

Blueline Tilefish Joint Subcommittee REVISED Meeting

Summary

July 20 & 22 (via webinar)

Attendees: Jim Gilmore, Michelle Duval, Dewey Hemilright, Jim Gartland, Sarah Gaichas, Tom Roller, Mike Luisi

Council Staff: Hannah Hart, Chip Collier, José Montañez, Michael Schmidtke, Myra Brouwer, Brandon Muffley, Judd Curtis

Other Attendees: Doug Potts (GARFO), Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Shakira Goffe (VMRC), Alan Bianchi (NC DEQ), James Fletcher (UNFA), Greg Hueth (MAFMC)

This report was revised from the original version to incorporate follow-up discussions among staff about appropriate terminology.

Background

The subcommittee continued discussions to develop a science-based, transparent, and adaptable approach for determining the jurisdictional apportionment of the blueline tilefish Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) between the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils for the area from Cape Hatteras, N.C. to the NC/VA border and north.

The sub-committee held its initial meeting on May 1, 2026, during which it reviewed the approach that was used to establish the current apportionment of the ABC, including fishery-independent survey information and past blueline tilefish ABC apportionment decisions; examined approaches that have been used to address jurisdictional apportionment for other stocks; and identified additional information to consider for accomplishing the subcommittee's charge.

Across the July 20 and 22 meeting, the subcommittee examined how survey, fishery, and socioeconomic information could contribute to an apportionment framework, then worked through the structure, uncertainty, stability provisions, and implementation needs of a weighted rubric. The discussion emphasized consistency with the stock assessment, transparency about data limitations and regulatory effects, as well as the additional analysis needed before recommending revised apportionments. Specifically, the sub-committee:

- Reviewed the 2025 South Atlantic Deepwater Longline (SADL) Survey (SADLS) data and coverage of bottom temperature
- Reviewed commercial and recreational landings, including price per pound and landings by region/port

- Reviewed a draft rubric approach for apportioning the ABC and discussed the suitability of the proposed data categories (fishery-independent survey, commercial fishery, recreational fishery, and past apportionments)
 - Discussed sources of uncertainty for each category
 - Discussed possible management approaches to establish the apportionments in the future
 - Developed recommendations for the Councils to consider
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1. SADL Survey

The subcommittee reviewed the most recent year of the expanded SADL survey information and noted the lower survey CPUE observed in 2025 compared to the previous two years.

Subcommittee members cautioned that a single-year decrease should not be interpreted as evidence of a stock decline. They highlighted that the northern portion of the survey (North Carolina through Delaware Bay) used consistent timing and standardized methods, but that random stations can fall on unsuitable habitat and weather can affect operations. Industry observations likewise suggested that the lower catch reflected the locations selected rather than a broad decrease in abundance. Members noted that:

- Survey timing was consistent with previous years.
- Standardized methods, including use of the same vessel, captain, and soak timer in the northern survey area were maintained.
- Random site selection and weather-related effects likely contributed to lower catches.
- Habitat and site selection strongly influence catch rates.

Given the available time series is short and annual catches can vary with station-level conditions, the subcommittee advocated for the continuation of the survey and, in the meantime, developing an analysis that can separate spatial and temporal patterns from catchability effects. A model-based approach could estimate the relative biomass or abundance in each jurisdictional area, quantify uncertainty, and incorporate relative covariates as the time series and supporting data improves. There was broad support for:

- Continuing the SADL survey and inclusion of all years of the survey in the fishery-independent survey category of the apportionment rubric.
- Exploring model-based (spatio-temporal) analyses rather than relying solely on survey design-based CPUE.
- Evaluating habitat variables such as bottom temperature and substrate, for possible incorporation into future analyses.
- Documenting weather, habitat, and station-level observations that may improve future models.

As part of the SADL survey discussion, the subcommittee discussed whether bottom temperature data could help explain blueline tilefish habitat and refine regional survey estimates. Specifically, the subcommittee discussed potentially using the Global Ocean Physics Reanalysis (GLORYS)

bottom temperature data as a potential explanatory variable. GLORYS is an ocean physics model that is fit to observed data (e.g., satellite, buoys) and produces a uniform daily bottom-temperature dataset across the region. The subcommittee noted the consistency across the region as a positive, but emphasized that the model assimilates the data at large scales (8 km grids) and may not be as useful when looking at smaller spatial scales such as the SADL survey strata. The subcommittee highlighted that GLORYS data should be validated against temperatures measured during the survey before it is used. Key points included:

- GLORYS provides valuable coastwide information but has limitations near Cape Hatteras because of highly dynamic ocean conditions.
- Model output should be compared with observed survey temperatures before being incorporated.
- Bottom temperature alone is unlikely to explain blueline tilefish distribution; habitat and substrate are also important.

2. Commercial Fishery Data

The subcommittee generally supported using commercial landings and other associated commercial fleet information as one category of the apportionment rubric, while recognizing important limitations. Subcommittee members emphasized that landings have been constrained by the restrictive ACLs, possession limits, as well as early closures over the years, and therefore should not be treated as a direct measure of stock distribution. The subcommittee agreed to focus on a more recent time series, mostly consistent with SEDAR 92. During the discussion, the subcommittee also recommended that staff work to refine the data source given the differences between the two regions. General consensus included:

- Use a 2019-present time series.
- Use data consistent with the stock assessment.
- Standardize datasets but do **not** normalize landings.
- Explore removing duplicate reporting between regions, if possible.
- Compare ACCSP/CAMS data with assessment datasets before selecting the final data source.
- Explore additional commercial indicators, including:
 - Price per pound (inflation-adjusted)
 - Price per pound calculations for directed versus incidental trips
 - Port dependence - e.g. blueline tilefish landings relative to total landings
 - Social and economic importance by port using indicators/information from State of the Ecosystem or Ecosystem Status Reports

3. Recreational Fishery Data

The recreational dataset was viewed as the most uncertain of the available information. The subcommittee expressed concern specific to MRIP estimates given blueline tilefish is a rarely-intercepted species and therefore, often has high percent standard errors (PSE) associated with

the catch estimates. The subcommittee also highlighted the transition from the Delphi approach to using MRIP in the Mid-Atlantic region and the high variability and difference between the two data sources. Members agreed it was still important to capture recreational activity but acknowledged that the recreational fishery rubric category should be weighted less than other categories.

The committee generally agreed to:

- Use MRIP (FES), South Atlantic Headboat Survey, and Mid-Atlantic Vessel Trip Report data because these data align with the assessment.
- Use the same 2019-present time series as commercial data.
- Account for high uncertainty primarily by assigning less weight to this category rather than attempting complicated adjustments to the data.
- Continue exploring VTRs and associated-species analyses as supplemental information.
- Consider that changes to recreational accountability measures in the South Atlantic took place in 2024-2025.

4. Apportionment Rubric

The subcommittee supported a weighted rubric as a transparent way to combine biological information, fishery importance, and continuity with the current apportionment. Members stressed that the categories serve different purposes; the SADL data help anchor the biological distribution signal; commercial and recreational information characterize fishery and socioeconomic/community importance; and the past proportional split provides near-term stability while the survey and analytical framework matures. Given the underlying datasets and analytical methods will improve at different rates, members recommended that the rubric should be adaptable rather than permanently fixing either the categories or their weights.

General agreement included:

- Retain the four proposed categories:
 - Fishery-independent survey
 - Commercial fishery
 - Recreational fishery
 - Past proportional split
- Allow the weighting of categories to evolve as better information becomes available.
- Conduct sensitivity analyses before selecting final category weights.

5. Past Proportional Split

Subcommittee members supported retaining the current 70/30 Mid-Atlantic/South Atlantic proportional split as one component of the rubric to provide stability. The subcommittee recognized that this duplicates some SADL information given the current proportional split was derived from the 2023-2024 survey results, but viewed the duplication as a way to provide increased stability while the survey time series and agreed upon model-based analysis that would be developed for the Fishery Independent Survey data category mature. As those data sets

mature they agreed that the weight assigned to this category would decline over time. Subcommittee members did not support using the older 56/44 split derived from the 2017 pilot tilefish survey. It was highlighted that the survey used a different design and spatial coverage, caught relatively few blueline tilefish, and predates the 2019 starting point selected for the other fishery information recommended. Reasons for using only the current proportional split included:

- The 2017 pilot survey, which was used to form the initial apportionment, is dated and based on few fish.
- The current apportionment incorporates more comprehensive and recent information.
- The weight assigned to this category could decline over time as the SADL survey time series grows.

6. Weighting and Stability

The subcommittee did not select final numerical weights but recommended a range for each category for further consideration. Subcommittee members agreed that weights should reflect the relative purpose and reliability of each category's data set, rather than a judgment that one sector is inherently more important than the other. They recommended the fishery independent data (i.e., SADL data) would receive the largest weight given it is the only source of data that provides some understanding of regional stock distribution; commercial information would generally receive more weight than recreational information due to commercial information being more reliable; and the current proportional split would provide stability during the early years of the rubric framework. There was broad agreement that:

- Fishery-independent survey information should receive the greatest weight, recommended a weighted range of 60-70% .
- Recreational data should receive the lowest weight because of uncertainty, recommended a weighted range of 5-10%.
- Commercial data should generally receive greater weight than recreational data, recommended a weighted range of 10-20%.
- The current proportional split should receive a moderate weight to provide initial stability and then be decreased over time, recommended a weighted range of 10-25%
- Sensitivity analyses are needed before finalizing percentages.

Members also discussed limiting annual apportionment changes, with many favoring:

- Not making annual changes to the apportionment proportions.
- The apportionment rubric should have regular review every **3–5 years**, particularly following stock assessments
- Following a review, if changes to the apportionment are warranted, consider limiting annual apportionment changes (many members discussed 5%, with others mentioning 10%) to avoid abrupt apportionment shifts (or phased implementation if larger changes are warranted).

7. Management Process

The subcommittee discussed whether the Councils could implement future changes through a memorandum of understanding (MOU); however, staff also discussed that a jurisdictional apportionment is a conservation and management measure under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Members agreed with writing the final methodology as a formula so future percentages could be updated without requiring a full amendment whenever the inputs change. Council and NOAA Fisheries staff will continue communicating to determine the types of actions necessary to apportion the ABC between Council jurisdictions.

8. Future Work

The subcommittee agreed that the weighted rubric approach should continue to be developed rather than implemented immediately. They highlighted that staff will need time to incorporate the 2026 SADL results, compare fishery datasets, develop a spatial-temporal survey model, and test how plausible weights and the annual change cap affect outcomes. They agreed that keeping the joint subgroup active to allow for review of such results and refinement of the approach prior to the next stock assessment which will tentatively begin in 2029 and before the Councils undertake a joint amendment process. The subcommittee generally agreed to:

- Utilizing the apportionment rubric with further refinement.
- Explore model-based survey analyses as a means to incorporate the SADL survey information.
- Conduct sensitivity analyses for weighting alternatives associated with each of the categories.
- Explore standardization of commercial and recreational datasets, if possible.
- Explore social and economic indicators within the commercial and recreational fishery categories.
- Keep the subcommittee active, reconvene after staff have new survey and analytical results, and revisit the rubric on a regular cycle (e.g. approximately every 3-5 years or when relevant assessment information becomes available).

Recommendation

Since the next blueline tilefish stock assessment is scheduled to begin in 2029, rather than rushing to revise the apportionment, the subcommittee favored developing a framework that emphasizes fishery-independent survey data while accounting for uncertainty, minimizing abrupt apportionment changes (i.e. a 5-10% annual change cap), and allowing the approach to evolve as additional data become available. The sub-committee would like to continue to develop the approach ahead of the next stock assessment.

This document was prepared using ChatGPT but was checked for accuracy and edited by staff