

December 2024 Council Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council met December 10-12, 2024, in Annapolis, Maryland. The following is a summary of actions taken and issues considered during the meeting. Presentations, briefing materials, motions, and webinar recordings are available on the [Council's December 2024 meeting page](#).

HIGHLIGHTS

During this meeting, the Council:

- Finalized an amendment to modify the species separation requirements for the Atlantic surfclam and ocean quahog fisheries
- Reviewed previously adopted recreational measures for summer flounder and scup and determined that no changes are needed for either species in 2025*
- Adopted status quo recreational management measures for black sea bass in 2025*
- Approved a scoping document for the Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment*
- Set the spiny dogfish acceptable biological catch for 2025 equal to the overfishing limit (the maximum legally possible), resulting in a commercial quota of about 9.3 million pounds
- Adopted a more flexible minimum mesh requirement for directed butterfish fishing
- Reviewed the final 2024 EAFM risk assessment report, which incorporates a number of recent updates and improvements
- Approved a Comprehensive Five-Year (2025-2029) Research Priorities document
- Approved the 2025 Implementation Plan
- Reviewed the results of a Council-funded project that has developed a hub for river herring and shad run data
- Endorsed recommendations from the Highly Migratory Species Committee regarding the NOAA Fisheries Atlantic HMS Proposed Rule for Electronic Reporting
- Presented the Ricks E Savage Award to former Council member Dewey Hemilright

** Items denoted with an asterisk (*) were undertaken during joint meetings with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass Management Board or Interstate Fisheries Management Program Policy Board*

Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Species Separation Requirements Amendment

The Council [took final action](#) on the Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Species Separation Requirements Amendment. After considering the outcomes from the October 2024 Species Separation Requirements Amendment Implementation Issues Workshop, the Council selected modified Alternative 5 (Increased Observer Coverage and Self-reported Discards; Mixed Trips Sort at Dealer with NOAA Catch Monitors) as the preferred alternative. Alternative 5 would allow for mixed surfclam and quahog species trips with sorting of mixed catch at the dealer, implement a new NOAA shoreside (dealer/processing plant-based) catch monitoring program, improve discard estimation via a combination of improved vessel reporting and increased observer coverage, and modify the allocation tracking and tagging system, among other changes to regulations. The Council will submit the amendment to the Secretary of Commerce for review and rulemaking.

2025 Recreational Management Measures for Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) to consider 2025 recreational management measures (i.e., bag, size, and season limits) for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass.

Summer Flounder and Scup

The Council and Board reviewed previously adopted recreational measures for summer flounder and scup and determined that no changes are needed for either species in 2025. Last year, the Council and Board adopted two-year recreational measures for summer flounder and scup following the Percent Change Approach implemented through Framework 17/Addendum XXXIV. For summer flounder, a 28% reduction in harvest was required, which was taken via adjustments to 2024-2025 state waters measures under conservation equivalency. For scup, a 10% reduction in harvest was required, which was taken via adjustments to 2024-2025 state waters measures. The intent of the Percent Change Approach is to hold measures constant across both years unless new data suggest a major change in the expected impacts of those measures on the stock or the fishery.

For summer flounder, state measures under regional conservation equivalency are expected to remain the same as in 2024, as described in the [staff memo](#) for recreational summer flounder measures. For scup, state and federal measures are expected to remain the same as in 2024, as described in the [staff memo](#) for recreational scup measures.

Black Sea Bass

Unlike summer flounder and scup, black sea bass recreational measures were not previously adopted for 2025. The Council and Board agreed to maintain status quo recreational measures in 2025 given that the recreational harvest limit (RHL) is unchanged compared to 2024, stock status remains positive, and an updated assessment will be available next year to inform the setting of 2026-2027 measures. Status quo includes continuing to waive the federal waters measures in favor of state waters measures through conservation equivalency. More details are provided in the [staff memo](#). If states wish to consider slight season adjustments under the status quo approach (e.g., to maintain a Saturday opening), those proposals must be approved by the Board.

Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Interstate Fishery Management Program Policy Board (Policy Board) to consider approval of a draft scoping document/Public Information Document (PID) for the [Recreational Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment](#) to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass and Bluefish Fishery Management Plans. This action, previously referred to as the “Recreational Sector Separation and Catch Accounting Amendment,” was initiated in 2020 as part of the [Recreational Reform Initiative](#), but has been on hold since that time to prioritize other management actions. The amendment will (1) explore options for managing for-hire and private/rental recreational fisheries separately (referred to as sector separation), and (2) consider approaches to improve or supplement the collection and use of recreational data that support management decisions for these species.

The Council and Policy Board approved the scoping document/PID, with minor modifications, for public comment in early 2025. As the first step in the Council and Commission’s amendment process, scoping will provide an opportunity for the public to identify major issues and potential management approaches that should be explored during the development of this amendment. Following the initial phase of information gathering and public comment, the Council and Policy Board will identify categories of alternatives for further development.

The final scoping document will be available on the Council's [website](#) in early 2025, along with an announcement of the scoping hearing schedule and written comment instructions.

2025 Spiny Dogfish Specifications

The Council adopted 2025 specifications that would set the spiny dogfish acceptable biological catch (ABC) equal to the overfishing limit (OFL) for the 2025 fishing year. This is the highest catch legally allowed under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), and results in the highest quota possible. The resulting specifications, if implemented by NOAA Fisheries, would result in a commercial quota of about 9.3 million pounds (a 9% reduction from the 2024 quota but almost 10% higher than last year's (2023) landings). The Northeast Fisheries Science Center will conduct new projections in 2025 for the 2026 and 2027 fishing years, and a management track stock assessment will be conducted in 2027 for setting 2028-2031 specifications.

Butterfish Mesh Requirements

After considering [recommendations](#) from its Law Enforcement Committee, the Council voted to modify the butterfish mesh regulations to allow square mesh greater than 2 5/8 inches for directed butterfish fishing. Current regulations require a minimum mesh size of 3-inch diamond or 3-inch square mesh to possess more than 5,000 pounds of butterfish. The proposed modification was supported by research conducted by the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, NY and by input from industry about their experience with different mesh configurations, both indicating that the change would add flexibility for fishermen while still reducing the retention of juvenile butterfish. The Council did not recommend any changes to the 3-inch minimum mesh size for diamond mesh. If implemented by NOAA Fisheries, the change would apply to vessels with moratorium butterfish permits and could be effective in early to mid 2025.

2024 Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) Risk Assessment

The Council reviewed the final 2024 [EAFM risk assessment report](#). Risk assessment is the first step in the Council's EAFM structured decision process to incorporate species, fleet, habitat, and climate interactions into management. The risk assessment report is typically updated each spring to provide a snapshot of the current risks to meeting the management objectives and helps the Council decide where to focus limited resources to address priority ecosystem considerations in its science and management programs. The 2024 risk assessment report incorporates the changes and updates approved by the Council following the 2023 comprehensive review and recent recommendations provided by the Ecosystem and Ocean Planning (EOP) Committee and Advisory Panel on elements that needed further refinement and development. The 2025 EAFM risk assessment will be presented to the Council in April and will incorporate the latest information, including updated indicators from the 2025 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem report.

2025-2029 Research Priorities

The Council reviewed and approved the [Comprehensive Five-Year \(2025-2029\) Research Priorities](#) document. This is the Council's fourth research priorities document since the 2006 re-authorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act required each of the regional councils to identify five-year research priorities. The 2025-2029 research priorities document builds off the organizational and prioritization framework implemented during the development of the 2020-2024 document and has been updated to incorporate the extensive input received throughout 2024. The broad research themes and species-specific priorities included in the new document reflect the current state of scientific knowledge and the Council's management challenges and science needs.

2025 Implementation Plan

The Council approved the 2025 Implementation Plan after making several revisions. The plan lists activities and priorities for the coming year and is linked to the Council's strategic plan. The Council agreed to add a new deliverable which will task the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) with development of a white paper on the scientific considerations of developing separate overfishing limits (OFLs) and Acceptable Biological Catches (ABCs) for the commercial and recreational sectors for the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries. The Council also agreed to add the following items to the list of "Possible Additions" for 2025: (1) Develop guidance to address circumstances under which the Council could consider suspension of its Risk Policy, and (2) Develop a white paper to explore potential Council and NOAA Fisheries involvement in surfclam stock enhancement efforts in the New York Bight and Central Atlantic. The final implementation plan will be posted on the Council's website at <https://www.mafmc.org/strategic-plan> once available.

Manomet River Herring Portal

Staff from Manomet presented the results of a Council-funded project that has developed a hub for river herring and shad run data. Manomet is finalizing several features of the web-based portal and will be conducting outreach in 2025 to gather additional run data from east coast entities that would like their data to be available, as well as to make potential users aware of the portal's features. Emily Farr of Manomet (efarr@manomet.org) can be contacted for more information.

Highly Migratory Species

The Council reviewed [recommendations](#) from its Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Committee regarding the NOAA Fisheries Atlantic HMS [Proposed Rule for Electronic Reporting](#). The proposed action would modify and/or expand reporting requirements for Atlantic HMS, including reporting by commercial, for-hire, and private recreational vessel owners and dealers. The Committee supported some of the agency's preferred alternatives but expressed substantial concern with the preferred alternatives identified for the HMS commercial and for-hire open access permits (i.e., Atlantic Tunas General and Harpoon Category, Swordfish General Commercial, and HMS Charter/Headboat Permits). The Council endorsed the Committee's comments and directed staff to submit a comment letter before the comment deadline.

Ricks E Savage Award

Captain Dewey Hemilright was presented with the Council's [Ricks E Savage Award](#). The award is given each year to a person who has added value to the Council process and management goals through significant scientific, legislative, enforcement, or management activities. He was appointed to the Council in 2012 to fill a mid-term vacancy as an obligatory member from the state of North Carolina. He went on to serve three additional full terms, for a total of 11 years. With more than three decades of commercial fishing experience, Dewey brought valuable on-the-water perspective to Council discussions and helped managers understand how potential management decisions would affect people's lives and livelihoods. "Dewey asked great questions and was always willing to share his own knowledge and experience with the Council and others," said Council Chair Wes Townsend. "While he often served as a voice for the U.S. fishing industry, he did an outstanding job of balancing the interests of commercial fisheries and the sustainable management of the resources as required under Magnuson." Dewey served as chair of the Council's Highly Migratory Species Committee for seven years and participated on most of the Council's other committees at different times. He also served as liaison to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and as Council representative on the NMFS HMS Advisory Panel.

Recreational Tilefish Permitting and Reporting – Enforcement Update

A representative from NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement reported that a New Jersey based recreational vessel operator was recently issued a \$500 fine for possession of a blueline tilefish without the required permit. As a reminder, recreational anglers fishing for golden and blueline tilefish north of the North Carolina/Virginia border are required to have a free recreational tilefish permit and submit a trip report within 24 hours of returning to port from any trip where tilefish were targeted (even if none were caught or kept). These requirements are intended to help improve our understanding of recreational tilefish catch and effort. Consistent and accurate reporting by recreational fishermen helps ensure the long-term sustainability of the tilefish fisheries. Additional information about private recreational tilefish permitting and reporting requirements is available on [the Council's website](#) or in [this flyer](#).

Upcoming Meetings

The 2025 Council Meeting Schedule is available [here](#). Please note that the dates for the June and December meetings have been revised. The June meeting will be held June 3-5, 2025 (a week earlier than originally scheduled), and the December meeting will be held December 15-18, 2025 (a week later than originally scheduled). A complete list of upcoming meetings can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events>.

The next Council meeting will be held via webinar **February 11-12, 2025**.