

# Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan Amendment 3

## MFC ADOPTS PLAN

The North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) adopted the Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan Amendment 3 at its May 2022 meeting. The 2019 coast-wide stock assessment determined southern flounder was overfished and overfishing was occurring. Therefore, the goal of Amendment 3 is to manage the southern flounder fishery to achieve a self-sustaining population that provides sustainable harvest using science-based decision-making processes. To ensure this goal is met, the MFC adopted a 72% reduction for the fishery. This reduction is more conservative than the NC Fishery Reform Act requires to achieve the plan goal.

Amendment 3 management effects both commercial and recreational fishing. Which includes a shift in allocation to reach 50/50 parity in 2026. Management strategies also include sustainable harvest, separating flounder species in management, and adaptive management.

## 2022 SOUTHERN FLOUNDER SEASONS

The North Carolina recreational southern flounder season will be September 1 - 30. This includes recreational hook-and-line and gig.

The commercial southern flounder fisheries will open as follows:

Mobile Gear:		
	Statewide	September 15
Pound Net:		
	Northern Area	September 15
	Central Area	October 1
	Southern Area	October 1

A commercial gear-area combination will close when the total allowable landing (TAL) is approached.



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## SOUTHERN FLOUNDER STOCK



In the Atlantic Ocean, southern flounder range from North Carolina to Cape Canaveral, Florida. Genetic and tagging studies provide evidence a single Atlantic Ocean stock.

The 2019 coast-wide stock assessment included data from the full range of waters in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the east coast of Florida from 1989 to 2017.

In considering long-term viability, the stock assessment estimates the population based on mature female fish and measures the rate fish are removed from the population. Based on these

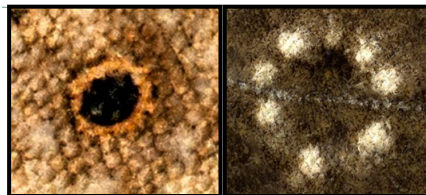
factors, 2017 estimates indicate the stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring.

Overfished means there are not enough mature females to produce enough young. Overfishing means that fish are being removed faster than they can be replaced.

Reducing the number of fish removed annually is needed to increase the southern flounder stock to sustainable levels. Amendment 3 was implemented in North Carolina to reach sustainability by 2028.

### What is an ocellated spot?

Ocellated means having an eye-like mark as shown on the left, where the spot has a ring. This ring is lacking in non-ocellated species, like the southern flounder, as shown on the right.



### SIZE LIMITS

Size limit changes including increasing the minimum, decreasing the minimum, and slot limits are often used to limit harvest.

Life history information must be considered when looking at size limit changes for southern flounder. Males are smaller than females so size limit changes could shift sex ratios of harvest.

Slot limits may be appropriate for healthy stocks. But the current size classes of southern flounder are limited. A slot limit may be considered when the stock rebuilds.

### RECREATIONAL FISHERY

- Single recreational southern flounder season for gig and hook-and-line gears set annually based on TAL
- Ocellated flounder season March 1–April 15 for hook-and-line in the ocean
- One-fish bag limit per person per day
- Recreational Commercial Gear License gear prohibited for harvest of southern flounder
- 15-inch total length minimum size limit

### RECREATIONAL ALLOCATIONS

Year	Total Allowable Landings*
2022	159,706
2023	159,706
2024	159,706
2025	212,941
2026	266,176

\*TAL may change due to previous year's overages



## Dealer Permit Required

Starting in 2022, dealers must purchase an Estuarine Flounder Dealer Permit to possess, purchase, or sell estuarine flounder. This permit is free and requires flounder landings to be reported daily.



## COMMERCIAL ALLOCATIONS

Year	Total Allowable Landings*	Mobile Gear	Pound Nets
2022	372,646	186,188	186,458
2023	372,646	186,188	186,458
2024	372,646	186,188	186,458
2025	319,411	132,953	186,458
2026	266,176	79,718	186,458

\*TAL may change due to previous year's overages

## COMMERCIAL FISHERY

- Commercial southern flounder season set annually based on TAL
- Allocation divided between mobile gears and pound nets
- Mobile gears divided into two areas based on ITP B-D line
- Pound nets divided into three areas, consistent with Amendment 2
- If quota remains after closure threshold is met, a trip limit for pound nets and gigs may allow limited harvest below TAL
- 15-inch total length minimum size limit
- Minimum mesh size of 6.0-ISM for anchored large-mesh gill nets used in the taking of flounder
- Minimum mesh size of 5.75-ISM for pound net escape panels
- Single, overnight gill net soaks set no sooner than one hour before sunset and retrieved no later than one hour after sunrise.
- Anchored large-mesh gill nets maintain a maximum of 1,500-yards in Management Units A, B, and C and a maximum of 750-yards in Management Units D and E unless more restrictive yardage is specified through adaptive management or through the sea turtle or sturgeon ITPs

SOUTHERN FLOUNDER



SUMMER FLOUNDER



GULF FLOUNDER



FLOUNDER SPECIES



## OCEAN OCELLATED SEASON

In North Carolina, the recreational flounder fishery is managed as left-eyed flounder, consisting of three main species of flounder. Limiting southern flounder harvest due to the stock status means harvest of the other two species will also be limited. The Division is working on verifying recreational fishers can properly ID the three species to expand harvest opportunities.

The Division is promoting angler education for species ID. The Coastal Angling Program has a smartphone app, Catch-U-Later, to verify fish identification. The app is being used by volunteer anglers who send in their fish ID with a picture to be reviewed.

Since southern flounder are the only species of the three left-eyed flounder in North Carolina

without ocellated spots, a season for ocellated flounder would increase recreational access beyond the southern flounder season.

Amendment 3 has implemented an ocellated flounder season from March 1–April 15. This season is only for ocean waters and hook-and-line gear. A 1-fish bag limit and 15-inch total length minimum size limit will be in place.

Southern flounder catch during the ocellated season will be considered when setting the fall flounder season in all waters of North Carolina. If anglers are not properly identifying flounder species the fall season will need to be shortened to account for landings.

*See [flounder biologist tagging fish](#) on the [North Carolina DEQ YouTube channel](#). Subscribe for more DEQ content.*

## WHAT IF WE CATCH TOO MANY FISH?

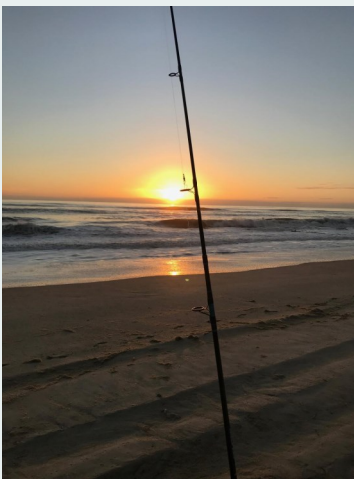
When fisheries are managed through a quota there must be a way to account for sectors going over their limit. Accountability measures provide a means for regulating overages.

In the flounder fishery, each sector allocations must account for Total Allowable Catch (TAC) which includes landings and discards.

For the commercial fishery, if the TAC for a gear and area is not exceeded at the end of the fishing year, no paybacks are needed. If they do exceed the TAC, the responsible gear and area

combination will have overages subtracted from the following year allocation. The payback will be assessed pound for pound.

For the recreational fishery, TAC will be evaluated by combining landings from the MRIP, the gig survey, and dead discards. If the estimate exceeds the recreational TAC, overages will be subtracted from the next year. If overages are greater than the annual TAC, overages will be subtracted across multiple years the poundage is replaced. The payback will be assessed pound for pound.



## RESEARCH

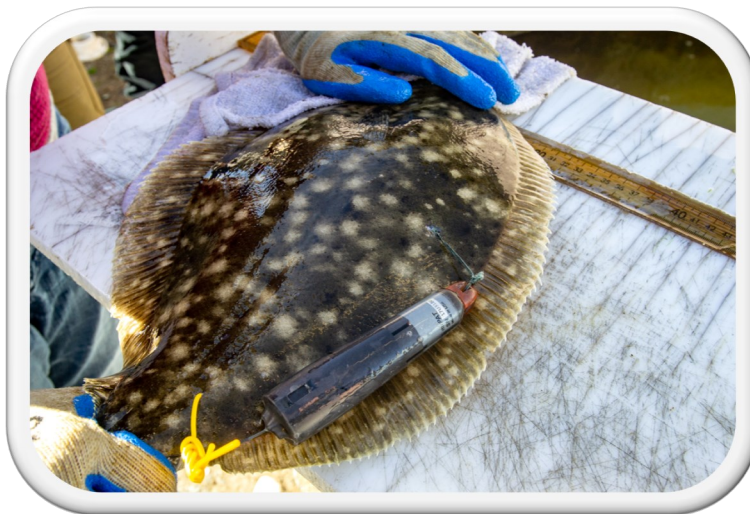
Research is a critical aspect of successful fisheries management. There are still aspects of the life history of southern flounder that are uncertain. The Research Recommendations identified through Amendment 3 have been prioritized by need and category.

Researchers recognize the need to further their understanding and share findings. In March 2022, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission held a regional symposium on the status of flounder in the Gulf of Mexico, South, and Mid Atlantic. You can

watch presentations on the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission [YouTube Channel](#).

The Division, in partnership with universities and other states, is participating in several projects. One project is attaching satellite tags to female fish during the spawning season. Biologists are interested in information on migration patterns and spawning habitats.

Research findings will improve the understanding of life history and be useful for future assessments and management.



## STOCK ASSESSMENT

The 2019 Stock Assessment of Southern Flounder in the South Atlantic indicated the South Atlantic Southern Flounder stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring. Data were included for southern flounder from North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the east coast of Florida.

At minimum a 31% reduction of total removals is needed to end overfishing and a 52% reduction of total removals is needed to be sustainable. The Marine Fisheries Commission has decided to be more cautious, with management aiming for a 72% reduction.

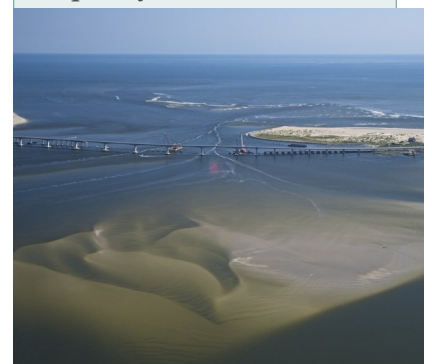
The Division is currently working with the other South Atlantic states on updating the stock assessment with data through 2022.

## INLET CORRIDORS

Inlets are natural entry ways between the ocean and estuary. The barrier islands of the North Carolina coast create many inlets across the state. These narrow corridors funnel migrating species between habitats.

Fish travel to and from the ocean for many reasons. Some fish, like southern flounder, quickly move through inlets. Other species, like blue crabs, remain in the inlet for an extended time

Different life stages of fish have distinct needs and require special habitats. The habitats provide important roles in avoiding predators, feeding, and water quality needs.



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## OTHER STATE REGULATIONS

South Carolina

[New regulations press release](#)

<https://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/species/southernflounder.html>

Georgia

<https://coastalgadnr.org/CommercialFishing>

<https://www.eregulations.com/georgia/fishing/>

Florida

[New regulations press release](#)

<https://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/flounder/>

*All Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan documents are available on the Division's [Fishery Management Plan Website](#)*

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