

Update for the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (September 16-20, 2024)
Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission’s Working Group on Flyingfish-Dolphinfish

The [Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission \(WECAFC\)](#) 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. WECAFC 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 within the scope of management authority of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). (Although the dolphinfish is known to cross international boundaries throughout the wider Caribbean, *Coryphaena hippurus* is not considered by ICCAT to be one of the “tuna and tuna-like species,” as it is not part of the Family *Scombridae*.)

WECAFC’s Flyingfish-Dolphinfish Working Group held its first meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on June 4-5, 2024. The meeting was hosted by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council with financial support from NOAA Fisheries’ Office of International Affairs, Trade, and Commerce (IATC). The U.S. delegation included NOAA Fisheries staff from IATC, Southeast Regional Office, and Southeast Fisheries Science Center, as well as the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Caribbean Fishery Management Council.

The Working Group meeting had more than 50 participants representing WECAFC members that included Barbados, Colombia, Dominica, France, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, United States and Venezuela. Each gave a presentation describing their flyingfish and dolphinfish fisheries. The United States described its dolphinfish regulations and recent work to develop a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for the U.S. Atlantic coast. Many Working Group participants suggested the need for increased biological sampling throughout the wider Caribbean, collection of life history data, and genetic studies that could eventually help to inform our understanding of stock dynamics, stock structure and status of Atlantic dolphinfish.

There was enthusiasm among some meeting participants to work toward the development of a regional stock assessment for dolphinfish. The United States suggested that given significant data limitations, a step-wise approach would be essential: first identifying data critical needs, then working collaboratively to address these gaps, while also considering other appropriate tools for data poor fisheries to evaluate population trends. In order to increase data collection and reporting, the Working Group recommended that dolphinfish, along with wahoo, should both be prioritized within WECAFC’s Data Collection Reference Framework.

In recognition of the data limitations, there was also broad support for beginning to consider the key elements and steps towards precautionary management of dolphinfish in the wider Caribbean. Thus, the Working Group called for the development of a preliminary outline of a regional fishery management plan; this outline would facilitate the consideration of initial management alternatives. It is important to note that any such plan would not replace or amend the regulatory measures already in place within the United States. WECAFC has developed similar region-wide plans for several other stocks; these plans are intended solely to guide

members on measures to help ensure the sustainable management and conservation of resources in the region and are non-binding.

The Working Group's recommendations will be presented to the Commission at its next annual meeting, expected to occur during the summer of 2025. For further information, contact Rachel.O'Malley@noaa.gov or Laura.Cimo@noaa.gov.