

Background Paper: Flyingfish/Dolphinfish Working Group of the Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC)

Dolphinfish (*Coryphaena hippurus*) are highly migratory and pelagic. In the western Atlantic ocean, dolphinfish are commonly found off the U.S. South Atlantic coast, throughout the Gulf of Mexico, and the wider Caribbean south to the coast of Brazil. There are no stock assessments for dolphinfish in the Western Central Atlantic. Life history characteristics of this species include rapid growth and early maturity, and the [2022 Report to Congress on the Status of U.S. Stocks](#) indicates that dolphinfish is currently not overfished and not subject to overfishing. However, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) has received public comment that dolphinfish abundance appears to be diminishing and that there is concern over the health of the dolphin stock and fishery.¹ A recent scientific literature review with a comprehensive analysis of international fisheries data from 1950 to 2018 found that commercial landings in the wider Caribbean have increased nearly three-fold, yet 23 nations that are known to catch dolphinfish do not report their catch statistics to the relevant international body (i.e., the U.N. Food and Agriculture Administration).² This study by Merten *et al.* (2022) presented extensive evidence of increased pressure on the dolphinfish stock and greater uncertainty in stock status.

The Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission (WECAFC) has agreed – as a result of a U.S. recommendation in 2019 – to broaden the mandate of its Flyingfish Working Group to include dolphinfish and other pelagic species that are not managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. WECAFC is a regional fisheries body that acts in an advisory capacity to promote the effective conservation, management, and development of living marine resources in the Wider Caribbean. It has 34 members, including the United States. The first meeting of WECAFC’s newly-mandated Flyingfish/Dolphinfish Working Group is tentatively planned for 2023.

Goals of the WECAFC Dolphinfish/Flyingfish Working Group for its first meeting include:

- To identify regional needs and priorities;
- To highlight areas for potential collaboration; and
- To develop a work plan and recommendations for future activities of the Working Group.

Through this initial U.S. public meeting on September 21, 2022, NOAA Fisheries’ Office of International Affairs, Trade and Commerce seeks to make the Council and U.S. fisheries stakeholders aware of the new WECAFC Working Group. We invite the Council’s input on possible U.S. objectives and outcomes for the 2023 meeting, as well as any specific information that would inform the goals outlined above. Our intention is to share information about the Working Group’s activities as it becomes available; any input from the Council will inform future U.S. participation and the representation of U.S. interests.

¹ Amendment 10 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Dolphin and Wahoo Fishery of the Atlantic (2021). South Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

² Condition of the international fisheries, catch and effort trends, and fishery data gaps for dolphinfish (*Coryphaena hippurus*) from 1950 to 2018 in the western Central Atlantic Ocean. Marine Policy 143 (2022) 105189, Merten et al.