



# The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

## Division of Marine Fisheries

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### MEMORANDUM

TO: Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MFAC)  
FROM: Nichola Meserve, Fishery Management Specialist  
THROUGH: Daniel McKiernan, Director  
DATE: September 12, 2024  
SUBJECT: Future Public Hearing Item: Striped Bass Total Length Measurement

#### Overview

This memo provides background on the issue of the method to measure striped bass, especially within the narrow recreational slot range. It may be appropriate to take to public hearing a proposal to clarify the method of total length measurement for striped bass, specifically that the upper and lower fork of the tail must be squeezed together to measure the tail extremity.

#### Background & Rationale

Size limits are a critical element of the interstate fishery management plan (FMP) and the state's management of striped bass for its sustainability. The Striped Bass FMP establishes all size limits as a measurement of "total length" but does not designate the precise method of measurement. DMF's striped bass regulations define total length as "the greatest straight line length in inches as measured on a fish with its mouth closed from the anterior most tip of the jaw or snout to the farthest extremity of the tail. For fish with forked tails, the upper and lower fork may be squeezed together to measure the tail extremity."

Concern with this definition—specifically the discretion for anglers to either squeeze or leave fanned out the caudal fin—was raised after the adoption of a recreational maximum size limit for striped bass. Both MEP officers and DMF staff have reported that this regulatory ambiguity has led to uneven application of measuring technique to ensure a slot sized fish; i.e., a tendency for anglers to squeeze the tail to reach the minimum length but leave the tail fanned out to fall short of the maximum length. With the recent narrowing of the slot as well as year-class strength increasing the availability of fish near the maximum size, this tendency has likely grown. This is problematic from an assessment perspective (collection of length frequency and weights at length) and management perspective (effectiveness of size limit regulation and intended protection of certain age classes).

The MFAC Law Enforcement Focus Group previously discussed this issue in November 2022. With urging from MEP staff that more precise language would aid in compliance and enforcement, the Focus Group agreed that DMF should consider amending the total length definition to require either the tail be squeezed or fanned out. Subsequent MFAC discussion (also in November 2022) resulted in interest to see how other states define total length to inform MA's proposal and possible movement towards designating a coastwide standard. Since then, with additional complaints and

questions raised from the public about the current definition of total length, DMF has taken additional steps to inform a public hearing proposal.

First, we have undertaken a review of other states’ rules and guidance (as readily available online) relevant to this issue. This includes a search of state regulations and recreational fishing guides. The results are summarized below (sources in attached appendix). The majority of states utilize a “must be squeezed” approach to total length measurement of striped bass.

<i>Tail Treatment for Total Length Measurement</i>	<i>Jurisdictions</i>
Must be squeezed	ME, NY, NJ*, PA*, DE*, MD, VA, NC*
Must be left natural/fanned out	NH, PRFC
Angler discretion	MA, RI*, CT*, DC

\*per state recreational fishing guide rather than specified in a regulation (at least one that was able to be found in this review)

Second, to better identify the biological difference between the two methods of tail measurement, we have made plans to collect dual measurement samples within the next month from: 1) striped bass collected from the carcass collection program throughout 2024; and 2) 1-2 field days of sampling this fall, conducted opportunistically during other planned at-sea activities. Samples from the carcass collection program are expected to yield between 50-100 dual measurements from striped bass in the 28 to <31” slot limit. The field days will hopefully provide additional samples just below and above the slot limit. These results will help justify the biological need for state rule-making and potential interstate action to beget uniformity.

It must be noted that the effectiveness of this proposal in standardizing striped bass length measurement will depend on public education. DMF will devise an outreach plan accordingly.

Although the concern about total length measurement arose from the recreational fishery’s maximum size, the revised total length definition would apply across all sectors of the striped bass fishery.

### **Timeline**

DMF should consider bringing this item to public comment in early 2025 for implementation prior to the striped bass season commencing. However, this timeline may be influenced by the potential for additional interstate management requirements in response to the 2024 stock assessment (scheduled to be presented to the Management Board in mid-October).

Appendix. **Striped Bass Total Length Definitions by State**  
(as inventoried from available online sources by DMF staff, August 2024)

**Maine**

Regulation: "Total length" means the greatest dimension between the most anteriorly projecting part of the head and the farthest tip of the caudal fin when the caudal rays are **squeezed together**. The measurement is a straight line and is not taken over the curve of the body.

**New Hampshire**

Regulation: "Total length" means the straight-line distance from the tip of the snout to the tip of the tail or caudal fin while the fish is lying on its side, **normally extended**.

**Massachusetts**

Regulation: Total Length means the greatest straight line length in inches as measured on a fish with its mouth closed from the anterior most tip of the jaw or snout to the farthest extremity of the tail. For fish with forked tails, the upper and lower fork **may be squeezed** together to measure the tail extremity.

**Rhode Island**

Regulation: "Total length" means the straight linear distance from the tip of the snout to the end of the tail of a finfish species. All finfish species' minimum sizes are measured as total length, except for coastal sharks, in which minimum size is measured by fork length.

Rec. Fishing Guide: Total length: is the maximum length of the fish, from the tip of the snout to the tip of the tail. The best way to obtain this length is to push the fish's snout up against a vertical surface with the mouth closed and the fish laying along or on top of a tape measure. Measure to the **tip of the tail or pinch the tail fin** closed to determine the total length. Do NOT use a flexible tape measure along the curve of the fish.

**Connecticut**

Regulation: (a) No person, while on the waters of this state or on any parcel of land, structure, or portion of a roadway abutting tidal waters of this state shall possess or land any fish of the following species taken by sport fishing methods, regardless of where taken, if it is less than the identified *length as measured from the tip of the snout to the end of the tail*:...

Rec. Fishing Guide: The minimum length is measured from the tip of the snout to the end of the tail. The tail **may be pinched** to achieve the longest length when measuring, but the minimum length does not include the tendril (dorsal tail filament) found on black sea bass. Fish measuring less than the identified minimum length must be released immediately, with avoidable injury.

**New York**

Regulation: Total length is the longest straight line measurement from the tip of the snout, with the mouth closed, to the longest lobe of the tail, with the lobes **squeezed together**, and the fish laid flat on the measuring device.

**New Jersey**

Regulation: Fish length shall be measured from the tip of the snout to the tip of the tail (total length)...

Rec. Fishing Guide: "Fish tail **pushed together** to obtain greatest length, mouth closed"

**Pennsylvania**

[Rec. Fishing Guide](#): Total length: This is the measurement Commission biologists and law enforcement personnel use. **Compress tail slightly** to obtain this measurement.

#### **Delaware**

[Rec. Fishing Guide](#): Measuring Your Catch: Place the fish on a measuring board or stick with the tip of the jaw or snout (the mouth closed) at the end of the instrument. Hold the head down with one hand to keep the fish in place, **pinch the upper and lower lobes of the tail together** while swiping the tail back and forth across the board. Note the measurement of the longest part of the tail\*; that is the "total length." Keep in mind that fish which barely make the minimum length may shrink after being on ice for an hour or more.

#### **Maryland**

[Regulations](#): "Total length" means the distance from the tip of the snout to the end of the longest lobe of the **extended tail** of a fish.

[Rec Fishing Guide](#): How to Measure a Fish: The total length of a fish is the maximum length with the mouth closed and the **tail pinched together** measured from the snout to the tip of the tail. The best way to obtain this straight line measurement is to push the fish's snout against a vertical surface with the mouth closed and with the fish lying along a tape measure and then pinch the tail fin closed to determine the total length.

#### **Virginia**

[Regulation](#): "Total length" means the length of a fish measures from the most forward projection of the snout, with the mouth closed, to the tip of the longer lobe of the tail (caudal) fin, measured with the **tail compressed along the midline**, using a straight-line measure, not measured over the curve of the body.

#### **Potomac River Fisheries Commission**

[Regulation](#): Method of Measurement. Measurement shall be the greatest distance in a straight line from the tip of the snout to the end of the caudal fin or tail **in a natural state**, excluding the tail filament of a black sea bass. No person shall alter the natural state of any species of fish listed in (a) above such that its length cannot be measured.

#### **Washington DC**

[Regulation](#): Total Length - the length from the anterior-most part of the fish to the tip of the longest caudal fin rays.

#### **North Carolina**

How to Measure a Fish webpage: <https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/rules-regulations/rec-guide/how-measure-fish/open>

Total Length (TL) – The length of a fish as measured from the tip of the snout to the tip of the tail (**pinch tail together when measuring**).