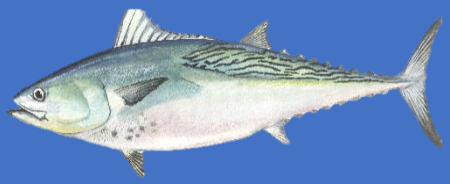
Little Tunny White Paper



December 2022

On September 19, 2022, the Council received a letter from the American Saltwater Guides Association (ASGA) requesting they consider re-adding false albacore to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Coastal Migratory Pelagic (CMP) Resources of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Region (CMP FMP). In response to the letter, the Council directed staff to develop a white paper examining if little tunny (also known as false albacore) meet the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Management and Conservation Act (Magnuson Stevens Act) criteria for a stock in need of conservation and management (50 C.F.R §600.305(c)(1)).

The little tunny is a member of the family Scombridae. It is steel blue with 3-5 broken, dark wavy lines, not extending below the lateral line. The belly is white and lacks stripes. There are 3-7 dark spots between the pelvic and pectoral fins. Spots below the pectoral fin are dusky. The little tunny has a robust, torpedo-shaped body built for powerful swimming. The mouth is large, slightly curved, and terminal with rigid jaws with the lower jaw slightly protruding past the upper jaw. Scales are lacking on the body except for the corselet and the lateral line. The corselet is a band of large, thick scales forming a circle around the body behind the head, extending backwards along the lateral line. The lateral line is slightly undulate with a slight arch below the front of the dorsal fin, then straight to the caudal keel. The caudal fin is deeply lunate, with a slender caudal peduncle including one short keel on each side.

Each of the ten criteria found in the Magnuson Stevens Act are discussed below. This discussion is ***preliminary*** ***and does not constitute a conclusion on whether little tunny is in need of conservation and management via a federal fishery management plan.***

Information informing this white paper can be found in the October 2022 Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel Report in the fishery overview.

(i) The stock is an important component of the marine environment.

The little tunny is found worldwide in tropical to temperate waters, between 56°N-30°S. In the western Atlantic Ocean, it ranges from Massachusetts south to Brazil, including the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea, and Bermuda. It is the most common scombrid in the western north Atlantic. This fish is typically found in nearshore waters, inshore over the continental shelf in turbid, brackish waters. Adult little tunny school according to size with other scombrid species at

depths ranging from 3-490 ft (1-150 m). However, during certain times of the year the schools break apart with individuals scattering throughout the habitat. Juveniles form compact schools offshore.

(ii) The stock is caught by the fishery.

Since 2000, total landings of false albacore have averaged 3,141,490 pounds per year along the east coast. Recreational landings have averaged 2,680,257 pounds per year and commercial landings around 461,233 pounds per year. Landings have stayed relatively consistent, with the exception on an increase in both commercial and recreational between 2012 and 2019. Commercial and recreational landings have historically and continue to primarily occur in the South Atlantic region (North Carolina through Florida), when compared to the Mid-Atlantic (New York through Virginia) and North Atlantic (Maine through Connecticut) regions. There has not been a stock assessment for this species, so the stock status is currently unknown.

(iii) Whether an FMP can improve or maintain the condition of the stock.

Little tunny has not been assessed and as a result the stock condition is not well understood. However, there is no other available information suggesting that the stocks may be in a depleted or otherwise diminished condition, or that management is necessary to address such conditions. While the condition of the stocks is not well understood, conservation and management under an FMP usually presents some potential to improve or maintain the condition of the stock. Unless harvest is occurring in state waters, management under an FMP would allow management measures to be adopted that would at least be able to maintain the current condition of the stocks.

(iv) The stock is a target of a fishery.

Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) members have indicated that recreational fishing for little tunny has become a more popular and targeted fishery in recent years. The species appear to be incidentally caught when fishing for other species commercially and they are often used as strip bait in the trolling and shark fisheries. AP members indicated that commercial landing of little tunny is a niche fishery and while a small food market has developed, it is not a volume fishery. If more than 10,000 pounds are caught the market is flooded and the price drops significantly.

(v) The stock is important to commercial, recreational, or subsistence users.

AP members discussed the importance of little tunny for the recreational sector throughout the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, as well as the Carolinas. For the for-hire component of the recreation sector specifically, little tunny can often still be caught on bad fishing days, allowing for-hire operators to get fish hooked for their customers and keep trip satisfaction high. In the Carolinas, fly fishing for little tunny has become popular and fishermen will travel to the coast to participate in the fishery making it an important driver of tourism. Commercial AP members noted the importance of little tunny as bait but noted that landing little tunny to sell is a niche fishery, as illustrated by the relative low landings.

(vi) The fishery is important to the Nation or to the regional economy.

Given the low landings of little tunny over the last twenty years when compared to other fisheries throughout the Nation, the fishery does not appear to be of notable importance to the Nation. However, AP members have indicated that the fishery may be important to regional economies.

(vii) The need to resolve competing interests and conflicts among user groups and whether an FMP can further that resolution.

There are no known competing interests or conflicts among user groups within the current fisheries harvesting or fishing for little tunny as discussed in sections above; therefore, conservation and management under an FMP would not have any competing interests to resolve.

(viii) The economic condition of a fishery and whether an FMP can produce more efficient utilization.

AP members have indicated that the recreational fishery is important economically in some regions while the commercial fishery is more niche. It was noted that the commercial fishery (landed) is not a volume fishery and that when a significant amount of little tunny are added to the market at one time, the price drops significantly. More discussion may be necessary to determine if an FMP can produce more efficient utilization of the fishery.

(ix) The needs of a developing fishery, and whether an FMP can foster orderly growth.

AP members have indicated that the recreational fishery is developing while other AP members have indicated the fishery is stable and not increasing in the Atlantic as evidenced in the discussion provided in the sections above. More discussion may be necessary to determine if an FMP can foster orderly growth.

(x) The extent to which the fishery is already adequately managed by states, by state/Federal programs, or by Federal regulations pursuant to other FMPs or international commissions, or by industry self-regulation, consistent with the requirements of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and other applicable law.

There are no known regulations in place to directly manage little tunny on the state or federal levels. These species may be indirectly managed through existing state or federal fisheries regulations such as gear restrictions or generic bag limits and size limits. In the Atlantic exclusive economic zone, vessels with federal commercial coastal migratory pelagics permits already report all landings that are sold to a federally permitted dealer including species that are not federally managed. The South Atlantic electronic for-hire program requires that federally permitted for-hire coastal migratory pelagic vessels in the Atlantic report all landings including species that are not subject to federal management. Finally, the Marine Recreational Information Program captures information on all species caught by recreational fishermen.