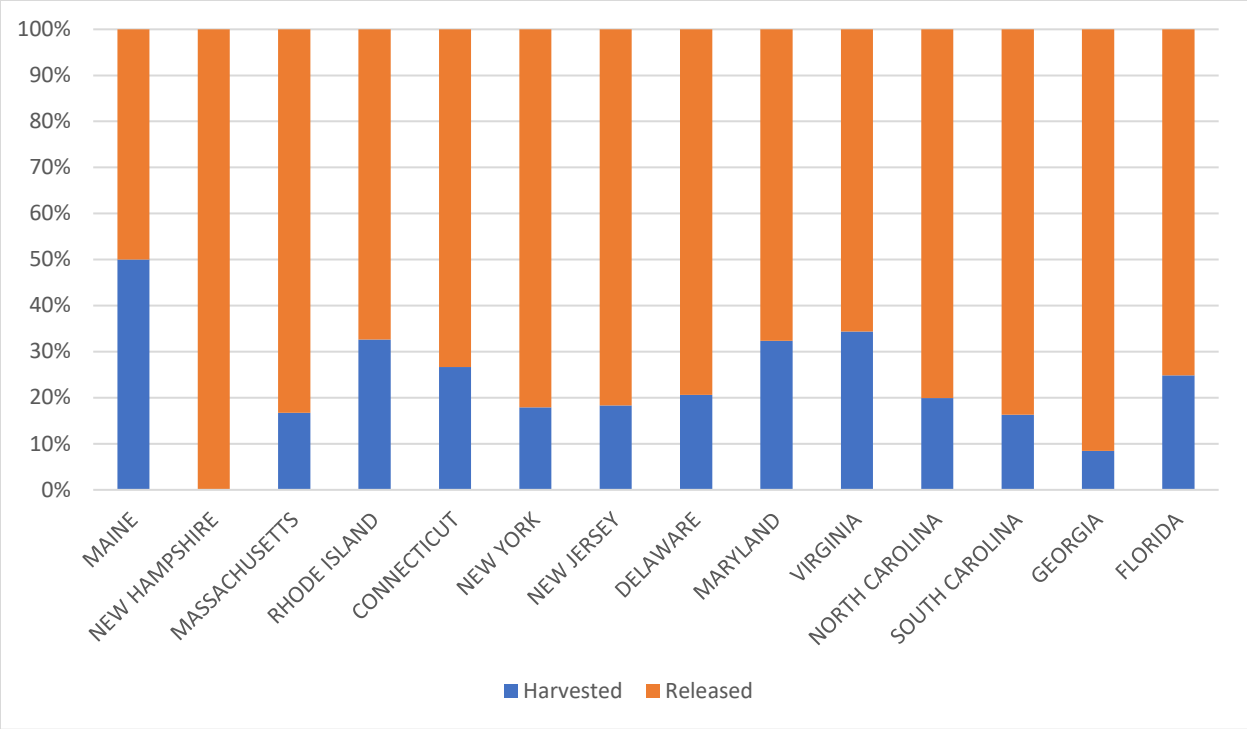

Figure 2. Proportion of bluefish recreational catch that was harvested and released by state in 2024 (in numbers of fish). Source: MRIP.

Figure 3 presents landings by mode since 2003 and indicates that the recent primary modes landing bluefish are shore mode and private boats. Based on recreational harvest in 2024, landings from shore represented 65% of overall landings, followed by private rental mode at 30% and the for-hire sector at 6%. Over the last five years (2020-2024), ~62% of the total bluefish landings came from shore, ~33% from private/rental boats, and ~5% from for-hire boats. Preliminary values indicate 984 bluefish for-hire boats were permitted for 2024, which slightly increased from 945 in 2023.[3]

[3] Source: https://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/public/public/web/NEROINET/aps/permits/data/index.html.

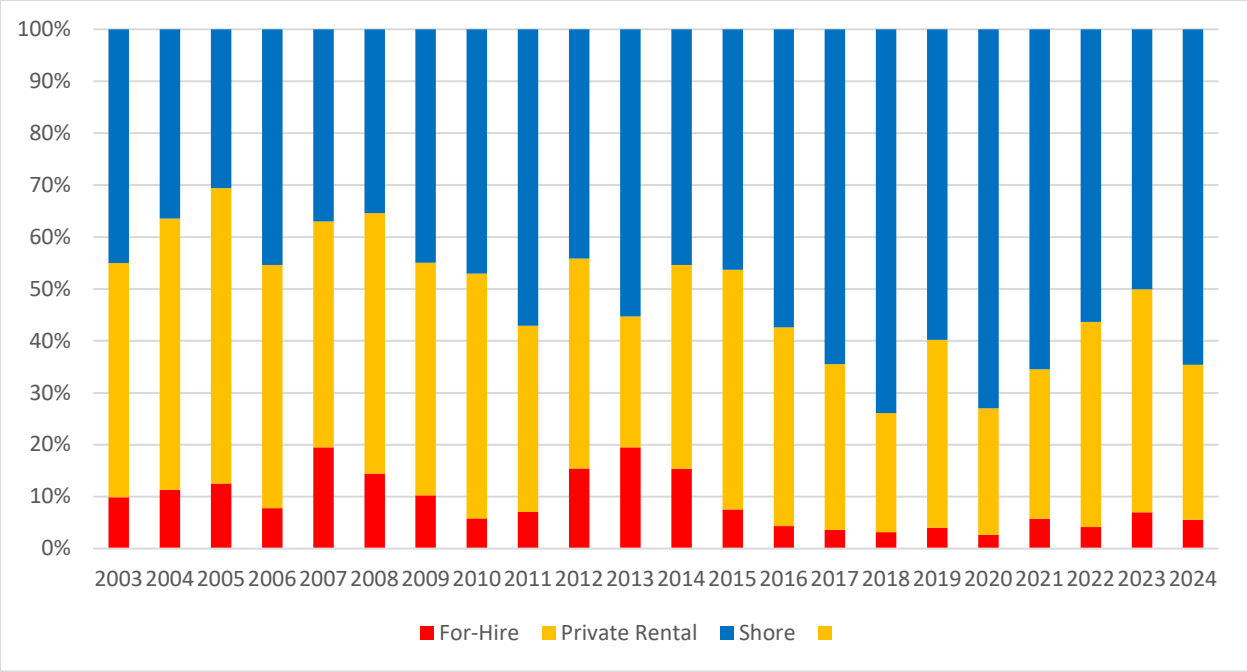

Figure 3. Bluefish recreational harvest (pounds) by mode on the Atlantic Coast, 2003-2024. Source: MRIP.

MRIP classifies catch into three fishing areas: inland, nearshore ocean (< 3 mi), and offshore ocean (> 3 mi). In 2024, the majority of coastwide bluefish harvest occurred in nearshore ocean at 51%, followed 46% from inland waters, and 3% from offshore waters. Inland and nearshore ocean are considered state waters while offshore ocean (>3 miles) is federal waters, therefore 97% of bluefish harvest by weight occurred in state waters in 2024.

Commercial Fishery

According to CAMS data, 2,545 commercial bluefish permits were issued in 2024. A subset of federally permitted vessels were active in 2024 with dealer reports identifying 288 vessels with commercial bluefish permits that landed bluefish. In addition, 395 federal dealers held bluefish permits and 119 of those dealers purchased bluefish in 2024.

In 2024, the commercial fishery landed 1.89 million pounds. CAMS data for 2024 indicate that most of the bluefish commercial landings were taken by gillnet (74%), handline (10%), trawl/dredge (9%), and other (7%).

Across states, 2024 commercial bluefish landings were the highest in North Carolina (0.85 million pounds), followed by New York (0.30 million pounds), Virginia (0.29 million pounds), Massachusetts (0.15 million pounds), and Florida (0.12 million pounds; Table 4). CAMS landings data was used to identify all NMFS statistical areas that accounted for at least 5 percent of the total bluefish landings (Table 5). Five statistical areas accounted for approximately 70% of the landings in 2024. The highest percentage of landings and the highest number of trips were from statistical area 635. A map of the proportion of bluefish landings by statistical based on CAMS data is shown in Figure 4.

Table 4. Preliminary commercial landings by state for 2024. Final commercial catch accounting will be made available by GARFO prior to setting specifications. Source: CAMS database.

State	2024 Landings (million pounds)
ME	0.000
NH	0.000
MA	0.150
RI	0.086
CT	0.030
NY	0.301
NJ	0.037
DE	0.011
MD	0.010
VA	0.293
NC	0.852
SC	0.000
GA	0.000
FL	0.122
Total	1.891

Table 5. Statistical areas that accounted for at least 5 percent of the total bluefish landings in 2024. Source: CAMS database.

Statistical Area	Landings (pounds)	Number of trips	Percent of total landings
635	663,134	6,104	35%
625	254,813	2,754	13%
611	161,584	1,644	9%
613	123,229	641	7%
514	116,631	259	6%

Norte: Some areas accounting for at least 5 percent of total bluefish landings not shown due to confidentiality requirements.

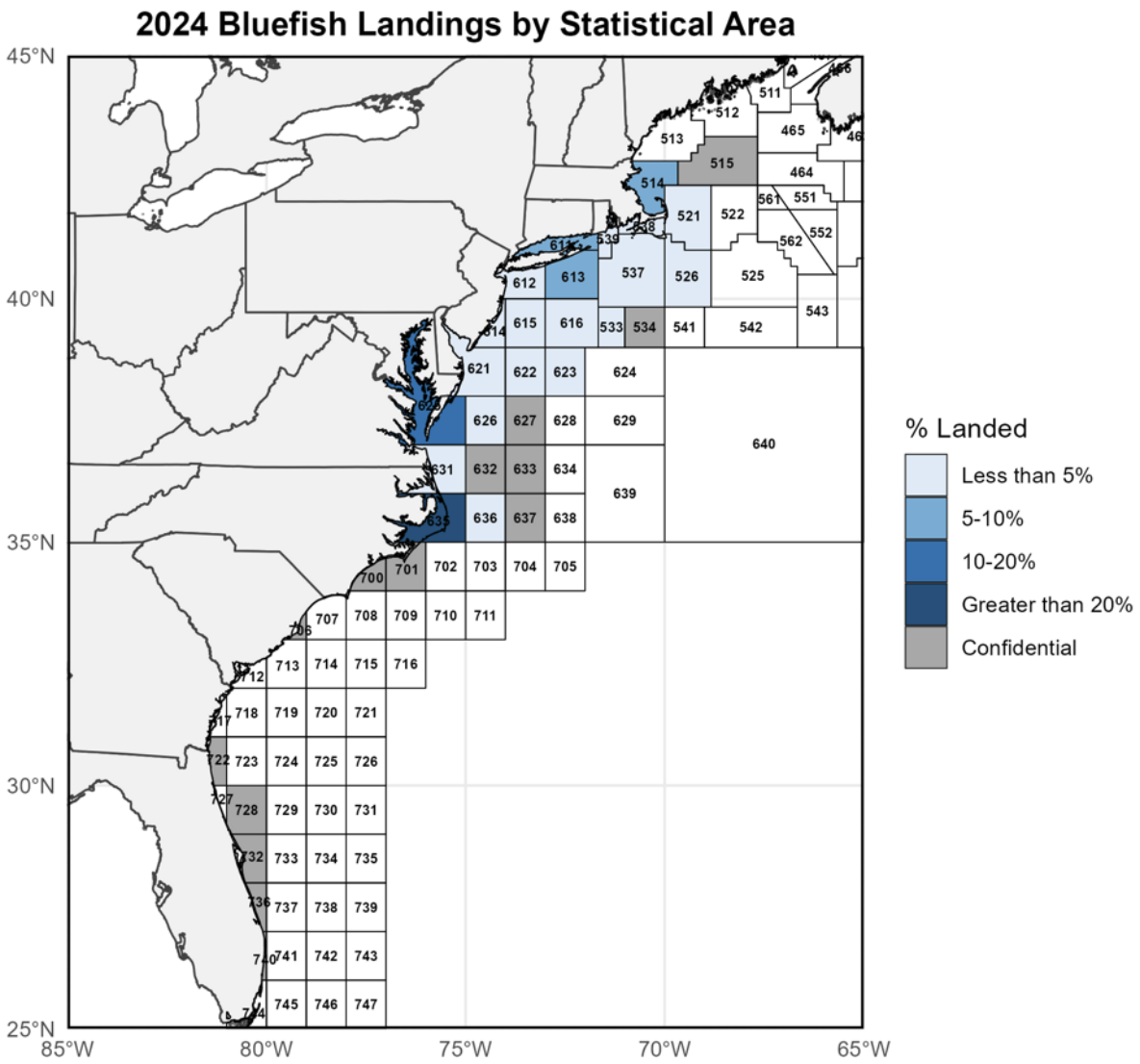

Figure 4. Proportion of bluefish landings by NMFS Statistical Area in 2024. Source: CAMS database.

The top commercial landings ports for bluefish in 2024 are shown in Table 6. Four ports qualified as "top bluefish ports," i.e., those ports where 100,000 pounds or more of bluefish were landed. Wanchese, NC landed the most commercial bluefish with 376,374 pounds landed. The ports and communities that are dependent on bluefish are described in Amendment 1 to the FMP (available at http://www.mafmc.org/fisheries/fmp/bluefish). Additional information on "County Profiles" along the Atlantic coast where fisheries occur can be found at: https://explorer.naco.org/. In addition, Fishery Performance Reports prepared by industry advisors, provide additional information on the social and economic environments from the industry members perspectives and are available at: http://www.mafmc.org. Recent trends in the fisheries are presented below and in Fishery Information Documents are also available on the Council website.

According to dealer data, commercial vessels landed about 1.89 million pounds of bluefish valued at approximately $1.76 million in 2024. Average coastwide ex-vessel price of bluefish

was $0.93/pound in 2024, a $0.31 increase from the previous year (2023 price = $0.62/pound). A time series of bluefish adjusted revenues and prices is provided in Figure 5.

Table 6. Preliminary 2024 bluefish landings in pounds for top ports (landings > 100,000 pounds). Source: CAMS database.

Port	Pounds	% of total commercial landings	# vessels
WANCHESE, NC	376,374	20%	14
BEAUFORT, NC	168,761	9%	15
HATTERAS, NC	129,802	7%	<10
MONTAUK, NY	128,699	7%	62

Norte: Some ports accounting for landings > 100,000 pounds not shown due to confidentiality requirements.

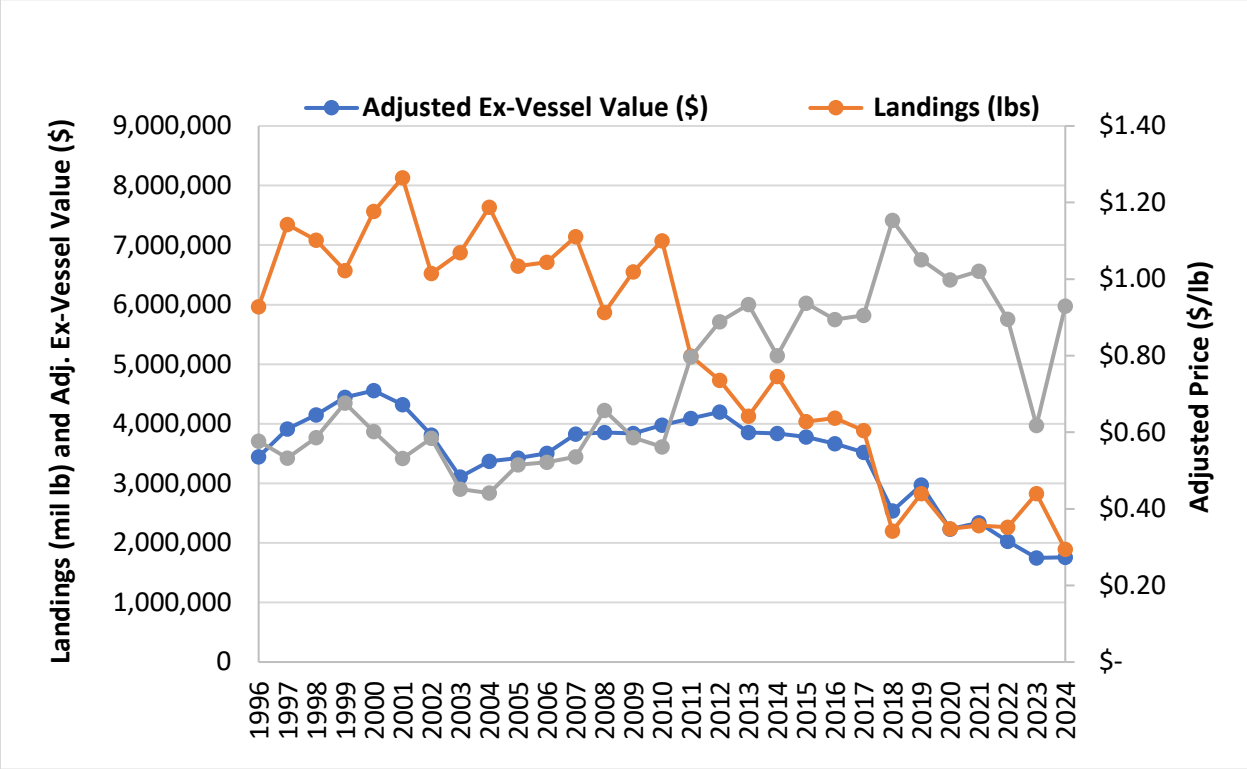

Figure 5. Bluefish commercial landings (in millions of pounds), ex-vessel value, and price/pound (adjusted to 2024 real dollars) from 1996-2024.

Bycatch species caught on bluefish targeted trips based on observer data are shown in Table 7. The commercial bluefish fishery is primarily prosecuted with gillnets and handlines, although there are other small localized fisheries, such as the beach seine fishery that operates along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Many of these fisheries do not fish exclusively for bluefish, but target a combination of species including croaker, mullet, Spanish mackerel, spot, striped bass,

and weakfish. Given the mixed-species nature of the bluefish fishery, incidental catch of non-target species is not directly attributable to the bluefish fishery.

Table 7. Percent of top commercial non-target species caught (kept or discarded) by weight on observed trips where bluefish was either target species 1 or 2 from 2019-2023. Source: Observer data retrieved April 2024.

Species	% by weight
Smooth dogfish	10%
Scup	4%
Striped bass	2%
Spiny dogfish	2%
Atlantic bonito	1%
Black sea bass	1%

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