



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Division of Marine Fisheries

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MAURA T. HEALEY
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THOMAS K. O'SHEA
Commissioner

DANIEL J. MCKIERNAN
Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission
FROM: Daniel J. McKiernan, Director 
DATE: December 12, 2024
SUBJECT: Future Public Hearing Item—Possession Limit for Atlantic Bonito and False Albacore

Proposal

I am proposing to go out to public hearing this winter to establish a five fish per person possession limit for Atlantic bonito and false albacore (both species combined).

Background and Rationale

False albacore and Atlantic bonito are managed under the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas and NOAA Fisheries' implements the requirements thereof through their Highly Migratory Species Division. At present, there is little understanding of the species life history, the populations are not assessed, and there are no federal or interstate fishery management plans governing harvest. Absent such oversight, it is up to each state's discretion as to whether they want to unilaterally manage the possession and harvest of these migratory species within their jurisdiction. Historically, Massachusetts—like most other Atlantic coastal states—has opted not to manage these species.

DMF presented and reviewed available commercial and recreational harvest data for these species at the September 2024 MFAC business meeting. In summary, these data demonstrate: (1) estimated harvest of both species is predominantly driven by the recreational sector coastwide and in Massachusetts; (2) Massachusetts contributes significantly to the recreational harvest of both species but has a very small commercial fishery for Atlantic bonito and no commercial fishery for false albacore; (3) Massachusetts recreational fishery is predominately catch and release for both species with some retention of Atlantic bonito; and (4) Massachusetts has seen increasing recreational catch of both species in recent years.

These data conform to anecdotal reports that recreational fishing activity for both species has become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly along our southern coast during the late summer, and has effectively filled the gap created by the declining availability of striped bass and bluefish in the region. Additionally, with the expansion of warm ocean waters in New England, the geographic extent and seasonality of our fisheries for these species are likely increasing as well. This is further bolstered by the preliminary 2024 MRIP catch estimates demonstrating this year is likely an all-time high for Atlantic bonito catch and harvest. Through Wave 4 (July – August), Massachusetts' 2024 catch exceeded the next highest annual estimate (2018), and it is estimated that more fish were retained in Massachusetts during Wave 4 than an any prior annual MRIP estimate for the state (1981-2024).

With this increasing fishing activity, a segment of our recreational fishing sector has become concerned about the unconstrained growth in this fishery absent stock assessments and fishery management plans. Accordingly, they have encouraged states to act and manage these species with precaution. I find these

arguments to be compelling and believe it is appropriate to consider adopting a state-specific possession limit to constrain harvest.

Note that the proposed limit would apply per person and thereby apply to commercial and recreational fishers alike. This is similar to the approach we have taken to manage blue crabs and sand lance. Adopting such a rule will prevent an individual from obtaining a commercial fishing permit to avoid low recreational fishing limits but will also effectively constrain commercial fishing for these species. It may also limit their use as bait, which was a concern several years back when young-of-the-year Atlantic bonito were being jigged as bait alongside mackerel.

Harvester data demonstrate that potential impacts on constraining commercial catch will be limited to the Atlantic bonito fishery. This fishery is nominal in scale and value with between five and 15 active permit holders selling bonito in any of the past five years; annual aggregate landings not exceeding 400 pounds over the past three years (2021-2023) and not exceeding 1,000 pounds in any of the last five years (2019-2023); and the average ex-vessel price has been about \$5.00 per pound since 2021. At present, Massachusetts does not have a commercial fishery for false albacore but has fielded phone calls in recent years about the potential development of a purse seine fishery for false albacore in state waters. There is no evidence to suggest this interest has materialized.

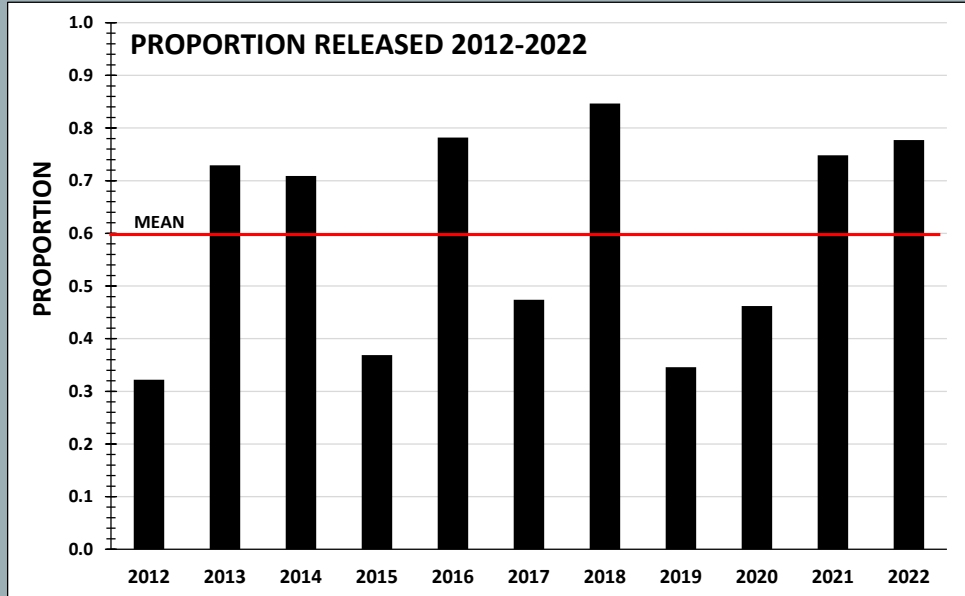
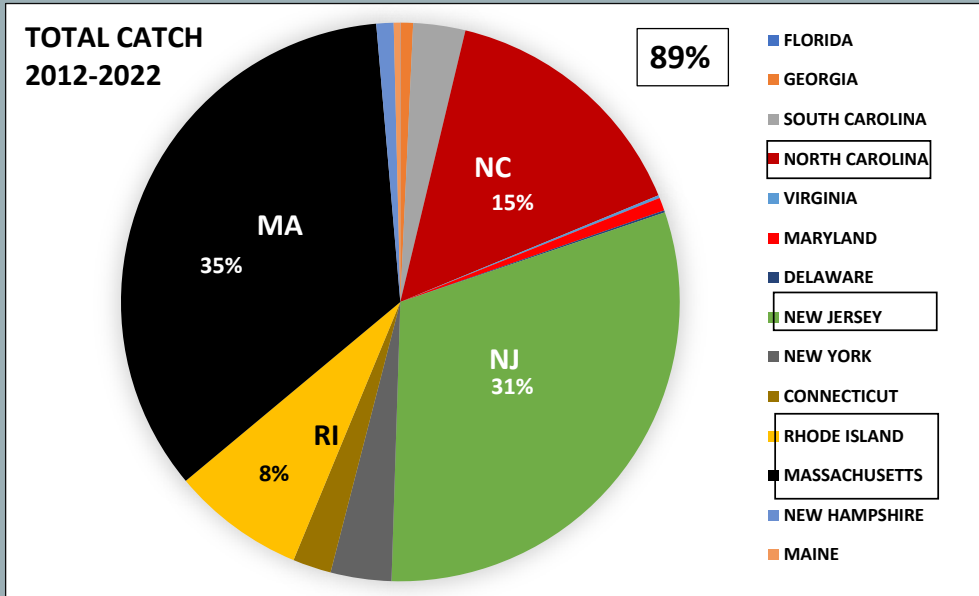
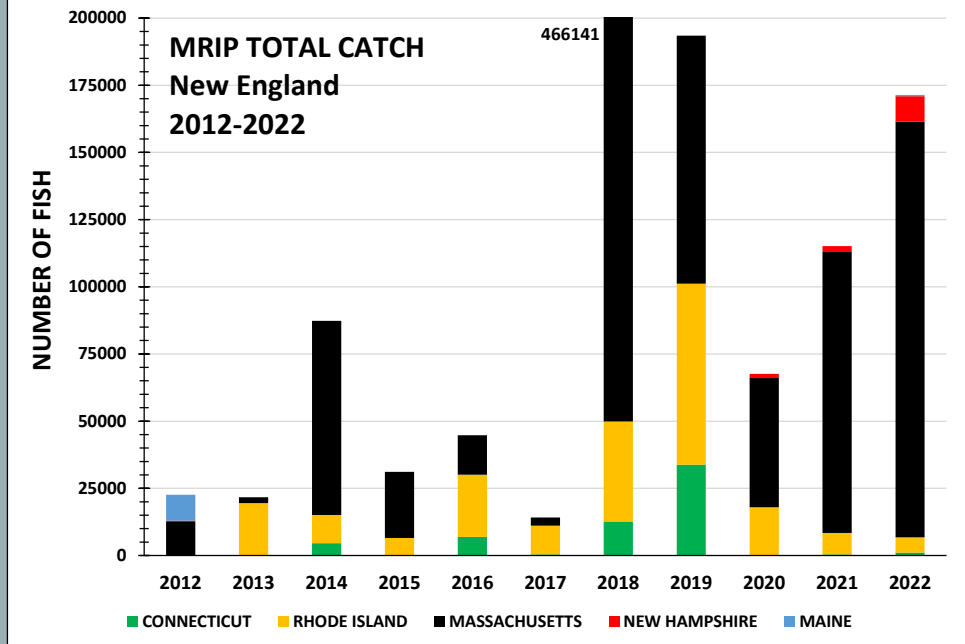
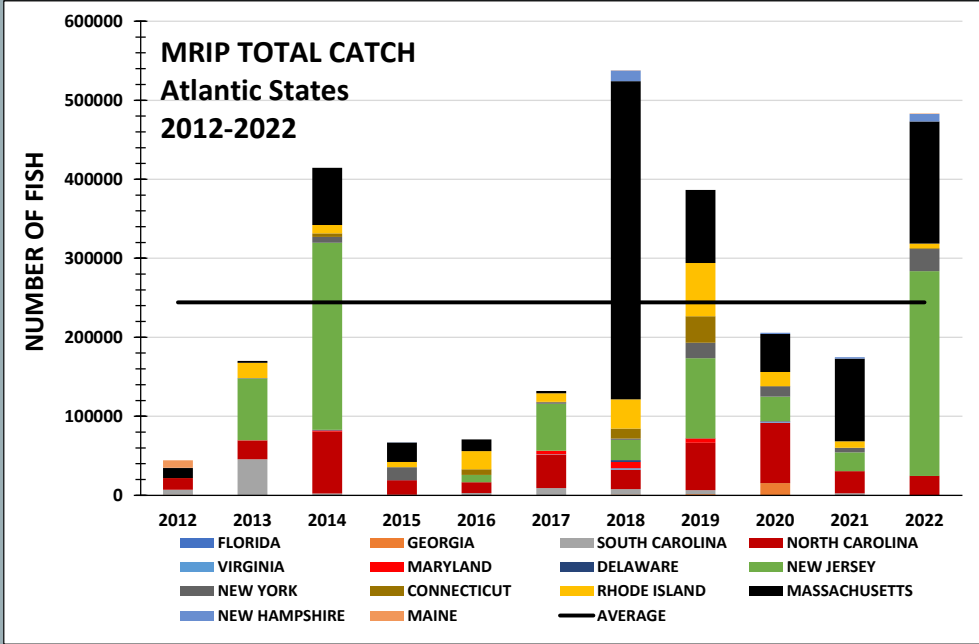
I anticipate this proposal will be generally popular, particularly as the harvest limit is sufficient to accommodate local fishing tournament retention practices. However, those few individuals who have been fishing commercially and targeting Atlantic bonito may be negatively impacted. Additionally, it has been suggested that industrial-scale commercial jigging operations for mackerel do incidentally catch these species. An exemption may be warranted for this incidental catch given the total volume of fish caught in this fishery and the challenges related to sorting and discarding bycatch when fishing is occurring. I expect that public comment will help me better understand this issue and craft a recommendation to address it. Note that such a bycatch exemption has precedent in high volume bait fisheries, DMF has exempted the federal waters trawl fishery for sea herring from the river herring moratorium and allowed an incidental catch of river herring up to 5% the total count of Atlantic herring.

Enclosed

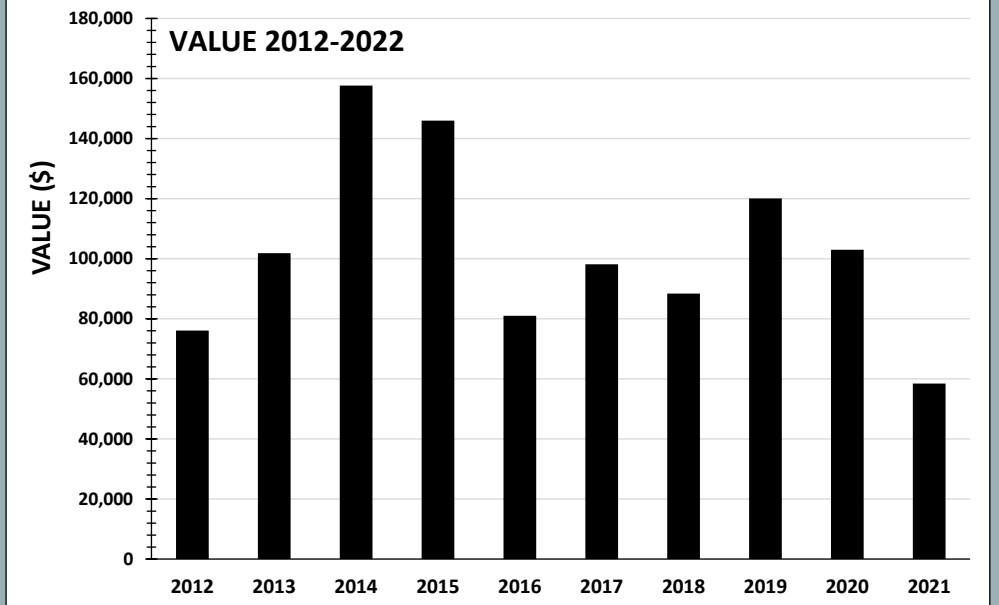
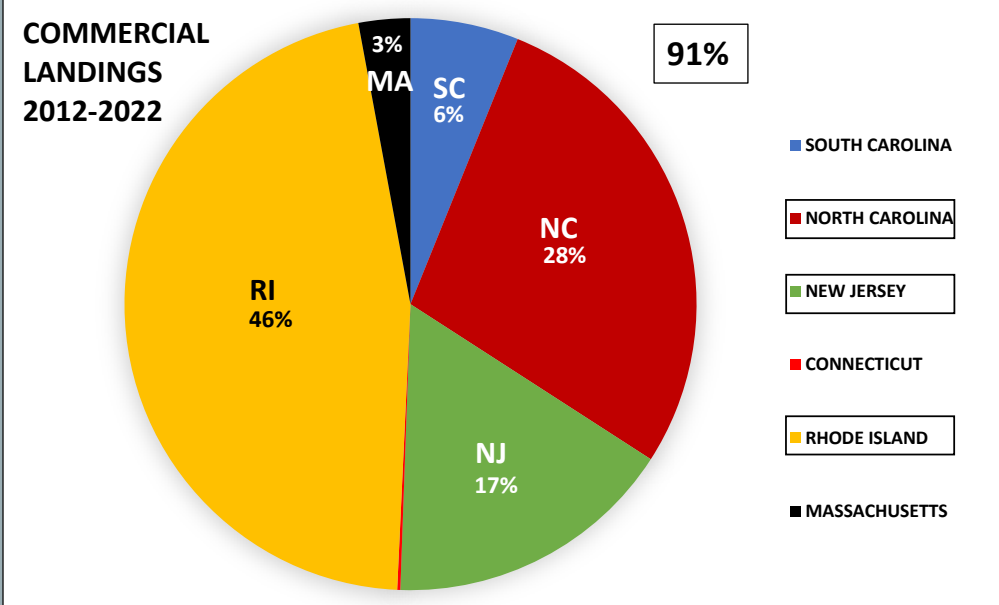
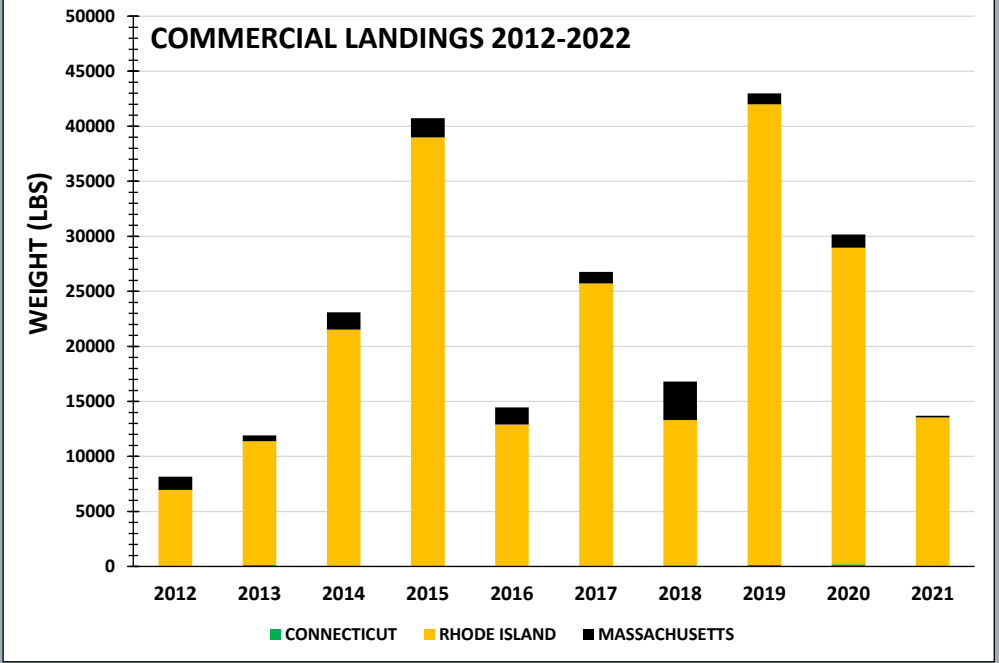
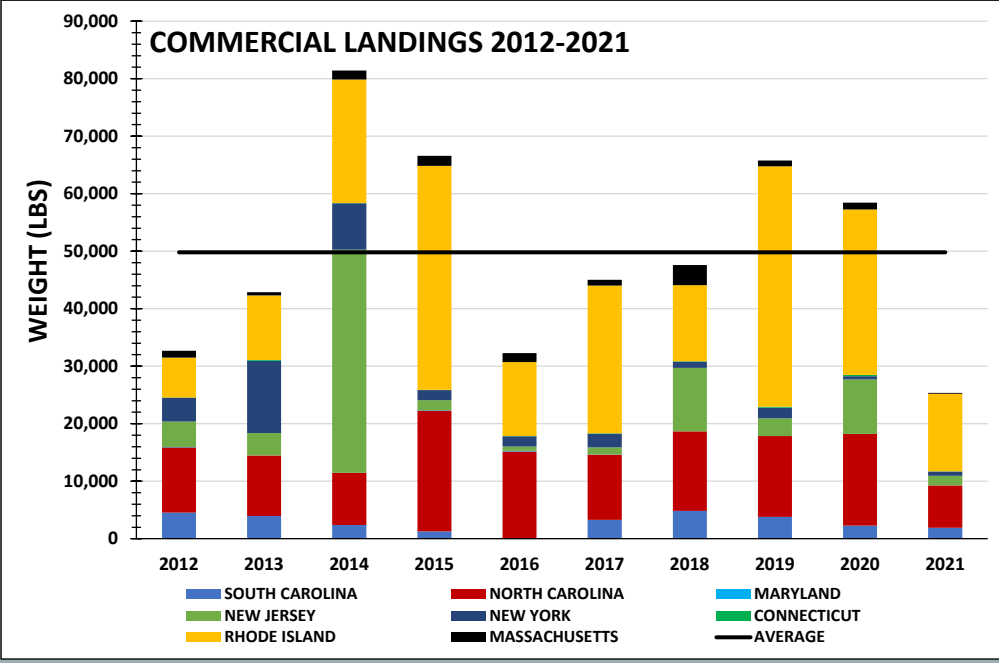
September 2024 DMF Presentation on Atlantic Bonito and False Albacore Catch and Harvest

**ATLANTIC BONITO
FALSE ALBACORE
CATCH CHARACTERISTICS**

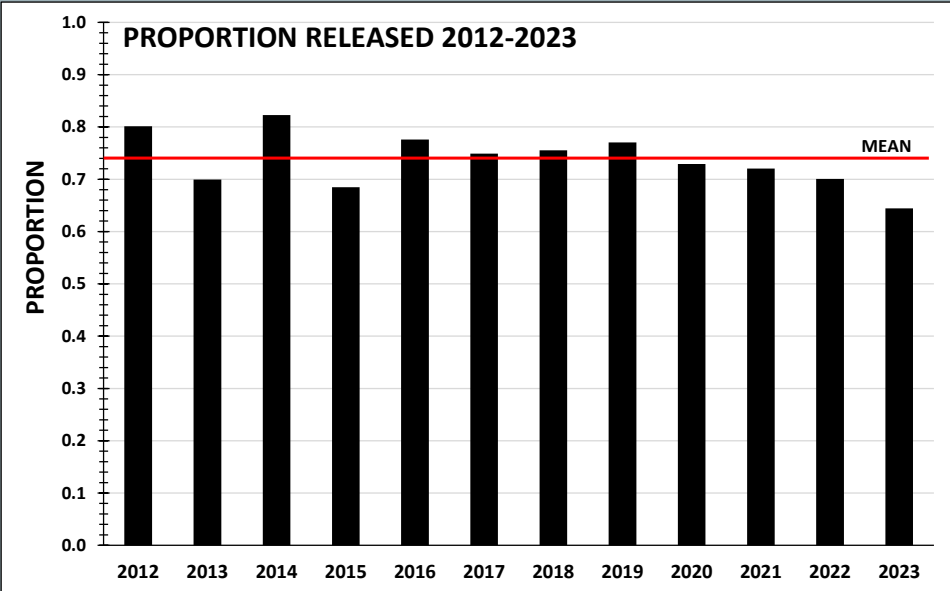
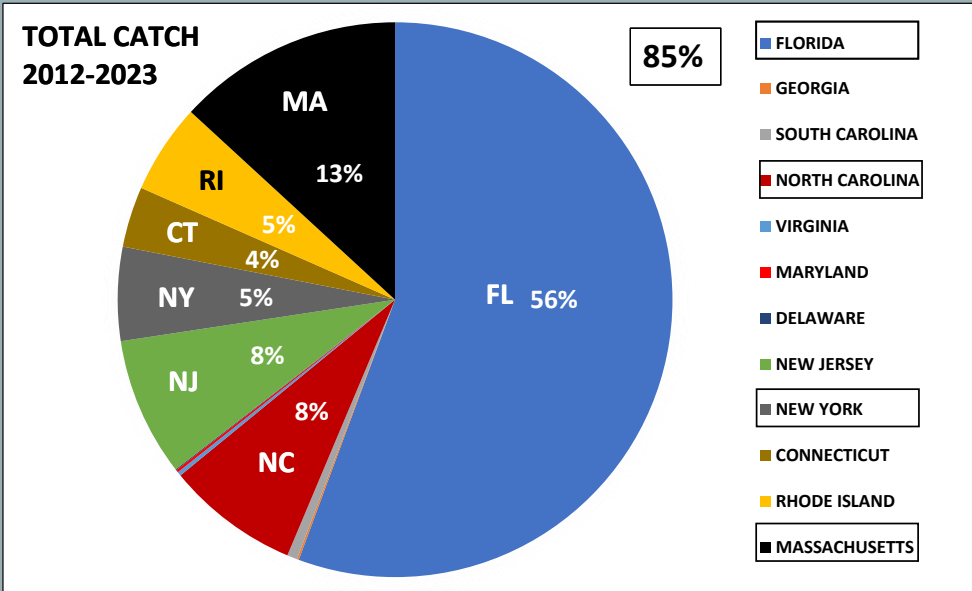
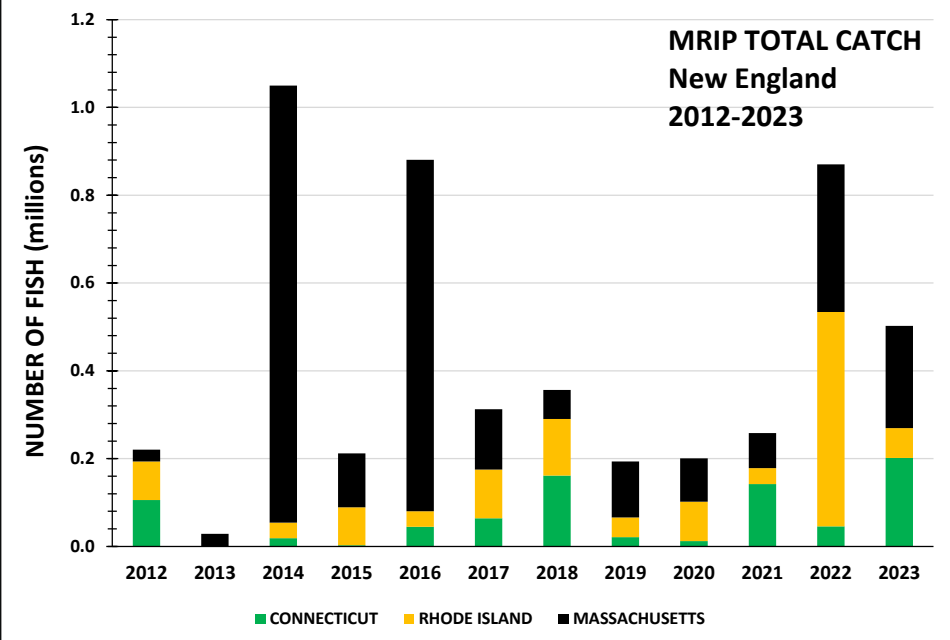
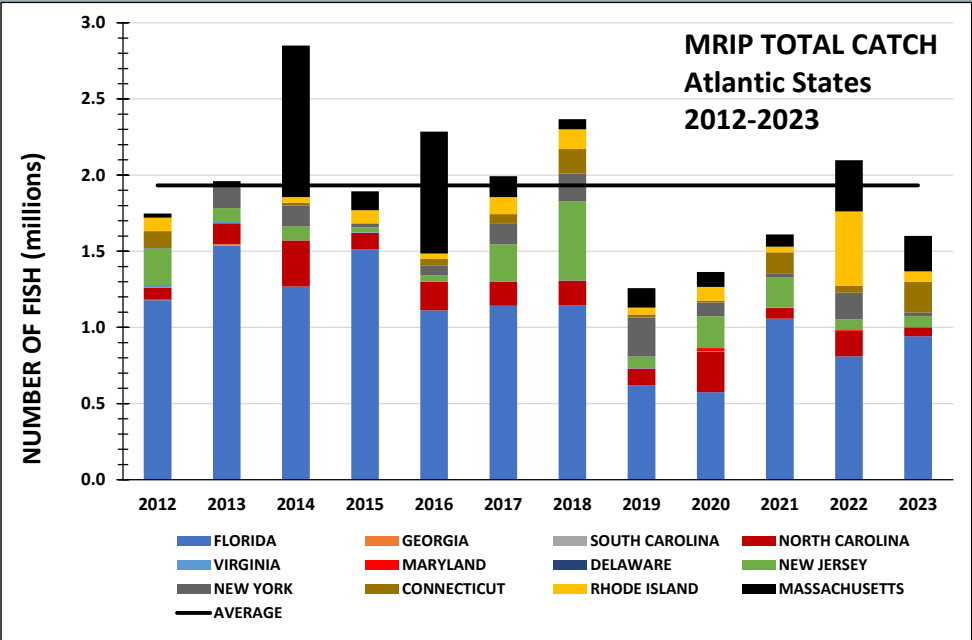
ATLANTIC BONITO RECREATIONAL



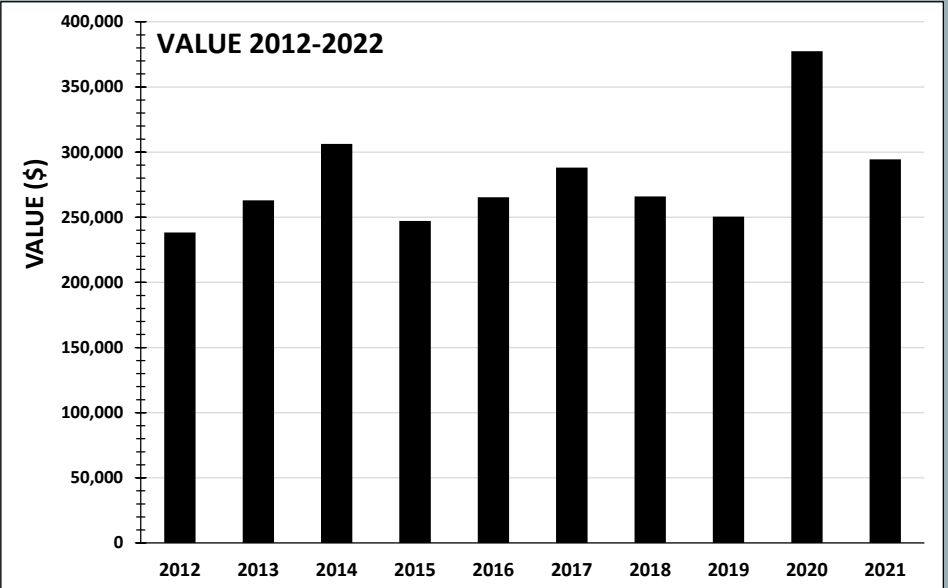
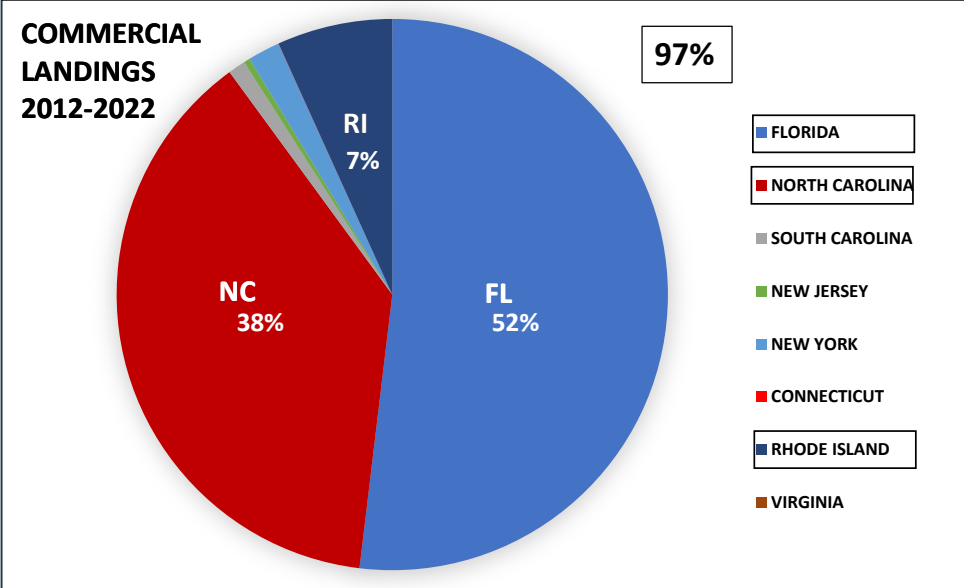
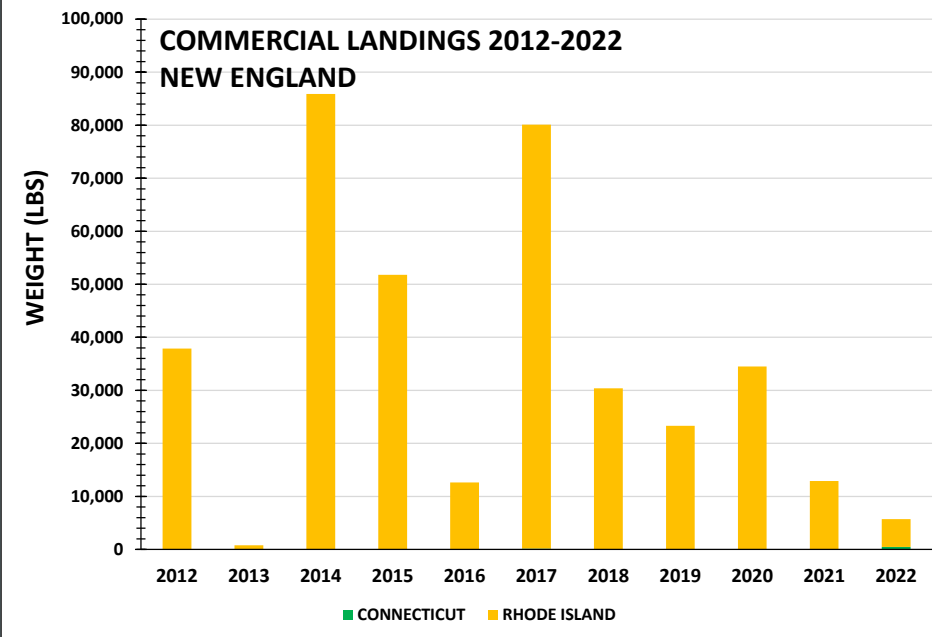
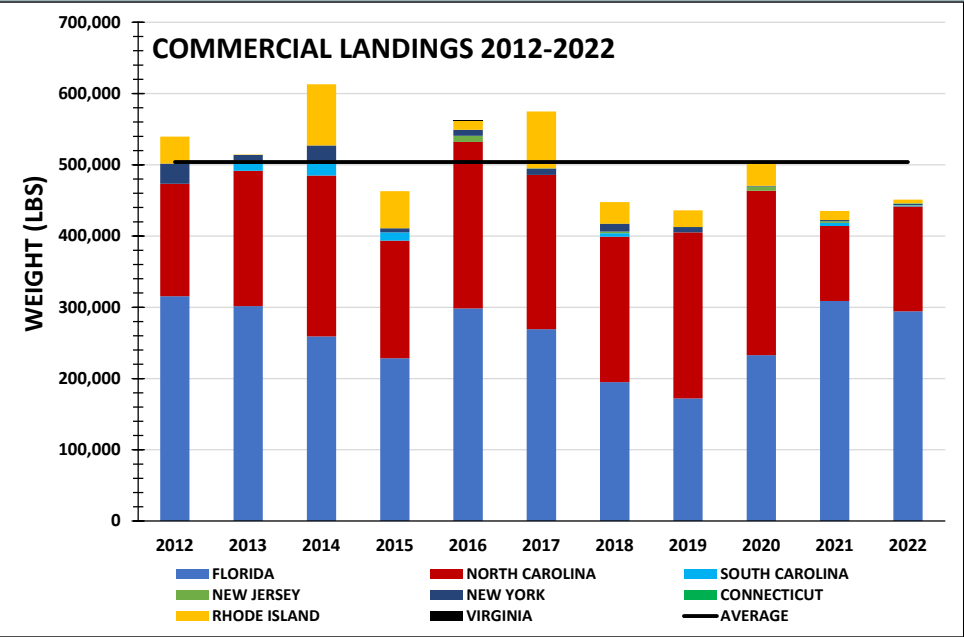
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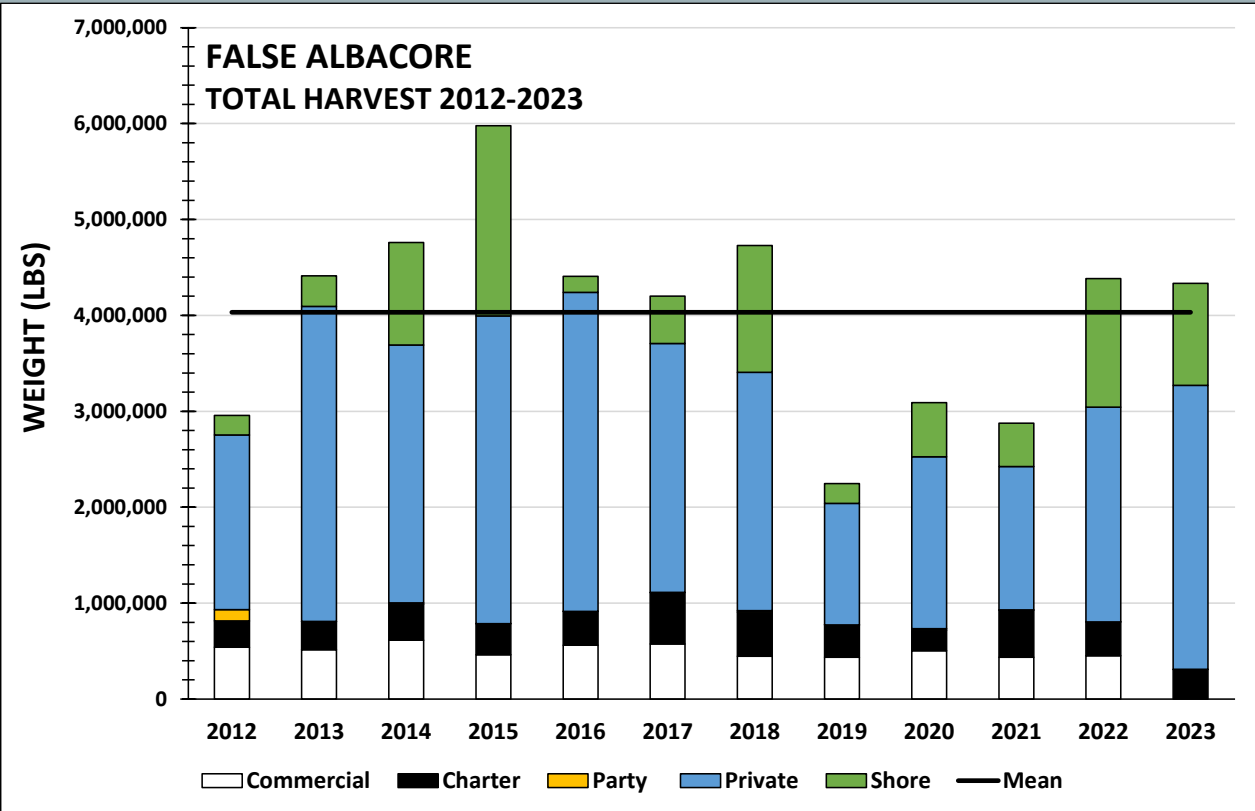
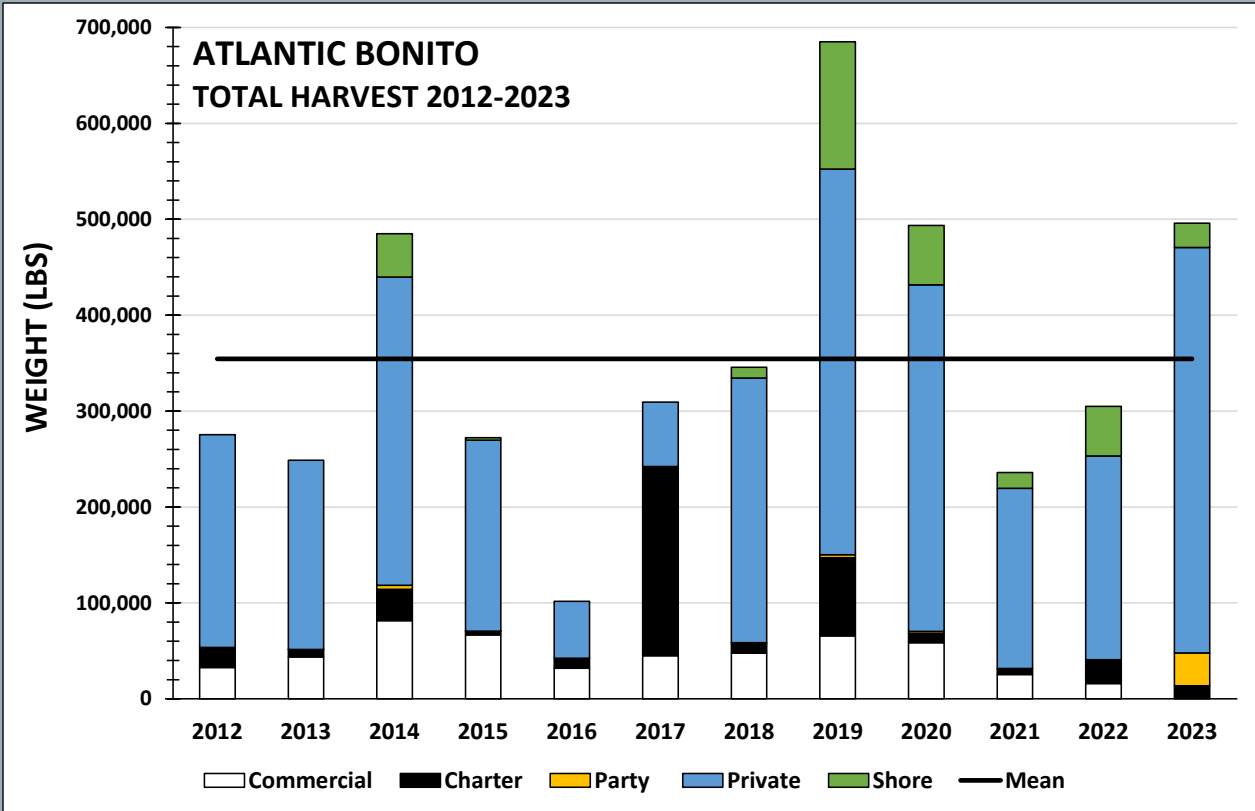
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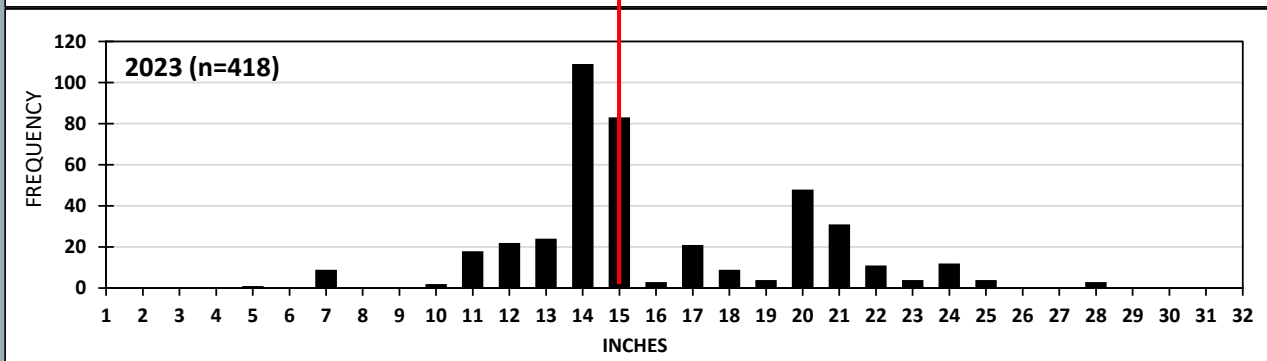
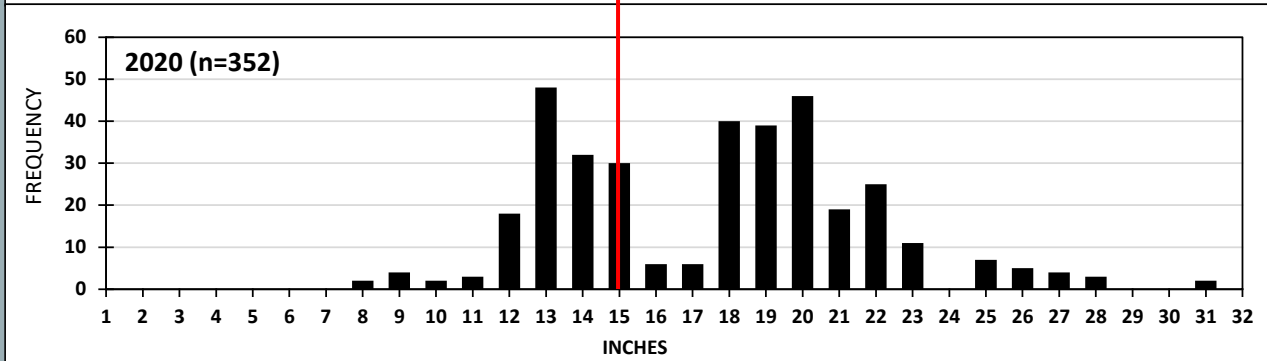
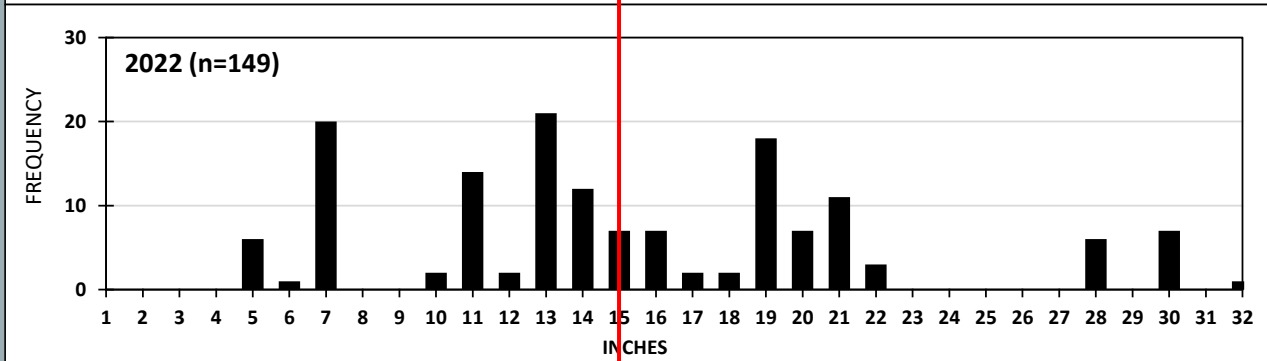
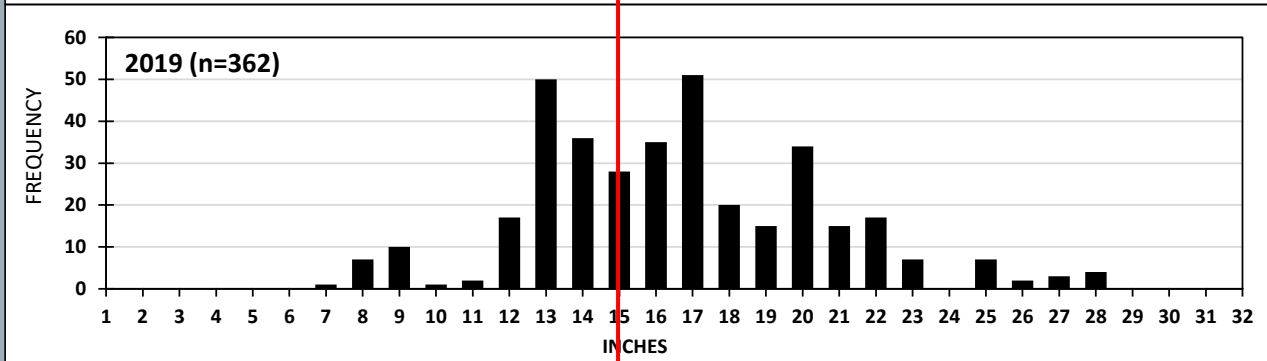
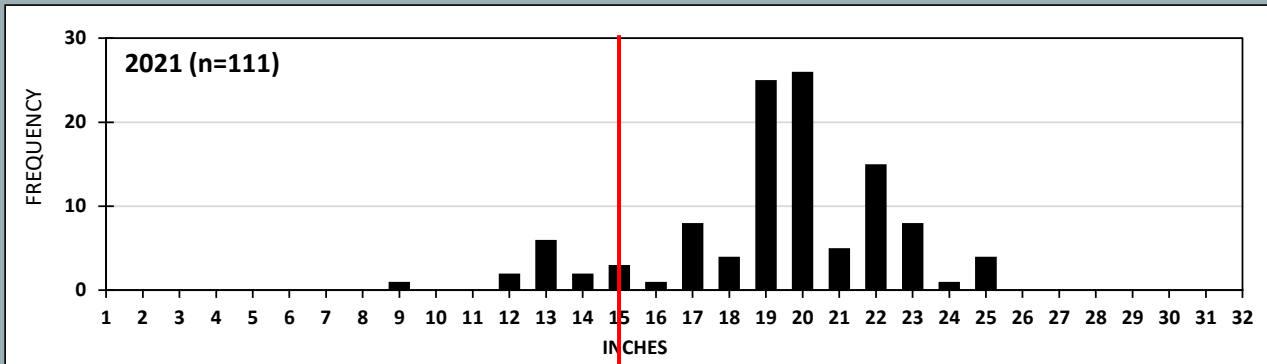
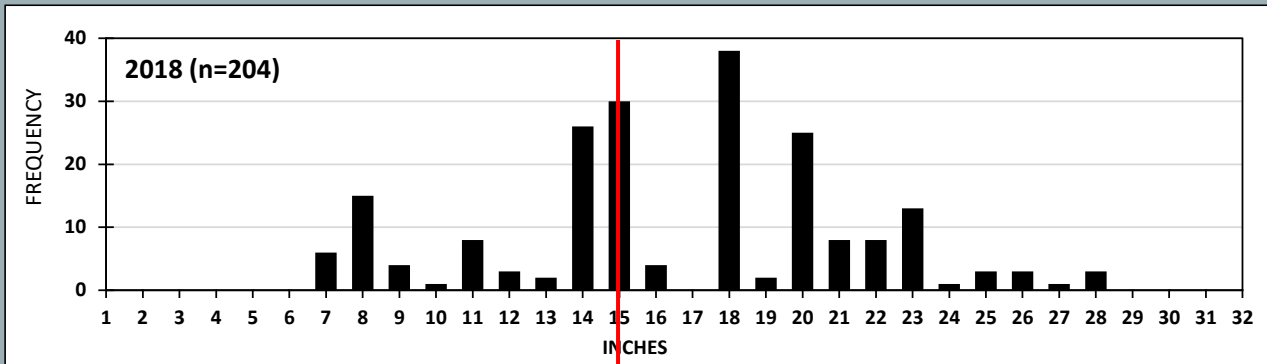
FALSE ALBACORE COMMERCIAL



TOTAL HARVEST

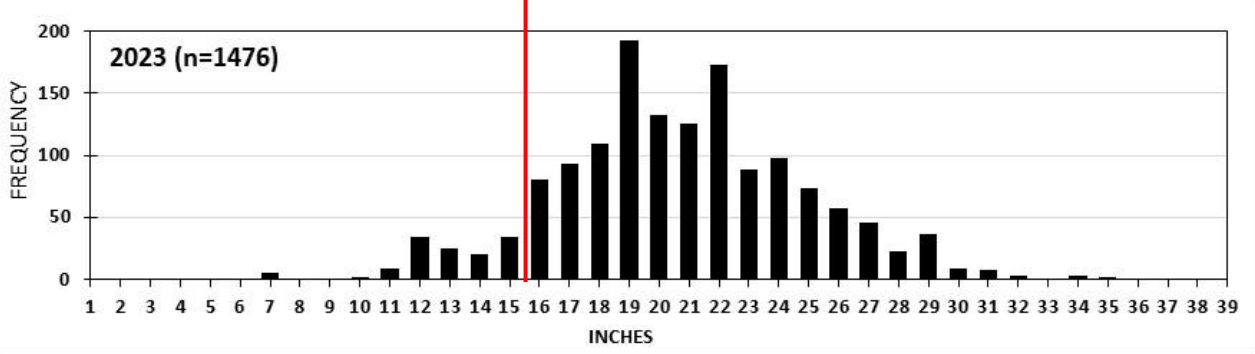
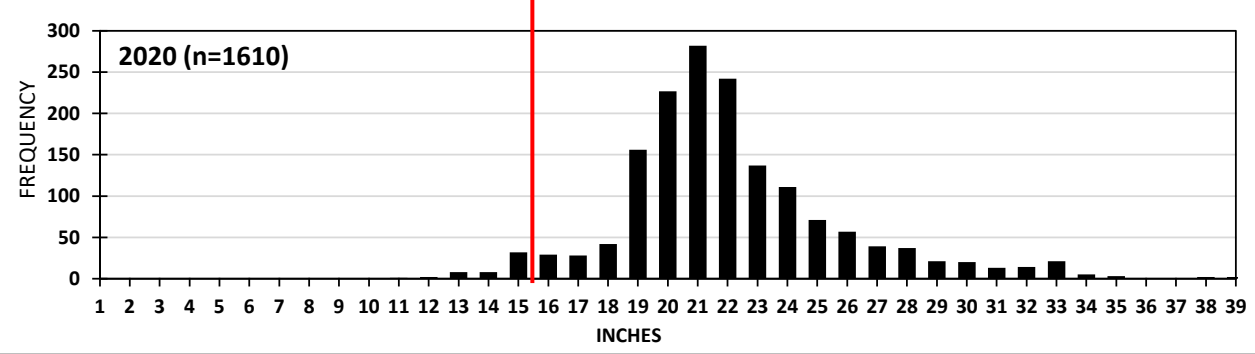
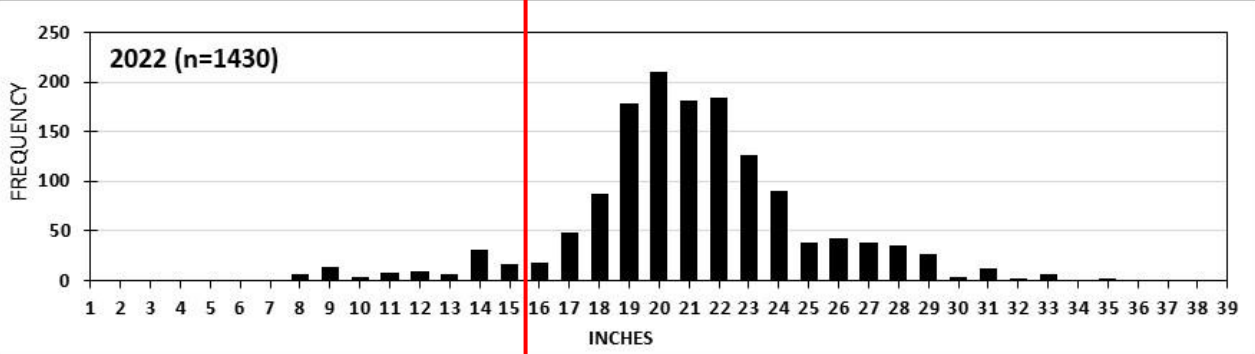
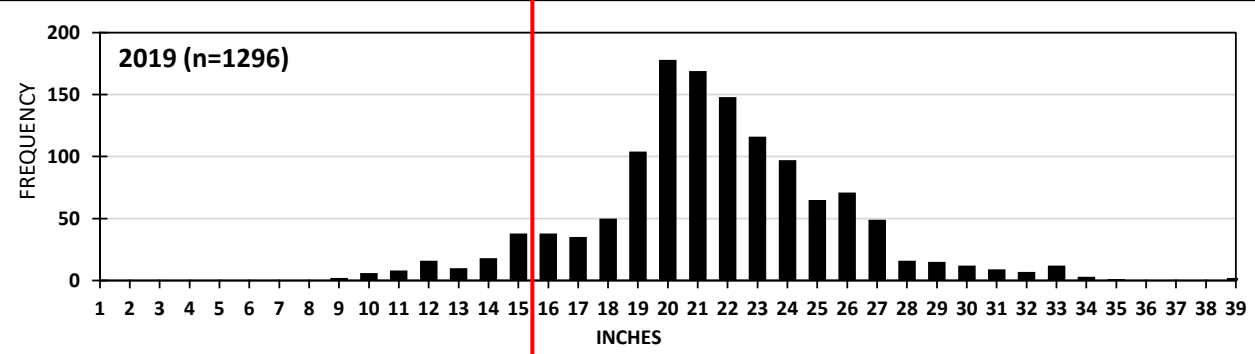
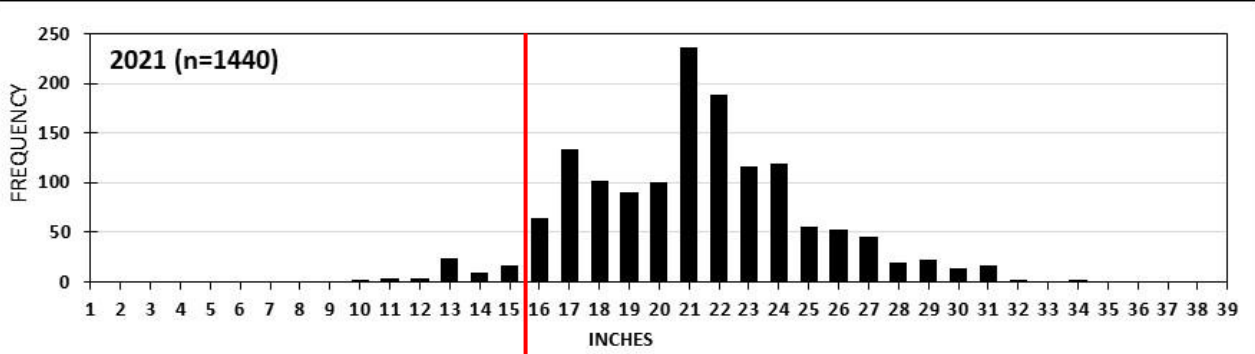
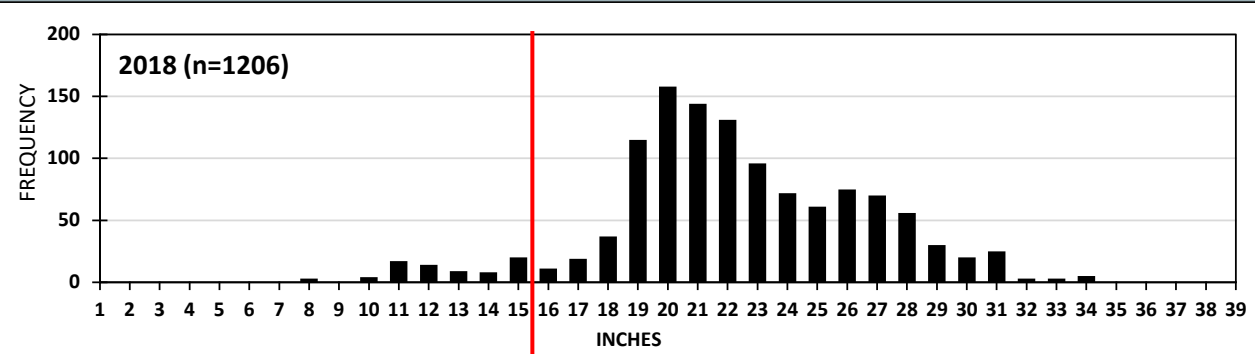


LENGTH FREQUENCY: ATLANTIC BONITO



ESTIMATED SIZE AT SEXUAL MATURITY

LENGTH FREQUENCY: FALSE ALBACORE



ESTIMATED SIZE AT SEXUAL MATURITY