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SOUTHERN FLOUNDER FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

AMENDMENT 5

March 1 – March 31, 2025



**The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries seeks your
input on Southern Flounder Management**

North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality
North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries
3441 Arendell Street
P.O. Box 769
Morehead City, NC 28557



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The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) wants your input on development of Amendment 5 to the Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan (FMP)

The Southern Flounder FMP is being reviewed to further address the August 2024, North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) motion “...to ask the DEQ Secretary to modify the [Annual FMP Review Schedule to amend the Southern FMP for the review of the plan to begin in 2024. The intent is to allow for more recreational access while maintaining the rebuilding requirements of Amendment 3](#)”. Amendment 5 will explore long-term management options for increasing recreational access while maintaining Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements along with other issues.

PURPOSE OF THE SCOPING DOCUMENT

This document provides background information about Southern Flounder management and identifies potential issues and management strategies to be addressed. Scoping is the first and best opportunity to make suggestions about what management strategies should or should not be considered in development of Amendment 5 to the Southern Flounder FMP.

Additional management strategies may be considered in Amendment 5 dependent on statutory requirements, available data, research needs, and effectiveness of the strategy. **Specific management options have not yet been developed.** After reviewing public comments received during the scoping process, the Division will determine issues to be addressed and develop a range of management options.

A series of questions about each potential strategy is provided for the public to consider when thinking about the strategies; in general: “What aspects of the Southern Flounder fishery are most important to you? What changes would you make to Southern Flounder management while maintaining rebuilding requirements?”

The suggested questions in this document are **NOT** intended to limit the scope of ideas or comments but may provide guidance to organize your thoughts and ideas. **The Division wants to hear about your experiences in the flounder fishery and ideas for improving management.**

SOUTHERN FLOUNDER LEADS

For questions about Southern Flounder biology, life history, and management please contact:

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WHAT IS SCOPING?

Scoping is the first stage of the FMP process. Scoping serves to:

1. Provide notice to the public that a formal review of the FMP is underway.
2. Inform the public of the stock status, when available.
3. Solicit input on relevant management strategies and issues to be addressed.
4. Recruit FMP advisory committee (AC) members to assist the Division in drafting the plan.

SCOPING PERIOD

March 1, 2025 – March 31, 2025



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SCOPING MEETINGS

At each scoping meeting Division staff will be available to provide information, answer questions, and solicit feedback about Southern Flounder science, data collection, and management in North Carolina. There will be no formal presentation, but a recorded presentation can be viewed [here](#). Individuals are encouraged to communicate and share ideas with Division staff individually or in small groups, there will be no formal comment session during these meetings. This scoping structure is different from past scoping meeting setups used by the Division. This is being done to ensure all individuals wanting to ask questions or provide comments are given the opportunity to do so without strict time constraints.

MEETING LOCATIONS AND DATES

<p>Tuesday March 4, 2025 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Archdale Building Ground Floor Hearing Room 512 North Salisbury Street Raleigh, NC 27604</p>	<p>Thursday March 6, 2025 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Dare County Administration Building 954 Marshall C. Collins Drive Manteo, NC 27954</p>
<p>Tuesday March 11, 2025 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. DMF Central District Office 5285 Highway 70 West Morehead City, NC 28557</p>	<p>Thursday March 27, 2025 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Cape Fear Community College Room U252 502 N. Front Street Wilmington, NC 28401</p>

HOW TO COMMENT

Public comments may be discussed with staff at public scoping meetings. Written comments may also be submitted online or through U.S. Mail. All written comments must be received by 11:59 pm on Monday March 31, 2025. You may submit written comments through one of the following methods:

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1. Online at: [Southern Flounder Scoping Comments](#)
2. U.S. Mail to:

N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries
Southern Flounder Scoping
P.O. Box 769
Morehead City, N.C. 28557



SCAN TO
SUBMIT
ONLINE
COMMENTS

All comments, regardless of submission method, will be considered by the Division in development of Amendment 5.

CURRENT MANAGEMENT

Southern Flounder is currently managed under [Amendment 3 to the North Carolina Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan](#).

The [2019 coast-wide stock assessment](#), which included data through 2017, determined the Southern Flounder stock is [overfished \(Figure 1\)](#) and [overfishing \(Figure 2\)](#) is occurring. [Stock projections](#) indicated a [72% coast-wide reduction in total catch](#) (landings and dead discards), measured in pounds was needed to rebuild spawning stock biomass (SSB) to the SSB target by 2028 and a [51% reduction in total catch](#) was necessary to reduce fishing mortality (F) to the F target.

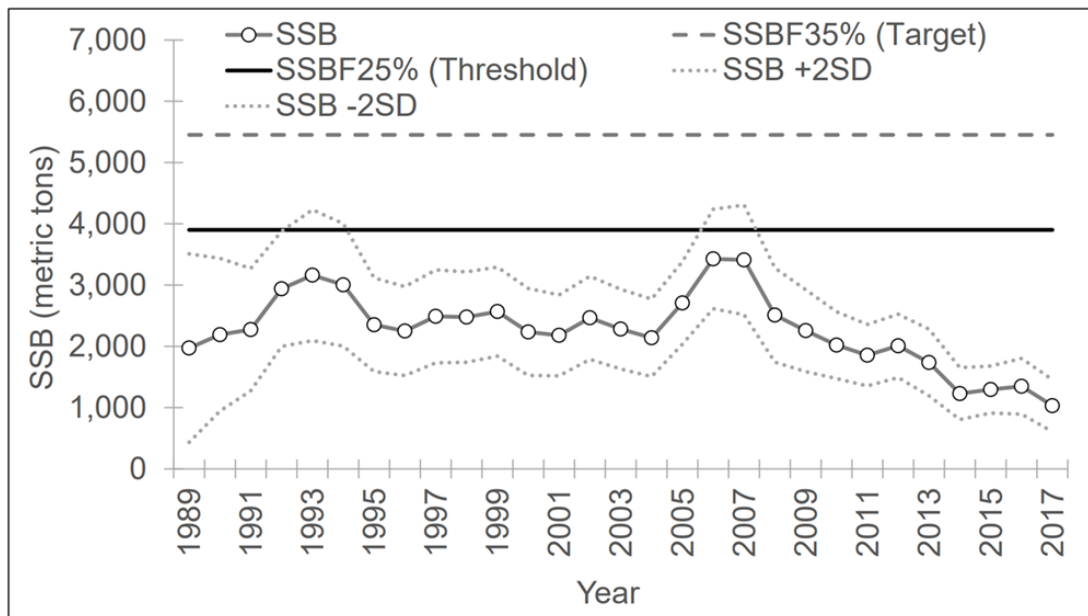


Figure 1. Estimated spawning stock biomass (SSB, including +/- 2 standard deviations (SD)) compared to established reference points (threshold and target), 1989-2017 ([Flowers et al. 2019](#)). SSB in 2017 is below the threshold (solid line) so stock is overfished.

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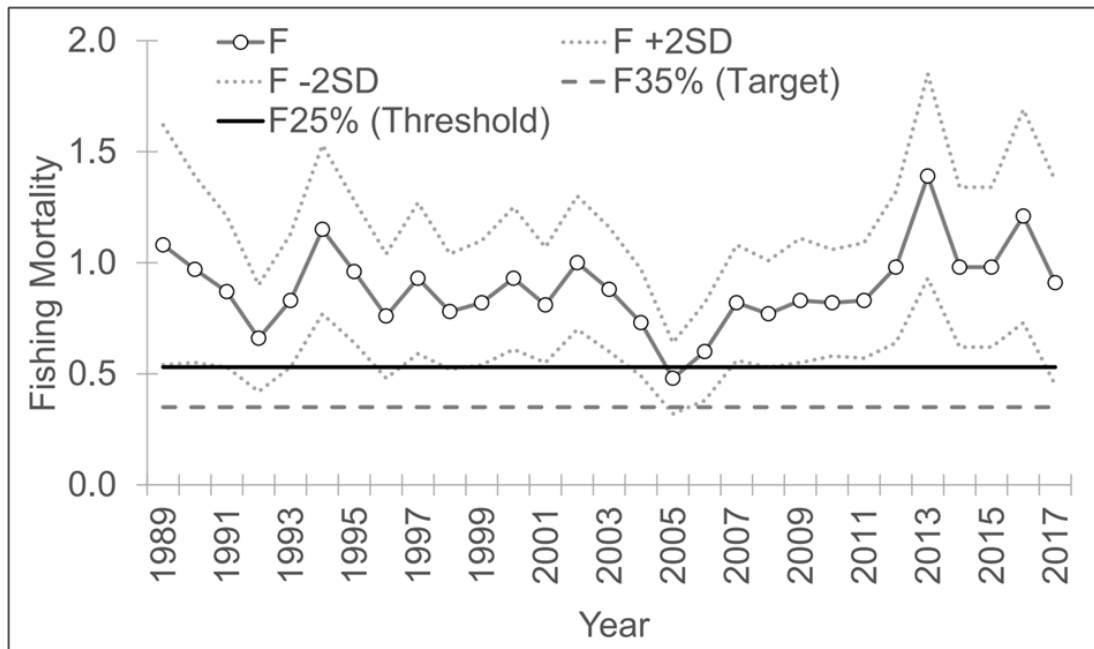


Figure 2. Estimated fishing mortality (F) rates (numbers weighted, ages 2-4; including ± 2 standard deviations (SD)) compared to established reference points (threshold and target), 1989-2017 (Flowers et al. 2019). F in 2017 is above the threshold (solid line) so overfishing is occurring.

[North Carolina General Statute 113-182.1](#) states that fishery management plans shall:

1. Specify a time period not to exceed two years from the date of adoption of the plan to end overfishing
2. Specify a time period not to exceed 10 years from the date of adoption of the plan for achieving sustainable harvest
3. Include a standard of at least 50% probability of achieving sustainable harvest for the fishery

Sustainable harvest is defined in North Carolina [General Statute 113-129](#) as “the amount of fish that can be taken from a fishery on a continuing basis without reducing the stock biomass of the fishery or causing the fishery to become overfished”.

Amendment 3 was adopted in May 2022 and implemented a [quota-based approach](#) to reduce North Carolina’s portion of the catch from the terminal year (2017) of the assessment by 72% to rebuild the stock to the SSB target. The quota system includes paybacks for more precise management and to account for quota overages. The quota that met the required reductions was 548,034 pounds of Total Allowable Catch (TAC), which results in 532,352 pounds of Total Allowable Landings (TAL) when accounting for dead discards. This TAL was further divided into [commercial and recreational sector allocations](#). The allocation was set to 70% commercial and 30% recreational (70/30) for 2021 through 2024, moving to 60/40 in 2025, and 50/50 beginning in 2026.

Commercial landings are closely monitored by the North Carolina [Trip Ticket Program \(NCTTP\)](#) to maintain total landings near the quota in near real-time. This approach is not realistic for the

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recreational sector; thus, a one-fish bag limit and restricted harvest seasons have been used to constrain recreational landings. Total recreational landings are not available until after the fishing season. Dead discards for both sectors are not available until after the fisheries close but are added when the data are available to determine if each sector’s total allowable catch is exceeded each year. If a sector’s total allowable catch is exceeded, then the quota for the following season is reduced accordingly. Management under Amendment 3 achieved a 69% harvest reduction in 2022, and 68% in 2023, not meeting the 72% target reduction due to overages in the recreational fishery (Table 1).

Table 1. Catch estimates in pounds with target and actual reduction percentages from the North Carolina Southern Flounder commercial and recreational fisheries as compared to 2017 during 2017-2023. (North Carolina TTP and MRIP). *Target reductions under Amendment 2.

Year	Total Landings	Dead Discards	Total Removals	2017 Total Removals	Target reduction	Actual reduction
2017	1,901,256	56,008	1,957,264	1,957,264	.	.
2018	1,452,590	36,670	1,489,259	1,957,264	.	.
2019	1,233,695	41,309	1,275,003	1,957,264	62%*	34.9%
2020	905,149	45,266	950,415	1,957,264	72%*	51.4%
2021	1,071,541	52,132	1,123,673	1,957,264	72%*	42.6%
2022	540,494	62,668	603,162	1,957,264	72%	69.2%
2023	576,013	48,457	624,470	1,957,264	72%	68.1%

Due to recreational catch overages in 2023 (Table 2), the recreational season was not opened in 2024. A major contributor to recreational overages has been consistently elevated dead discards in the hook-and-line fishery, which have remained at or above the level observed in 2017 (39,080 pounds) despite shortened seasons.

Table 2. Recreational TAC and catch estimates in pounds with adjusted TAC based on overage reductions, 2022-2024. An asterisk (*) indicates that the value is estimated from the previous year.

Year	TAC	Adjusted TAC	MRIP Landings	Gig Landings	Total Landings	MRIP Dead Discard	Gig Dead Discard	Total Dead Discard	Total Removals	Overage deducted from next year’s TAC
2022	170,655	170,655	166,091	7,882	173,973	52,771	251	53,022	226,995	56,340
2023	170,655	114,315	192,168	7,882*	200,050	41,308	251*	41,559	241,609	127,294
2024	170,655	43,361	not yet available							

In response to the closed recreational season in 2024, the MFC passed a motion at their August 2024 business meeting to request modification of the Annual FMP Review Schedule to amend the Southern Flounder FMP for the review of the plan to begin in 2024 to allow more recreational access to the fishery while maintaining Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements. To immediately address the motion, the Division is developing Amendment 4, which proposes to implement the 50/50 sector allocation in 2025 instead of 2026 as prescribed by Amendment 3. Amendment 4 is tentatively scheduled for adoption in August 2025, allowing additional recreational access to the Southern Flounder resource later in that year.

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Amendment 5 will further explore long-term approaches for increasing recreational access while maintaining Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements. The amendment will also address other issues depending on public input and relevancy. **Broad topics to be addressed include recreational access, changes in the commercial fishery, and updates to the adaptive management framework in place under Amendment 3.**

STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION

Increased Recreational Access by Managing Southern Flounder Separately from Other Flounder Species

In North Carolina, the recreational flounder fishery is managed as an aggregate fishery of the three main species of flounder (Southern, Summer, and Gulf). As a result, when the Southern Flounder recreational fishery is closed it is unlawful to harvest the other two species.

Amendment 3 explored options to [increase recreational access by managing Southern Flounder separately from other flounder species](#) and adopted a [strategy](#) to allow a one-fish ocellated (Summer and Gulf flounder) bag limit during March 1 through April 15 in ocean waters using only hook-and-line gear. **However, because of consistent overages by the recreational fishery during the designated Southern Flounder season, this ocellated flounder season has never been opened.**

Education and outreach are key to success of this strategy. The [Flounder Identification Guide](#) developed by the Division describes characteristics (presence of ocellated or non-ocellated spots, gill rakers, and fin ray counts) to identify the three main flounder species in North Carolina waters. The absence of ocellated spots in Southern Flounder relative to Gulf and Summer Flounder is a defining characteristic that can be used as the primary characteristic to differentiate among flounder species.

Amendment 3 discussed the importance of adaptive management for this strategy to be successful, but limited the scope of how adaptive management could be used to manage an ocellated flounder season. Amendment 5 will further explore how adaptive management can be used to manage Southern Flounder separately from other flounder species.

Questions for the Public

- What aspects of the flounder fishery are most important to you?
- Where do you primarily fish for flounder (e.g., estuary or ocean)? How likely are you to participate in an ocean only flounder fishery?
- Are you concerned about the recreational flounder fishery only being opened in some areas at certain times (e.g., only being able to harvest flounder in the ocean during the ocellated season)?
- Would you prefer a fishery with separate management for non-ocellated (Southern Flounder) and ocellated flounder (Summer and Gulf Flounder combined)? Or would you prefer a fishery that is species specific (manage Southern, Summer, and Gulf Flounder separately)?
- Do you catch ocellated flounder? How comfortable are you identifying ocellated flounder vs. Southern Flounder? What species of flounder do you catch most frequently?

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- If species specific management is adopted, would the increased likelihood of being issued a citation (i.e., ticket) due to misidentification resulting in the unlawful harvest of Southern Flounder make you less likely to participate in the fishery?
- Would you support having an ocellated flounder season if it meant the Southern Flounder season might be shorter, or not occur at all?

Timing of Recreational Southern Flounder Season

Questions for the Public

- What seasons are most important to the flounder fishery (e.g., when do you fish for flounder)?
- How has your flounder fishing effort changed since introduction of short Southern Flounder seasons?
- Would you rather have a short season when flounder are more available or a longer season when flounder may be less available?

Changes in the Commercial Fishery

Amendment 4, which is tentatively scheduled for adoption in August 2025, proposes to implement the 50/50 sector allocation in 2025 instead of 2026 as prescribed by Amendment 3 (Table 3).

Table 3. Allocations in pounds for the North Carolina Southern Flounder commercial and recreational fisheries and associated sub-allocations for each sector that maintains overall reductions of 72% but maintains the current level of sub-allocation for the pound net fishery. Under Amendment 4, 50/50 allocation would occur in 2025 instead of 2026.

Year	Allocation	Total Allowable Catch	Dead Discards	Total Allowable Landings	Total Allowable Commercial Landings	Commercial Gear		Total Allowable Recreational Landings	Recreational Gear	
						Mobile Gears	Pound Nets		Hook-and-line	Gigs
2021	70/30	548,034	15,682	532,352	372,646	186,188	186,458	159,706	142,206	17,500
2022	70/30	548,034	15,682	532,352	372,646	186,188	186,458	159,706	142,206	17,500
2023	70/30	548,034	15,682	532,352	372,646	186,188	186,458	159,706	142,206	17,500
2024	70/30	548,034	15,682	532,352	372,646	186,188	186,458	159,706	142,206	17,500
2025	60/40	548,034	15,682	532,352	319,411	132,953	186,458	212,941	189,608	23,333
2026	50/50	548,034	15,682	532,352	266,176	79,718	186,458	266,176	237,010	29,166

Regardless of when the allocation shift occurs, Amendment 3 is prescriptive in that commercial allocation shifted to recreational will come from the mobile gear sub-allocation (Table 3). Under Amendment 3, the pound net sub-allocation will remain unchanged. **While Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements do not leave substantial harvest opportunities for any sector**, the increasingly small mobile gear allocation presents management challenges. Specifically, the mobile gear season is likely to last only one or two days that may be non-consecutive. Given

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these constraints, changes to how the Southern Flounder commercial fishery is managed will be considered in Amendment 5.

Questions for the Public

- How has your fishing effort changed under reduced fishing seasons? How will your effort change under further reduced seasons (e.g., one or two days)?
- Amendment 3 considered the issue of [phasing out anchored large-mesh gill nets in the North Carolina Southern Flounder fishery](#) and ultimately adopted a [strategy](#) to continue to allow anchored large-mesh gill nets to harvest Southern Flounder. Should this issue be re-examined as part of Amendment 5?
- If large mesh gill nets were eliminated as a commercial gear to harvest Southern Flounder, would you switch gears or leave the fishery? If you said you would switch gears, would you switch to gigs, hook & line, pound nets or a combination?
- How do gill net yardage restrictions affect your fishing effort?
- Would you be in favor of measures that might reduce commercial trip level harvest but extend the season length?
- Given Amendment 3 rebuilding requirements will not change with Amendment 5, are there changes to Southern Flounder commercial fishery management that should be considered?

ISSUE THAT WILL NOT BE ADDRESSED

The following issues will not be addressed by Amendment 5 due to limited effectiveness, inability to meet sustainability requirements, lack of authority, or previous examination in [Amendment 3](#). Some issues were [considered by Amendment 3 and not developed](#). These issues are unlikely to be considered in Amendment 5 for similar reasons.

- Recreational flounder tags/stamps/permits/etc.
- Recreational day of week closures and openings
- Recreational size or bag limit changes
- Stocking
- Circle hooks
- Shrimp trawl bycatch

SOUTHERN FLOUNDER LEADS

For questions about Southern Flounder biology, life history, and management please contact:

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TENTATIVE AMENDMENT 5 TIMELINE

You Are Here

Scoping Period	March 1-31, 2025
DMF Drafts Amendment 5	March - July, 2025
Solicit FMP Advisory Committee	May - June, 2025
FMP AC Workshop	August, 2025
MFC Approve Draft for Public Comment and MFC AC Review	November, 2025
Public and MFC AC Review	December, 2025 - January, 2026
MFC Select Preferred Amendment 5 Management	February, 2026
DEQ Secretary and Legislative Review	March - April, 2026
MFC Votes to Adopt Amendment 5	May, 2026
Implementation of Amendment 5 Management	June, 2026

ALL DATES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

FMP COORDINATORS

For Question related to FMP development please contact:

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IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

Links to resources with a glossary of fishery terms are available below.

NCDMF: [Defining Fisheries: A User's Glossary](#)

ASMFC: [Acronyms and Glossary of Commonly Used Terms](#)

NOAA: [Fisheries Glossary](#)

FAO: [Term Portal](#)

Common Flounder Terms:

Allocation - A direct and deliberate distribution of the opportunity to participate in a fishery among identifiable, discrete user groups or individuals.

- For southern flounder, each sector (recreational and commercial fishery) has an allocation with the commercial fishery further divided by gear type and management area.
- Changes to allocation are not based on biological need.

Total Allowable Landings (TAL) - Quantifiable mechanism used to manage quota; TAL can be monitored in real time for the commercial fishery and is managed through a season for the recreational fishery.

Total Allowable Catch (TAC) - Annual recommended catch for a species, includes landings and dead discards; also referred to as total removals.

Dead Discards - Fish that are not kept upon being brought to the boat, and are either dead at the time of release or are a proportion of those fish released alive that later die due to injury, stress, etc.

Stock - Population of fish that live in same geographic area and mix enough to spawn when mature.

Stock Assessment - Process using biological and statistical information to determine changes in stock abundance over time. Determines stock status.

Overfished vs. Overfishing

- Overfishing – Removing too many fish each year.
- Overfished – Population is too small.

Fishery Management Plan (FMP) - Document that guides management of a fishery to ensure long-term sustainability.

- Changes to management enacted under an FMP are done through Amendments. Amendments can be implemented to address changes in stock status, new scientific information, or changing stakeholder needs.

Management Strategy - Adopted to help reach the goal and objectives of the plan. They are the sum of all the management measures selected to achieve the biological, ecological, economic, and social objectives of the fishery.

Management Measure - The actions implemented to help control the fishery as stipulated in the management strategies.

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Adaptive Management - A learning process to improve management outcomes. In North Carolina FMPs, it is an optional management framework that allows for specific management changes to be implemented between FMP reviews under specified conditions to accomplish the goal and objectives of the plan. Specifically, the framework identifies:

- The circumstances under which adaptive management changes may be made (when);
- The types of measures that may be changed (what);
- The schedule for implementation of changes (effective date); and
- The procedural steps necessary to effect a change (how).



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