



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Division of Marine Fisheries

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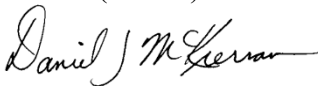
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Secretary

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Commissioner

DANIEL J. MCKIERNAN
Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MFAC)

FROM: Daniel J. McKiernan, Director 

DATE: September 14, 2023

SUBJECT: **Future Public Hearing Item – Commercial Summer Flounder Trip Limit Adjustments for 2024**

Proposal

DMF is considering minor reductions to the Period II (April 23–December 31) summer flounder trip limits in response to a greater than 50% reduction in the state's commercial quota for 2024. While the quota reduction is substantial, given fishery performance and quota underutilization, commensurate cuts to fishing limits are not necessary. The most substantial changes I would consider would include are described in Table 1. In summary, this would reduce: (1) the April 23 – August 31 trip limit to 500 pounds for net fishers and 300 pounds for hook fishers; (2) the September trip limit that is triggered when more than 20% of the quota is available on September 1 to 600 pounds; and (3) the October–December trip limit that is triggered when more than 5% of the quota is available on October 1 to 5,000 pounds.

Table 1. Proposed Changes to Limits for Period II Summer Flounder Fishery

Season	Gear Type	Trip Limit (lbs)	Fishing Days	Min Size
Apr 23 – Aug 31	Nets	500 600	Sun – Sat	14"
	Hooks	300 400		
Sept 1 – Sept 30	Nets	600 800 if >20% of quota 400 600 if ≤20% of quota	Sun – Sat	14"
	Hooks	600 800 if >20% of quota 250 400 if ≤20% of quota		
Oct 1 – Dec 31	All	5,000 10,000 if > 5% of quota 800 if ≤5% of quota	Sun – Sat	14"

Rationale

The 2023 stock assessment was released earlier this summer. This assessment shows that the stock remains not overfished, with spawning stock biomass (SSB) at about 83% of its target in 2022. However, SSB has been recently overestimated and is now trending downward. While the ratio of B/B_{msy} is not much changed from the last assessment (2021), the absolute estimates of SSB are lower. Moreover, overfishing was occurring in 2022, with fishing mortality at 103% of its threshold, compared to 19% below threshold from the prior assessment. Overfishing is occurring despite recent catch limit underages, supporting the notion that prior catch limits were set too high. Contributing to this substantial shift in stock status was that the promising 2018 year class was much smaller than initially estimated. Recruitment has been below average since 2011, the source of which has not been identified.

Using the new assessment, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) set the 2024/2025 quota at 8.79 million pounds—a 42% reduction from the 15.27 million pound coastwide quota in 2023. Because the coastwide quota is dropping below 9.55 million pounds, the level at which quota is reallocated per Amendment 21, Massachusetts will only receive its baseline quota share of 6.82%, rather than the near 9% we have been receiving the past two years¹. This brings the Commonwealth’s summer flounder quota to about 600,000 pounds for the next two years (2024 and 2025), as compared to the near 1.36 million pound quota this year. Note the anticipated quota levels for 2024 and 2025 are only slightly below quota levels from about 10-15 years ago when there was substantially more effort in the commercial fishery.

While this represents a 56% decrease in Massachusetts commercial quota from 2023 to 2024, the impact of the quota reduction on fishing limits should not be as severe. The fishery has underperformed its quota since 2019 and will very likely underperform it again this year (Table 2) with landings in the summertime fishery (April 23 – September 30) fluctuating between 310,485 pounds (2021) and 469,955 pounds (2019).

Table 2. Summertime (April 23 – September 30) and Annual Summer Flounder Landings 2019 - 2023

Year	Summertime Landings (live lb)	Total Annual Landings (live lb)	Percent Quota Utilization
2019	469,955	551,267	74%
2020	396,562	700,390	88%
2021	310,485	714,422	70%
2022	427,567	874,836	63%
2023*	290,507	616,876	45%

*Preliminary, includes only landings reported as of 9/14/23
Data Source: SAFIS eDR, 9/14/23

For 2024 and 2025, presuming the Period I fishery achieves its 30% allocation (~180,000 pounds) under status quo rules, the Period II fishery would open with about 420,000 pounds of quota. This available quota approximates the recent performance of the summertime fishery (Table 2). The math alone suggests we may not need to make any changes to the limits to ensure the fishery remains open into the early fall. However, it makes sense to consider nominal trip limit decreases to buffer against potential interannual variability in landings that may result in an early season closure.

At this time, I am not proposing any adjustments to the commercial summer flounder limits for the Period I fishery (January 1–April 23). I am uncertain changes are necessary given how the fishery is conducted. The Period I fishery occurs offshore in federal waters typically among vessels that land summer flounder in numerous states. Massachusetts has historically allocated this fishery 30% of the quota and current regulations reduce the trip limit to 100 pounds once the quota allocation has been reached; this may allow a small number of Massachusetts-based vessels to offload an incidental catch of summer flounder in the state but redirects the directed catch towards other states where quota may be available. Accordingly, I do not anticipate Period I landings will substantially exceed the fishery’s allocation.

¹ Amendment 21 modified the state-by-state quota allocations in a manner meant to increase equity across states when the stock is in a strong condition. When the coastwide quota exceeds 9.55 million pounds, the additional quota is allocated in equal shares of 12.375% to all states (except Maine, New Hampshire, and Delaware which share 1% of the additional quota). Coastwide quota up to 9.55 million pounds is allocated according to the historic shares based on 1980–1989 landings, or 6.82% for Massachusetts.