



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: May 10, 2023

SUBJECT: **Emergency Regulations Affecting Recreational Striped Bass Slot Limit**

On May 2, 2023, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Striped Bass Management Board (Board) voted to take emergency action to implement a 31" maximum size limit for all recreational fisheries, to be implemented as soon as possible and no later than July 2, 2023. The emergency action requires coastal states with ocean fisheries to implement a 28" to less than 31" slot limit for all recreational anglers, replacing the current 28" to less than 35" limit. The ASMFC will host four virtual informational hearings between May 17 and 31 (see the ASMFC [press release](#) for details).

This action was taken because recreational harvest nearly doubled from 2021 to 2022. This unexpectedly high harvest greatly reduced the probability of rebuilding the currently overfished striped bass stock by 2029, which is the goal of the interstate plan. This increased harvest was largely driven by the dominant 2015 year-class ageing into the harvestable size range, coupled with a nearshore abundance of forage attracting striped bass and the anglers who pursue them. For instance, DMF recreational sampling data from last year indicate that the 2015-year class made up 55% of harvested fish in Massachusetts.

The narrowed slot limit is expected to reduce harvest in 2023 by protecting more than half of that dominant 2015 year-class (compared to nearly zero protection with the 28" to less than 35" slot limit). The 2015 year-class is important to the future of striped bass because it is one of the few large year-classes produced over the past 20 years. We have been in a period of mostly below average recruitment since 2005, with the past four years being among the lowest recorded (Figure 1). With diminished recruitment, it is important to protect this 2015 year-class and provide it as many opportunities to reproduce as possible, and hopefully create strong year-classes should environmental conditions allow.

DMF has initiated the emergency rule making process to implement these measures. While the Board's motion sets a July 2 implementation deadline, the New England states are pursuing a more expedited rule making timeline with the goal of adopting this new slot limit prior to Memorial Day weekend. This expedited schedule should maximize the conservation benefits of the rule, particularly in New England as June is a peak fishing month.

I am currently requesting the Administration approve these new rules by Friday, May 26. Based on this schedule, I anticipate a state public hearing in early July and a final recommendation being brought to the MFAC at a late summer meeting. Given these changes will be occurring in season and affecting our most popular recreational fishery, DMF is working on an extensive public outreach plan to advertise these rule change, which includes an extensive Frequently Asked Questions webpage ([FAQ](#)) to educate anglers on the rule change and why the striped bass stock is at risk despite strong fishing conditions last year. Once

approved, we will announce the date of the rule change through emails to permit holders, informing media outlets and tackle retailers, signage, and through our social media channels.

It should also be noted that the ASMFC also initiated an Addendum to the FMP for 2024 measures that will investigate a range of options to reduce mortality in both the commercial and recreational fisheries to get the stock back on track for rebuilding by 2029. Measures to be considered included revised size limits and seasonal closures. This more typical approach to management action will be informed by public comment, with hearings likely occurring in the fall to allow for final action in time for 2024 implementation. This addendum also allows for the Board to respond by Board action (not an addendum) to the results of future stock assessments the next several years to ensure swift responses when needed to meet the rebuilding goal.

Figure 1. Atlantic Striped bass Female Spawning Stock Biomass and Recruitment

