

AMENDMENT #2 TO THE ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION'S
FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WEAKFISH

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted a management plan for the Atlantic coast weakfish fisheries in 1985. Important management objectives include understanding the coastal biology of the species, maintaining a spawning stock sufficient to minimize the possibility of recruitment failure and optimizing yield per recruit.

Amendment 1 to the Weakfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) was adopted in 1991 to address declines in weakfish harvest and spawning biomass, and the lack of implementation of the 1985 plan recommendations. Amendment #1 recommends size limits, mesh size restrictions, and other harvest control strategies, such as seasonal closures of fisheries, to reduce annual exploitation. Reduction-in-exploitation schedules called for a 15-25% reduction in 1992, a 25% reduction for 1993 and 1994, and a 1995 reduction in exploitation that would achieve a 20% level of maximum spawning potential. Another important management objective of Amendment #1 recommends that South Atlantic states (North Carolina through Florida) implement programs to reduce by-catch mortality of weakfish in their shrimp trawl fisheries by 50% by January, 1994.

Although some states made progress in 1992 and 1993 in meeting the required reduction in exploitation, none of the states with a directed fishery adopted management measures in 1993 which would achieve the full 25% reduction in exploitation, and most states achieved little progress toward this reduction target. Compared to the 1987-1989 period, quantifiable reductions in weakfish by-catch associated with shrimp trawl operations have occurred. However, only North Carolina shrimp trawl fisheries have implemented management measures to achieve a 50% reduction in by-catch of weakfish.

The purpose of Amendment 2 is to allow for full implementation of the first phase of this reduction strategy (a 25% reduction in the weakfish fishing mortality rate followed by a 25% in the weakfish exploitation rate), to clarify the shrimp by-catch requirements and schedule, and incorporate other modifications approved by the weakfish management Board during the development of the Schedule for Compliance of existing ASMFC FMPs under the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act.

The Weakfish Fishery Management Plan is proposed to be amended as follows. The effective date of this amendment is 20 October 1994.

Measure 1. Each state with directed fisheries for weakfish must immediately implement a minimum size limit of 12 inches, or establish equivalent conservation measures approved by the Weakfish Management Board. Such equivalent conservation, if implemented, will be in addition to reductions specified in Measure 3.

Measure 2. Mesh size requirements of the FMP for gill nets and trawl nets are suspended until July 1995. States that have mesh restrictions will maintain at least their current minimum mesh sizes as of September 1, 1994.

Measure 3. All states with directed weakfish fisheries must implement harvest control strategies to reduce exploitation by 25% by April 1, 1995. These plans will remain in place until March 31, 1996. State compliance for fishing period 1 April 1994 - 31 March 1995 will be judged on the basis of a 25% reduction in fishing mortality (rate at which fish die due to fishing). State proposals with respect to fishing April 1, 1995 to March 31, 1996 will be evaluated on the basis of a 25% reduction in exploitation (proportion of existing stock harvested in a given period). A 33% reduction in fishing mortality will achieve a 25% reduction in exploitation with a 12-inch minimum size limit (Table 4 revised, Components of an Evaluation Manual).

Measure 4. All South Atlantic states (North Carolina - FL) must implement management measures to achieve the 50% reduction in by-catch of weakfish in the shrimp trawl fisheries for the 1996 shrimping season. States that currently require the use of by-catch reductions devices (BRDs) in the shrimp trawl fisheries will maintain those requirements. By-catch reduction plans must be submitted

to the ASMFC by October 1, 1995, and approved by the weakfish Management Board prior to each state's 1996 shrimp fishing season.

Measure 5. In the event the ASMFC does not complete Amendment #3 by March 31, 1996, the state with directed weakfish fisheries must implement harvest control strategies that achieve F_{20} for the fishing year that begins April 1, 1996.