



# Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

## NEWS RELEASE

*Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
November 1, 2019

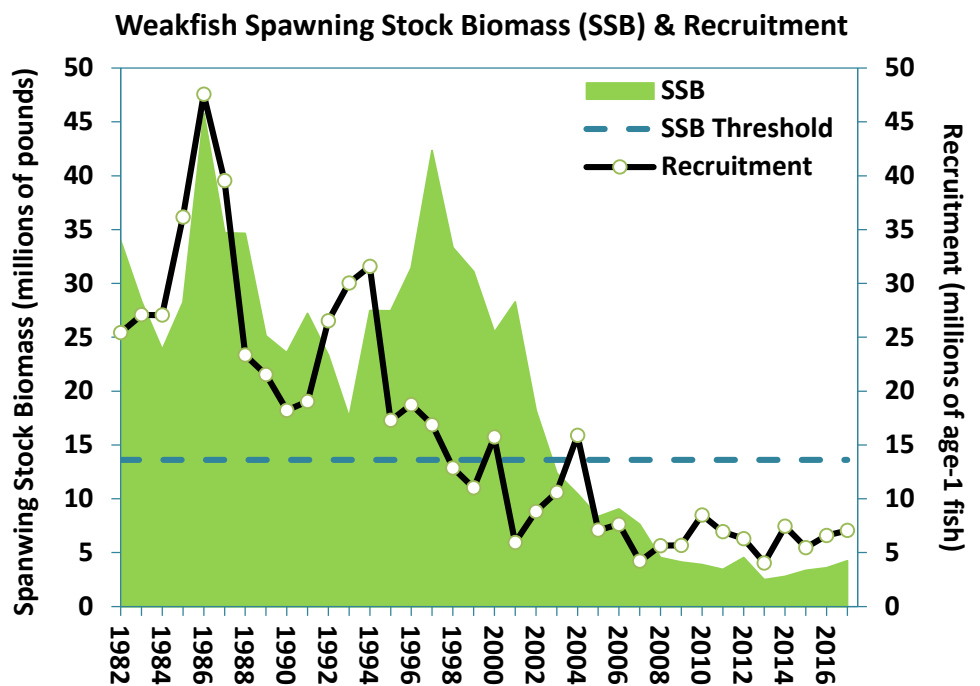
PRESS CONTACT: Tina Berger  
703.842.0740

### Weakfish Assessment Update Indicates Stock is Depleted Total Mortality Exceeds Threshold; Overfishing is not Occurring

New Castle, NH – The 2019 Weakfish Assessment Update indicates weakfish continues to be depleted and has been since 2003. Under the reference points, the stock is considered depleted when the stock is below a spawning stock biomass (SSB) threshold of 30% (13.6 million pounds). In 2017, SSB was 4.24 million pounds. While the assessment indicates some positive signs in the weakfish stock in the most recent years, with a slight increase in SSB and total abundance, the stock is still well below the SSB threshold. Given the weakfish

management program is already highly restrictive with a one fish recreational creel limit, 100 pound commercial trip limit, and 100 pound commercial bycatch limit, the Board took no management action at this time.

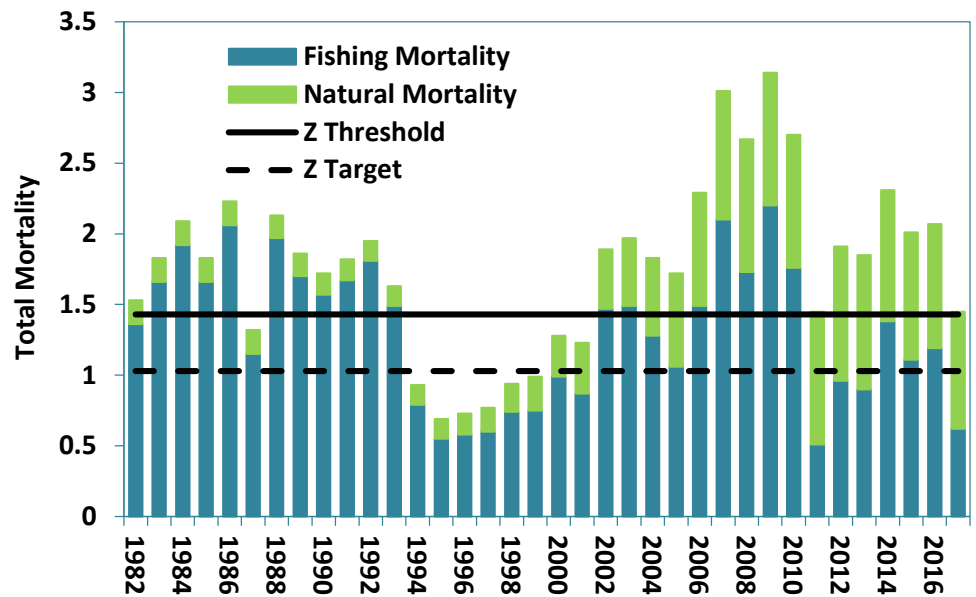
The assessment indicates natural mortality (e.g., the rate at which fish die because of natural causes such as predation, disease, and starvation) has been increasing since the early 2000s. Fishing mortality was also high during the mid- to late 2000s. Therefore, even though harvest have been at low levels in recent years, the weakfish population has been experiencing very high levels of total mortality (which includes fishing mortality and natural mortality), preventing the stock from recovering.



The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as a deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and anadromous species.

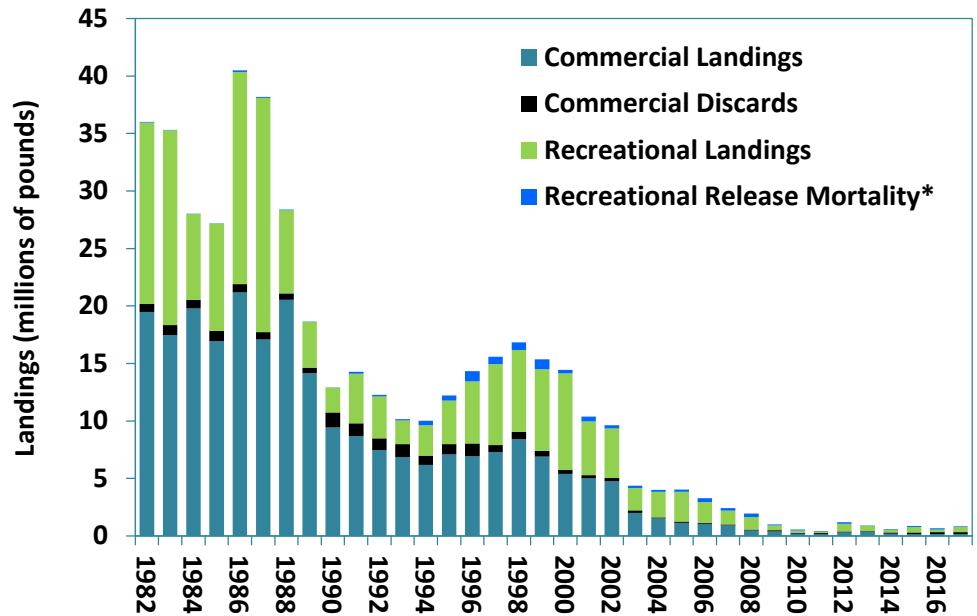
To better address the issues impacting the weakfish resource, the Technical Committee recommends the use of total mortality (Z) benchmarks to prevent an increase in fishing pressure when natural mortality is high. The assessment proposes a total mortality target of 1.03 and threshold of 1.43. Total mortality in 2017 was 1.45, which is above both the threshold and target, indicating that total mortality is too high. Fishing mortality has increased in recent years, but was below the threshold in 2017.

**Contribution of Fishing and Natural Mortality to Total Weakfish Mortality**



Weakfish commercial landings have dramatically declined since the early 1980s, dropping from over 19 million pounds landed in 1982 to roughly 180,560 pounds landed in 2017. The majority of landings occur in North Carolina and Virginia and, since the early 1990s, the primary gear used has been gillnets. Discarding of weakfish by commercial fishermen is known to occur, especially in the northern trawl fishery, and the discard mortality is assumed to be 100%. Discards peaked in the 1990s but have since declined as the result of management measures and a decline in stock abundance.

**Weakfish Commercial Landings and Discards & Recreational Landings and Release Mortality**



\* The stock assessment assumes 10% of the released fish died as a result of being caught and released.

Like the commercial fishery, recreational landings and live releases have declined over time. It is assumed that 10% of weakfish released alive die, so that total recreational removals are equal to the number of weakfish landed plus 10% of the weakfish released alive. The assessment update used the new time-series of calibrated estimates of landings and live releases from the Marine Recreational Information Program. These estimates were higher than the values used in the 2016 benchmark assessment, but showed the same overall trend. Total recreational removals peaked in 1987 at 20.4 million pounds and have declined since then to slightly less than 500,000 pounds in 2017. The proportion of fish released alive has increased over time; over the past 10 years,

88% of weakfish were released alive. Most of the recreational catch occurs in the Mid-Atlantic between North Carolina and New Jersey.

The Assessment Update and a stock assessment overview will be available on the Commission's website, [www.asmfc.org](http://www.asmfc.org), on the Weakfish page under Stock Assessment Reports. For more information on the stock assessment, please contact Katie Drew, Stock Assessment Team Leader, at [kdrew@asmfc.org](mailto:kdrew@asmfc.org); and for more information on weakfish management, please contact Mike Schmidtke, FMP Coordinator, at [mschmidtke@asmfc.org](mailto:mschmidtke@asmfc.org).

###