



# Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Coastal Pelagics Management Board  
**FROM:** Cobia Technical Committee  
**DATE:** April 12, 2022  
**SUBJECT:** TC Recommendation on Cobia Quota Block

*TC Members in Attendance:* Angela Giuliano (TC Chair, MD), Nichole Ares (RI), Mike Auriemma (NJ), Somers Smott (VA), Anne Markwith (NC), Justin Yost (SC), Chris Kalinowsky (GA)

*ASMFC Staff:* Toni Kerns, Emilie Franke, Tracey Bauer

*Others in Attendance:* Chris Batsavage (NC), Will Poston

The Cobia Technical Committee (TC) met via webinar on March 23, 2022 to discuss the quota block timeframe for cobia and to discuss future specification development and the timeline for the next cobia stock assessment.

### **Current Quota Block Background**

The current quota block is 2020-2022. In February 2020, the Board (formerly the South Atlantic Board) set the total harvest quota for the 2020-2022 fishing seasons at 80,112 fish, of which 92% was allocated to recreational harvest and 8% to commercial harvest in 2020 per Amendment 1. In 2021, the allocation of that total quota changed through Addendum I with 96% allocated to recreational harvest and 4% to commercial harvest. Using the previously approved total quota of 80,112 fish, this new allocation resulted in a recreational quota of 76,908 fish and a commercial quota of 3,204 fish (73,116 pounds) effective January 1, 2021.

Some states implemented new recreational cobia measures in 2021 based on Addendum I. As approved by the Board, Virginia and North Carolina changed their measures based on evaluation of previous landings against their new soft target recreational harvest limits. Virginia's 2021 measures were designed to reduce recreational harvest by 42% and North Carolina's 2021 measures liberalized regulations for recreational private anglers only. Some *de minimis* states also adjusted their 2021 recreational measures based on the updated *de minimis* requirement in Addendum I<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A recreational *de minimis* state may choose to match the recreational management measures implemented by an adjacent non-*de minimis* state (or the nearest non-*de minimis* state if none are adjacent) or limit its recreational fishery to 1 fish per vessel per trip with a minimum size of 33 inches fork length (or the total length equivalent, 37 inches).

### **TC Recommendation: Change the Quota Block to 2021-2023**

Since the 2021 changes in quota allocation and regulations occurred in the middle of the current 2020-2022 quota block, the TC discussed whether to shift the quota block to align with those management changes. If the current 2020-2022 quota block is maintained, then the Board would consider new specifications later this year for the 2023 fishing season. If the quota block is shifted by one year to 2021-2023, then the current total quota of 80,112 fish would apply to the 2023 fishing season; the Board would then consider setting new specifications next year for the 2024 fishing season. Per Amendment 1, the Board can set specifications for up to three years.

### **The TC recommends the Board change the cobia quota block to a timeframe of 2021-2023 for the following reasons:**

- This would align with the new sector allocations and new regulations implemented by some states in 2021.
- When new specifications are considered for 2024, there would be two years of data available under the new regulations (2021-2022) instead of just one year.
- The current total quota of 80,112 fish was a conservative quota level with a projected maximum probability of being overfished of 0.25; maintaining this quota level in 2023 carries a low risk.
- The current quota level was based on projections of constant annual harvest of about 2.4 million pounds. Realized harvest in both 2019 and 2020 was below 2.4 million pounds. Although preliminary data indicate 2021 harvest was over 2.4 million pounds, the average harvest of 2019-2021 is still below that level. The TC and the Plan Review Team will continue to closely monitor final 2021 harvest data and preliminary 2022 data to inform future specifications.

### **Future Specification Development and Next Stock Assessment**

The most recent cobia assessment (SEDAR 58) had a terminal year of 2017. The next SEDAR stock assessment for the Atlantic cobia would be an operational (i.e., update) assessment tentatively scheduled for 2025. The terminal year would likely be 2023 or 2024 and the assessment would likely be available to inform 2026 management.

If the Board changes the quota block to 2021-2023, the TC will develop specification options next summer for the 2024 fishing season. Since a new assessment will not be available yet, the TC will continue to use the projections provided by NOAA following the last assessment and will work with NOAA to discuss the possibility of any additional projections or information, if needed, while also considering the high levels of uncertainty around these projections.

Finally, regarding considerations for future specifications and assessments, the TC noted the importance of monitoring year-to-year changes and variability in state landings. The TC also noted recent data indicating overlap of Atlantic cobia (managed from Georgia north) with Florida (managed separately as part of the Gulf cobia group).