



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

October 15, 2015

Mr. Richard B. Robins  
Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
800 North State Street, Suite 201  
Dover, DE 19901

Dr. Michelle Duval  
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201  
North Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Mr. Robins and Dr. Duval:

NOAA Fisheries understands that the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils are both committed to the effective management of blueline tilefish within their respective jurisdictions. This letter provides guidance to aid the Councils in the management of blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic regions for 2016.

Blueline tilefish is managed in the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) in the South Atlantic. Blueline tilefish is not currently in a Mid-Atlantic Council FMP, and is being managed under an emergency rule effective through December 1, 2015, that is likely to be extended for up to 186 days, as provided for in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. I understand that the Mid-Atlantic Council is developing an amendment to its FMP for Golden Tilefish to manage blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic region, and intends to submit the amendment for Secretarial review early in 2016. If approved, the Mid-Atlantic Council's intention is to establish an annual catch limit (ACL) for blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic region and to implement management measures to constrain harvest to the ACL. For 2016, based on recent developments regarding the use of the SEDAR 32 stock assessment for coast-wide management advice, we are recommending that each Council establish an ACL for the fishery within its area of jurisdiction, at a level that will prevent overfishing.

A stock assessment for blueline tilefish (SEDAR 32) was completed in 2013, which included data through 2011. Although the South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) determined that the assessment was applicable to the entire Atlantic coast at its April 2015 meeting, the South Atlantic SSC raised concerns about the utility of projections from the assessment in specifying the acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels. The Mid-Atlantic SSC also reviewed the stock assessment. On June 1, 2015, a subgroup of the Mid-Atlantic SSC stated "The consensus is that in the light of recent events, SEDAR 32 does not currently represent best scientific information available to establish catch limits or other technical management measures." In September 2015, the South Atlantic SSC reviewed updated projections and concluded that the projections do not represent the best scientific information available and are not adequate to support blueline tilefish fishing level recommendations for either current or future years.



Because the projections from the stock assessment have been deemed by the SSCs of both Councils to be inadequate for management advice, we are recommending that alternative, non-assessment based methods be used by each Council to establish the 2016 ABC for blueline tilefish for the fishery within its area of jurisdiction. I request that each Council work with its SSC to establish an ABC using the best scientific information available that is appropriate for its respective region. In the South Atlantic, it may be advisable to derive ABC based on methods that incorporate recent landings such as Only Reliable Catch Stocks. In the Mid-Atlantic, where less catch history and survey information is available, the SSC may consider developing an ABC proxy. Catch advice in the Mid-Atlantic should reflect the moderate, pre-expansion harvest levels in the region and establish catch limits consistent with this lower exploitation, rather than basing catch limits on the recent, expanded fishery in the region. In addition, the two Councils should ensure that the accountability measures and management measures constrain catch to the ACLs.

As you are aware, studies are underway to determine the genetic composition of blueline tilefish in the Atlantic. We are hopeful that these studies will inform the Councils and NMFS whether there is more than one stock along the east coast and, if two stocks exist, establish their geographic distribution. The genetic work will be incorporated into a new coast-wide assessment for blueline tilefish scheduled to be completed in 2017. The information on stock structure and distribution may result in further guidance about the management of the stock(s), as provided for in Section 304(f) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

I commend both Councils for their work and cooperation to date and look forward to working with both of you to sustainably manage the blueline tilefish resource along the Atlantic coast in both the near- and long-term.

Sincerely,



Samuel D. Rauch, III  
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

cc:

John Bullard, Regional Administrator, Greater Atlantic Region  
Dr. Roy Crabtree, Regional Administrator, Southeast Region