

Blueline Tilefish Issues Paper

11/8/2021

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Topic: This issues paper contains a broad overview of the science, management, landings, and status determination criteria of blueline tilefish to help address the issue of overages of the annual catch limits (ACL).

Issue: In the last six years, landings of blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic region have often exceeded the sector and total ACL. The National Standard Guidelines contain the following language: “If catch exceeds the ACL for a given stock or stock complex more than once in the last four years, the system of ACLs and AMs should be reevaluated, and modified if necessary, to improve its performance and effectiveness.” 50 C.F.R. § 310(g)(7).

Assessment and management history:

November 2013 – Following **SEDAR 32**, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) determines blueline tilefish is undergoing overfishing and overfished. The management area in the stock assessment was defined such that landings from Rhode Island to Florida were used.

April 2014 - **Emergency rule** is effective for one year to reduce overfishing.

November 2014 – **Regulatory Amendment 21** changes the minimum stock size threshold and blueline tilefish is no longer overfished.

March 2015 – Actions in **Amendment 32** decrease the ACLs and end overfishing. The ACL equaled 98% of acceptable biological catch (ABC) to account for landings north of North Carolina. At the time, an examination of the landings indicated that approximately 2% of blueline tilefish landings originated in the Mid-Atlantic region, north of the North Carolina/Virginia border. The amendment established a commercial trip limit of 100 pounds (lbs) gutted weight (gw), and a vessel limit of 1/vessel/day during the May through August recreational open season. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (South Atlantic Council) goal was to align the recreational season with that for snowy grouper since the two species are frequently caught together and compatible seasons would reduce regulatory discards and associated release mortality, while maximizing access to the fishery for fishermen in the region.

August 2016 – Actions in **Regulatory Amendment 25** increased the ACLs based on a revised ABC recommendation from the South Atlantic Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The ACL equaled 78% of the ABC to account for landings from the Greater Atlantic Region. This percent was based on the ratio of landings between the South Atlantic and the Greater Atlantic region from 2011-2014. The framework amendment increased the commercial trip limit to 300 lbs gw and recreational bag limit to 3/fish/person/day in a May through August recreational open season.

October 2017 – Following **SEDAR 50**, NMFS determined that blueline tilefish south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, is not undergoing overfishing and was not overfished. The status of the stock was unknown north of Cape Hatteras due to insufficient data. SEDAR 50 used the conclusion from a stock ID workshop that blueline tilefish constitute a single panmictic population throughout the U.S. geographic range and concluded that the main stock assessment effort proceed with models including removals restricted to areas between the Council/Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council boundary and Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The Assessment Panel also proceeded with separate efforts to investigate the available data for the region north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to provide advice for management of blueline tilefish in that region.

December 2017 – The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council incorporated blueline tilefish as a managed species in the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan and established blueline tilefish management measures, including an ACL setting process, sector allocations, possession limits, fishing season, permitting, and reporting requirements.

February 2020 – The final rule for **Regulatory Amendment 27** implemented a commercial trip limit of 100 lbs gw from January 1 through April 30 and 300 lbs gw from May 1 through December 31. The Council reasoned that a 100 lbs gw trip limit of blueline tilefish from January through April would help reduce snowy grouper discards while an increase to a 300 lbs gw trip limit at the beginning of May would allow fishermen in the northern portion of the South Atlantic Council’s area of jurisdiction to have greater access to the resource and optimize their harvest.

August 2020 – The final rule for **Abbreviated Framework Amendment 3** increased the ACL. The ACL equaled the ABC. The ABC was based on the sum of the ABC from areas south and north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The abbreviated framework amendment includes the following discussion on the choice of ACL equal to ABC: “Setting the ACL below the ABC in Amendment 32 and Regulatory Amendment 25 were intended as a temporary measure to account for landings outside the South Atlantic Council’s jurisdiction; hence, the purpose was not to account for management uncertainty related to fishing activity within the South Atlantic Council’s area of jurisdiction. Furthermore, blueline tilefish landings that occurred north of the North Carolina/Virginia border prior to 2017 were accounted for in the recommended catch levels from SEDAR 50 (2017).”

OFL, ABC, ACLs, and landings:

The tables below include the status determination criteria and landings, some of which is preliminary. Landings were accessed from the Southeast Regional Office’s ACL Monitoring website on November 2, 2021. Landings are in pounds whole weight.

	OFL	ABC	Total ACL	Commercial ACL	Recreational ACL
2021	328,965	233,968	233,968	117,148	116,820
2020	328,965	233,968	233,968	117,148	116,820
2019	226,500	224,100	174,798	87,521	87,277
2018	226,500	224,100	174,798	87,521	87,277
2017	226,500	224,100	174,798	87,521	87,277
2016	226,500	224,100	174,798	87,521	87,277

	Total landings	% OFL	%ABC	% Total ACL
2021	Final landings not available			
2020	508,816	155%	217%	217%
2019	206,017	91%	92%	114%
2018	209,648	93%	94%	107%
2017	241,517	93%	108%	108%
2016	272,678	120%	123%	123%

	Commercial landings	Commercial ACL	Landings vs. ACL
2021	119,692	117,148	102.20%
2020	116,563	117,148	99.50%
2019	95,904	87,521	109.58%
2018	93,051	87,521	106.32%
2017	87,558	87,521	100.04%
2016	100,392	87,521	114.71%

	Recreational landings	Recreational ACL	Landings vs. ACL
2021	187,825*	116,820	160.78%
2020	392,253	116,820	335.78%
2019	110,113	87,277	126.16%
2018	116,597	87,277	133.59%
2017	153,959	87,277	176.40%
2016	172,286	87,277	197.40%

*Preliminary wave 1-4 MRIP landings. Recreational landings were provided from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center on October 25, 2021, and include both MRIP-CHTS and Southeast Region Headboat Survey landings.

The following information for charter and private recreational fishermen from the MRIP Query website and was accessed on November 15, 2021. These are MRIP-FES landings, and do not include Southeast Region Headboat Survey landings.

	Estimate Status	Recreational harvest (A+B1)	PSE
2021	Preliminary*	213,736	27.3
2020	Final	856,317	58.3
2019	Final	129,904	33.5
2018	Final	120,173	36.5
2017	Final	276,053	43.6
2016	Final	293,099	44.9

*Preliminary wave 1-4 MRIP landings

The following information for the charter and private recreational sector is from the MRIP Query website and was accessed on November 15, 2021. The blank cells indicate no intercepts occurred. The highlighted cells indicate when the PSE for the estimate is greater than 50%. These are MRIP-FES landings, and do not include Southeast Region Headboat Survey landings.

	Waves					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
2021*			92,365	121,371	Not avail	Not avail
2020			33,288	800,941		22,087
2019	12,730	1,176	37,905	78,092		
2018	55		28,777	91,340		
2017	3,834	52,601	65,086	60,925		93,608
2016	2,771		13,516	276,812		

*Preliminary wave 1-4 MRIP landings

Current possession limits:

Commercial:

- **Trip Limit:**
 - January 1 - April 30: 100 lbs gw
 - May 1 - December 31: 300 lbs gw

Recreational:

- **Retention Allowed:** May 1 - August 31
- **Bag Limit:** 3 fish/person/day

Current accountability measures:

	In-season closure	Post-season
Commercial	Yes	If overfished and total ACL exceeded, reduce commercial ACL by overage.
Recreational	Yes	If overfished and total ACL exceeded, reduce length of the recreational season to ensure recreational landings do not exceed recreational ACL and reduce recreational ACL by the overage.

Commercial sector.

- (i) If commercial landings for blueline tilefish, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the commercial ACL of 117,148 lb (53,137 kg), round weight, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the commercial sector for the remainder of the fishing year. On and after the effective date of such a notification, all sale or purchase of blueline tilefish is prohibited and harvest or possession of blueline tilefish in or from the South Atlantic EEZ is limited to the bag and possession limits. These bag and possession limits apply in the South Atlantic on board a vessel for which a valid Federal commercial or charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper has been issued, without regard to where such species were harvested, *i.e.*, in state or Federal waters.
- (ii) If commercial landings exceed the ACL, and the combined commercial and recreational ACL (total ACL) specified in [paragraph \(z\)\(3\)](#) of this section, is exceeded, and blueline

tilefish is overfished, based on the most recent Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register, at or near the beginning of the following fishing year to reduce the commercial ACL for that following year by the amount of the commercial ACL overage in the prior fishing year.

(2) *Recreational sector.*

(i) If recreational landings for blueline tilefish, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the recreational ACL of 116,820 lb (52,989 kg), round weight, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the recreational sector for the remainder of the fishing year, unless the RA determines that no closure is necessary based on the best scientific information available. On and after the effective date of such a notification, the bag and possession limits are zero.

(ii) If recreational landings for blueline tilefish, exceed the applicable recreational ACL, and the combined commercial and recreational ACL (total ACL) specified in [paragraph \(z\)\(3\)](#) of this section is exceeded, and blueline tilefish is overfished, based on the most recent Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register, to reduce the length of the recreational fishing season in the following fishing year to ensure recreational landings do not exceed the recreational ACL the following fishing year. When NMFS reduces the length of the following recreational fishing season and closes the recreational sector, the following closure provisions apply: The bag and possession limits for blueline tilefish in or from the South Atlantic EEZ are zero. Additionally, the recreational ACL will be reduced by the amount of the recreational ACL overage in the prior fishing year. The fishing season and recreational ACL will not be reduced if the RA determines, using the best scientific information available, that no reduction is necessary.

Possible ways to ensure landings are below the ACLs:

Below are possible tools that could be adjusted or implemented to reduce the likelihood that the ACLs are exceeded. Considerations should be given to the high discard rate of blueline tilefish, the co-occurrence with other species such as snowy grouper, and the challenges with in-season AMs with short seasons.

- Allowable bag and trip limits
- Allowable season
- Allowable areas
- Accountability measures (in-season and post-season)
- Buffers with triggers at specific targets
- Harvest tags
- Others?