

Black Sea Bass 2025 Specifications

October 23, 2024

Overview

- The black sea bass fishery is jointly managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission).
- The Council develops recommendations for fisheries in federal waters, while the Commission establishes management measures for state waters. Measures adopted by the Commission are final, while the Council's recommendations must be reviewed and, if approved, implemented by NOAA Fisheries
- Each year, the Council and Commission work together to develop coastwide specifications (i.e., total allowable catch and harvest levels) with the goal of aligning the management approach for state and federal waters.
- At their [August 2024](#) meeting, the Council and the Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) were unable to reach agreement on black sea bass specifications for 2025. The Board voted to leave the 2025 specifications the same as 2024, while the Council adopted specifications associated with a 20% reduction in the acceptable biological catch limit (ABC), consistent with the advice of its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).
- In October 2024, NOAA Fisheries published a [proposed rule](#) to implement 2025 black sea bass specifications consistent with those adopted by the Commission. If implemented, these specifications would exceed the ABC recommended by the Council and its SSC.

Why did the Council and Commission adopt different specifications?

- The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requires the Council's SSC to provide scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for ABCs, prevention of overfishing, and achieving maximum sustainable yield.
- The Council's SSC recommended a 20% reduction in the ABC for 2025 based on the results of the [2024 Black Sea Bass Management Track Stock Assessment](#).
- During their August 2024 meeting, the Council and Board discussed uncertainty about the projection methodology as well as concern about the potential socio-economic impacts of a 20% decrease in the ABC.
- The Council is bound by the MSA requirement to set catch limits which do not exceed the recommendations of its SSC. However, the Commission is not bound by the MSA. Therefore, the Board voted to suspend the typical joint management process for the 2025 black sea bass specifications, allowing them to adopt different catch and landings limits than the Council. The Board then voted to maintain status quo catch and landing limits for 2025. The Council considered also adopting status quo specifications; however, as this would violate the MSA, the Council ultimately agreed to set the 2025 specifications based on the SSC's recommended 2025 ABC.

How can NOAA Fisheries implement ABCs that exceed the SSC's recommendations?

- The MSA requires the Council to set catch limits that do not exceed the ABCs recommended by the SSC. However, that restriction applies only to the Councils, and NOAA Fisheries is able to set an ABC higher than the SSC recommendation in some circumstances.
- Regulations at [50 CFR 648.143\(e\)](#) allow the NOAA Fisheries Regional Administrator to take administrative action to address disconnects between Council and Board actions "to achieve alignment through consistent state and Federal measures such that no differential effects occur to Federal permit holders."
- As rationale for not implementing the specifications recommended by the Council, NOAA Fisheries notes in the proposed rule that divergent state and Federal quotas "would likely have significant negative socioeconomic impacts on Federal black sea bass permit holders." The proposed rule also notes that the black sea bass stock "is well above the FMP's definition of the biomass capable of producing maximum sustainable yield."

Why would a 20% reduction in catch limits be needed for an abundant stock?

- The 2024 Black Sea Bass Management Track Stock Assessment found that the black sea bass stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring in 2023. Spawning stock biomass in 2023 was estimated at about 2.19 times the target level, and fishing mortality was estimated to be 23% below the threshold level that defines overfishing.
- However, projections predicted a sharp decline in biomass in the future. Based on this information, the Council's SSC recommended an ABC of 13.29 million pounds for 2025. This represents a 20% decrease compared to 2024.
- The Council and Board questioned the projected decline in future biomass as this is not consistent with the generally increasing trend in biomass seen over the past several years. They also noted that projections based on the previous assessment model for several prior specifications cycles repeatedly predicted similarly sharp declines in biomass which were not realized.

What does this mean for 2025 recreational measures?

- The Council and Board will decide on the approach for 2025 recreational bag, size, and season limits during their December 2024 meeting. Their decision will be informed by Monitoring Committee and Advisory Panel input, recent fishery information, the requirements of the Fishery Management Plan, and other information as appropriate.

What does this mean for specifications after 2026?

- The management track assessment will be updated next year, with plans already underway to thoroughly evaluate the projection methodology and make revisions as appropriate. These updates will be used to inform the 2026-2027 catch and landings limits.