



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Division of Marine Fisheries

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MFAC)

FROM: Daniel J. McKiernan, Director *Daniel J. McKiernan*

DATE: September 12, 2025

SUBJECT: **Public Hearing Proposal for Bluefish Recreational Possession Limits**

Proposal

This memorandum serves to inform the MFAC that I intend to go out to public hearing this winter with a proposal to increase the recreational bluefish possession limits by two fish. Specifically, the proposal would amend the existing daily bag limits of 3 fish per angler when fishing from shore or a private/rental vessel (“private modes”) and 5 fish per angler when fishing from a charter or party boat (“for-hire modes”) to 5 fish per angler in the private modes and 7 fish per angler in the for-hire modes.

Rationale

This proposal is consistent with recent actions of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to liberalize the recreational fishing limits in response to a 40% increase in the recreational harvest limit (RHL) for 2026 and an expected underutilization at the current fishing limits.

Background

Bluefish are subject to both a federal (i.e., MAFMC) and interstate (i.e., ASMFC) fishery management plan. These management bodies met jointly in August 2025 to set 2026–2027 specifications (i.e., catch and landings limits and other management measures), taking into consideration the results of the 2025 stock assessment and recommendations of the MAFMC Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the joint MAFMC Monitoring Committee/ASMFC Technical Committee (MC/TC), and the joint MAFMC/ASMFC Advisory Panel.

The bluefish stock entered a seven-year rebuilding plan in 2022. Based on the results of the 2025 stock assessment, bluefish were not experiencing overfishing and were no longer overfished in 2024. While not fully rebuilt to the biomass target reference point (i.e., 89%), the stock is projected to be there in 2025, ahead of the 2028 deadline. The assessment-projected overfishing limits (OFLs) for 2026–2027 represent over 75% increases from 2025. After adjusting for scientific uncertainty, the SSC recommended 2026–2027 acceptable biological catches (ABCs) that increase by over 100% compared to 2025. The MC/TC raised concerns with these large increases to the ABCs while the stock remains in a rebuilding plan and given the pending MRIP

recreational estimate recalibration in 2026. The MAFMC and ASMFC ultimately decided to reduce the sector-specific annual catch limits (ACLs, which are allocated per the FMP) by 25% commercial and 30% recreational management uncertainty buffers for the sake of fishery stability. The resulting annual catch targets (ACTs) were further reduced by sector-specific expected dead discards (based on prior three-year averages) to result in the commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits adopted by the MAFMC and ASMFC (Table 1).

Ultimately, the coastwide commercial quota for 2026 is expected to increase 54% from 2025 and the 2026 recreational harvest limit by 40% (each with an additional small increase in 2027). Notably, Massachusetts commercial quota will increase by 63% in 2026 (and more in 2027) due to the ongoing phase-in of new commercial allocations. Next year (2026) is year five of a seven-year transition to state allocations based on more recent landings, which will ultimately bring MA's quota share from 6.71% in 2021 to 10.11% in 2028 in equal annual increments (i.e., 9.14% in 2026 and 9.63% in 2027).

The bluefish specifications may also include commercial and recreational management measures where necessary. There are no coastwide management measures for the commercial bluefish fishery other than the state-by-state quotas. Massachusetts has a 16" minimum size and 5,000-lb commercial trip limit. These are long-standing measures that take into consideration market factors and the potential for high interannual variability in harvest, and we are not proposing any changes for 2026 despite the commercial quota increase and a likely quota underutilization in 2025.

Rather than state by state quotas, the recreational fishery has been managed with coastwide possession limits to restrict harvest to the RHL (with no size limit or season). This limit was historically 15 fish per angler regardless of fishing mode until 2020, when the limit was reduced to 3 fish for the private modes and 5 fish for the for-hire modes in response to a needed 28% recreational harvest reduction to prevent exceeding the RHL. Arguments for the higher for-hire bag limit centered on operational needs of for-hire recreational fishing businesses and the mode's minimal contribution to total recreational harvest (~5% by weight) and ultimately won the vote despite concerns about equitable access and data partitioning.

Headed into 2026 with a 40% increase in the RHL, the MAFMC and ASMFC decided to increase the possession limits by two fish across all modes, i.e., to 5 fish for the private modes and 7 fish for the for-hire modes. This is projected to increase harvest by roughly 15-30%, depending on the method of calculation. Recent coastwide recreational harvest has averaged roughly 11.5 million pounds (2022–2024) compared to the 2026 RHL of 22.02 million pounds. The MAFMC and ASMFC acted with some restraint based on the ongoing rebuilding plan, recreational catch estimate uncertainty and variability, and interest in management stability. A substitute motion for a uniform 5-fish limit was supported by the ASMFC Board (12/4/0/0) but was narrowly defeated by the MAFMC (7/8/0), thus failing overall. The rationale for the all modes, 5-fish limit centered on equal access and returning to uniform measures before comprehensively considering mode management/sector separation through the ongoing draft amendment¹.

¹ MAFMC action tracking website: <https://www.mafmc.org/actions/recreational-sector-separation-amendment>

Based on 10-year average (2015-2024) MRIP estimates, the Massachusetts recreational bluefish fishery contributes about 3% of the coastwide annual catch and harvest, based on number of fish, and 7% of the coastwide annual harvest, based on weight of fish. Both coastwide and MA recreational harvest show an overall declining trend. MA's 10-year average annual harvest is 1.16 million pounds or 350,000 fish. By number of fish harvested in MA, the for-hire modes contribute 7%, the private/rental vessel mode 63%, and the shore mode 29%. Due to the smaller size of fish harvested from shore, the shore's contribution drops to 10% when considering harvest in weight (13% for-hire, and 77% private/rental vessel). Across all recreational modes, about 70% of the bluefish caught in MA are released, although the for-hire mode tends to retain a larger proportion of fish caught (50% compared to 25% in the private modes). Limiting out is the reason for few releases in any mode (Figure 1). The private/rental vessel mode has the highest frequency of limiting out.

Table 1. Expected 2026-2027 bluefish specifications (and their basis), compared to the 2025 specifications, in millions of pounds.

	2025	2026	2027	Basis
OFL	27.49	48.43	48.48	Stock assessment projection
ABC	21.83	44.61	45.41	Derived by SSC
Com ACL	3.06	6.25	6.36	ABC x 14% (per FMP)
Com ACT	3.06	4.69	4.77	Com ACL – Com management uncertainty (25%)
Com Quota	3.03	4.66	4.75	Com ACT – Expected com dead discards
Rec ACL	18.78	38.36	39.05	ABC x 86% (per FMP)
Rec ACT	18.78	26.85	27.34	Rec ACL – Rec management uncertainty (30%)
RHL	15.70	22.02	22.50	Rec ACT – Expected rec dead discards

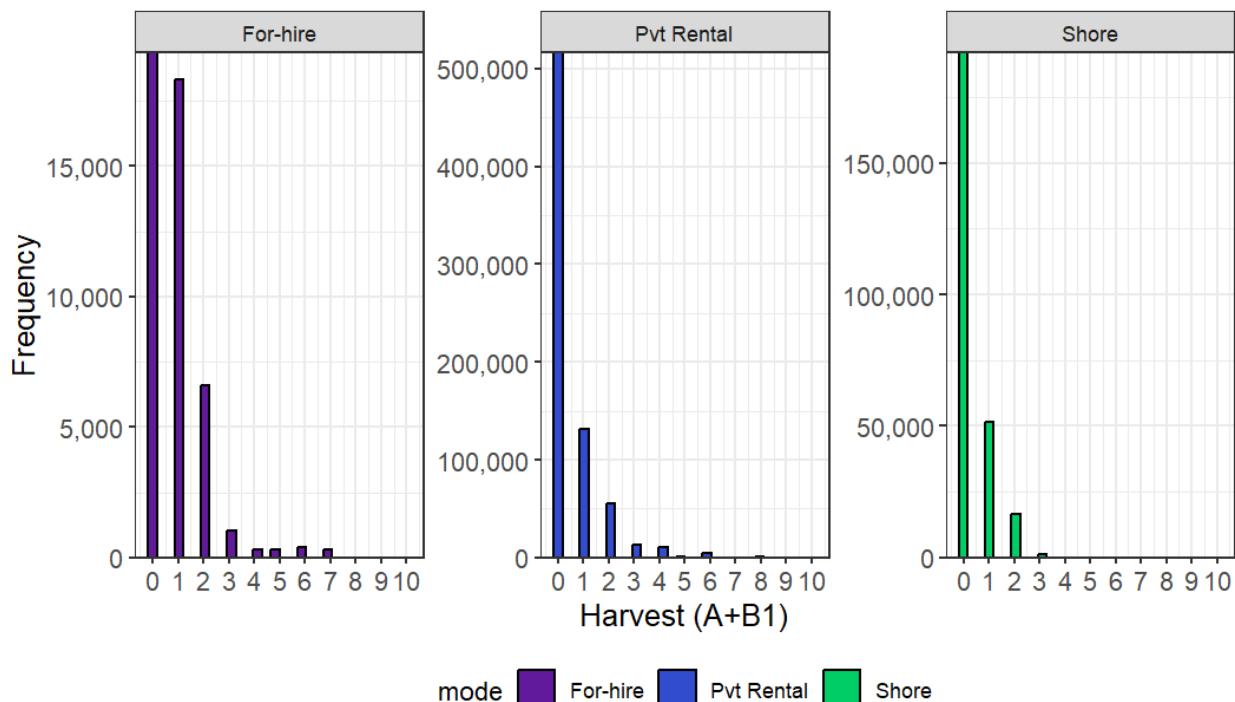


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of Massachusetts angler trips catching bluefish by number of bluefish retained (Source: MRIP pooled 2022–2024 intercept data). The proportion of angler trips at or above the bag limit by mode are: 2.2% for-hire (5-fish limit); 4.2% private/rental vessel (3-fish limit); and 0.4% shore (3-fish limit).