



## CCA Angler’s Guide to Amendment 7 for Striped Bass

March 2021

### Background

The 2018 benchmark stock assessment concluded that the striped bass population is “overfished and experiencing overfishing.” Overfished means that the number of spawning stripers in the population is below goals set by fishery managers. Overfishing means that anglers and commercial harvesters coast-wide are taking too many stripers from the water.

As Figure 1 below shows, each new assessment gives managers a new view on the size of the overall stock and how the estimated population relates to reference points that are used to determine the status of the stock. The 2018 benchmark stock assessment used re-calibrated Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) estimates to scale up the size of the stock, and develop a new understanding of the history of the stock. This scaling also changed the estimated relationship between recreational and commercial harvest.

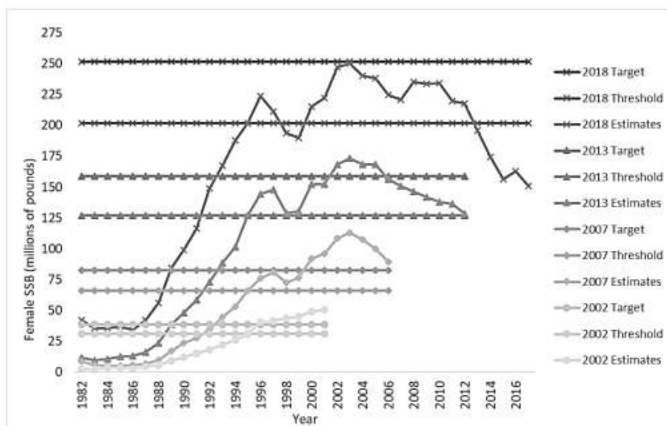


Figure 1. Historical perspective of Atlantic striped bass female spawning stock biomass (SSB) estimates and resulting SSB target and threshold since implementation of Amendment 6 in 2003. The SSB threshold and target are based on the estimate of female SSB in 1995 which has changed over time with improved data and modeling techniques. Source: ASMFC.

In 2019, in an attempt to end over fishing, the Striped Bass Management Board (Board) of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission developed Addendum VI to Amendment 6 of the Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan. Fishing mortality is one of the only things managers can do to control the direct fishing impacts on striped bass populations.

The new regulations developed in the addendum were implemented in 2020 with a goal of reducing coast-wide fishery removals (dead fish) by at least 18 percent. In states like Maryland, the new perception of recreational vs. commercial

catch led managers to largely place catch reductions on the recreational fishery, and as a result changing a decades long allocation between users.

For decades, the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) has advocated that in order to meet the goals and objectives of the striped bass fishery, managers must implement lower fishing mortality rates. The main reason is very simple population dynamics—lowering the fishing mortality rates allows more fish to live (increasing abundance) and for some fish to live longer

(increase the number of “trophy” fish). At the very least it may have maintained what was then a healthy population of striped bass. Now, the ASMFC is seeking your feedback to help craft a new version of the striped bass management plan, called Amendment 7. Below you will find CCA’s current position on the topics the ASMFC is considering at this time.

**Amendment 7 Public Information Document**

To begin the Amendment 7 process, managers have prepared a [Public Information Document \(PID\)](#) to guide the public through the existing management structure and seek ideas to shape numerous topics for further consideration during a second round of public input.

[Click here to view the full PID](#), and click the take action button below to begin your email to: [comments@asmfc.org](mailto:comments@asmfc.org).

**Virtual Public Meetings ([ASMFC Calendar](#))**

Date	State/Agency Jurisdiction	Contact
Monday, March 8 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	New Hampshire Fish and Game	<a href="#">Cheri Patterson</a> , 603.868.1095
Tuesday, March 9 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Maine Dept. of Marine Resources	<a href="#">Megan Ware</a> , 207.446.0932
Wednesday, March 10 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Virginia Marine Resources Commission	<a href="#">Pat Geer</a> , 757.247.2236
Monday, March 15 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Potomac River Fisheries Commission	<a href="#">Martin Gary</a> , 804.456.6935
Tuesday, March 16 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife	<a href="#">John Clark</a> , 302.739.9108
Wednesday, March 17 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Rhode Island Dept. of Environmental Management	<a href="#">Nicole Lengyel Costa</a> , 401.423.1940
Thursday, March 18 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries	<a href="#">Michael Armstrong</a> , 978.282.0308 x109
Monday, March 22 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources	<a href="#">Michael Luisj</a> , 443.758.6547
Tuesday, March 23 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation	<a href="#">Maureen Davison</a> , 631.444.0483
Wednesday, March 24 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	Connecticut Dept. of Energy & Environmental Protection	<a href="#">Justin Davis</a> , 860.447.4322
Thursday, March 25 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.	New Jersey Fish and Wildlife	<a href="#">Joe Cimino</a> , 609.748.2020

**Amendment 7 Topics**

**1. Fishery Goals and Objectives**

This is the portion of the management plan that guides the decisions made to manage the striped bass fishery. Goals and Objectives should reflect the answer(s) to the question of, “what do you want the fishery to look like?”

The current fishery Goals and Objectives are listed on pages 4 and 5 of the [PID](#), and provide a good path forward for this fishery.

## **CCA Recommendations**

- Manage striped bass as primarily a recreational fishery, which means manage them for increased abundance and age structure.
- Balance the needs of catch and release anglers with those who like to take a fish home.
- Stabilize the fishery with regulatory consistency across space and time.

## **2. Biological Reference Points (BRPs)**

These are the goalposts that are used to evaluate the status of the population and indicate when a management change needs to occur. Currently, the spawning stock biomass (SSB) reference point is based on the level of the SSB in 1995, the year striped bass population was declared recovered. The fishing mortality reference point is the fishing mortality rate that on average would maintain that SSB. An important point here is that the SSB reference point was not generated from the stock assessment, as is the case with most reference points.

Reference points are defined as a target and a threshold and are used to measure population goals for the overall biomass of spawning fish, and to set the goals and boundaries for fishing mortality. This could be explained as a target being the lane you want to drive in on a highway and the threshold being the edge of the road. If you're in your lane you are in good shape, but as when you hit the rumble strips, it's time to react before ending up in the ditch, or in the case of striped bass below the biomass threshold. The fishing mortality threshold is a ceiling you do not want to go above.

The primary question asked here is this: are the reference points adequate to achieve the fishery goals and objectives or should they be changed?

## **CCA Recommendations**

- Keep the current reference points in place. Addendum VI implemented an 18 percent reduction in fishing mortality intended to end overfishing.
- Those measures were put in place in 2020 and managers have not had a chance to determine if they were effective. Thus, it would be pre-mature to change reference points at this time.
- Focus on maintaining fishing mortality to rebuild the stock and avoid future declines in the population.
- Do not change the reference points until such time as these goal posts are generated from the stock assessment.

## **3. Management Triggers**

Management Triggers are a great precautionary concept, but often difficult to execute. The data generally used for such triggers can be highly variable (F, SSB and recruitment levels). The main goal of a management trigger is to recognize a decline in abundance and trigger corrective management action. Simply put, do not allow the current decline in abundance to happen again.

## **CCA Recommendations**

- Management should focus on a set of triggers that recognize a decline in abundance that so that corrective action can take place.
- All management triggers considered should be tested over a previous time to determine the value of the trigger in avoiding stock declines and recognizing the value of regulatory stability.

#### **4. Stock Rebuilding Target and Schedule**

In most cases rebuilding spawning stock biomass is problematic. As much as managers wish it weren't true, we have little control over rebuilding. The problem is there is often a weak spawner-to-recruit relationship, meaning there are times of low recruitment with high SSB and vice versa. Ideally, there would be a linear relationship between the SSB and the number of recruits, e.g.: if SSB increased 20 percent then recruits increased 20 percent. Unfortunately, that isn't the case because striped bass have a weak spawner-to-recruit relationship.

The reason for the high population level in the late 1990s to early 2000s was due to a period of above average recruitment, coupled with relatively conservative harvest levels compared to pre-moratorium levels. Beginning in the late 2000s, striped bass have undergone a prolonged period of below average recruitment, which is one of the primary reasons we are in the predicament we are in today.

It will be difficult if not impossible for striped bass to rebuild to the current SSB target level if the below average recruitment regime continues. Managers only have control over fishing mortality, which is poorly associated with recruitment. There are many other factors that control recruitment in striped bass, which include habitat, water quality and the forage base.

It is still useful to have a time limit on rebuilding the SSB to at least the threshold level. The question then becomes what happens when managers have maintained  $F$  at the target level for 10 years and the stock does not rebuild?

#### **CCA Recommendations**

- Utilize a ten-year rebuilding plan that focuses on maintaining  $F$  at its target level.
- As much as possible, support improvements to water quality and habitat for striped bass.
- Allow for flexibility in the rebuilding timeline if the Technical Committee determines that factors other than  $F$  have contributed to a slow recovery for striped bass.

#### **5-6. Regional Management and Conservation Equivalency**

These topics are combined because each focuses on management options and therefore possibly be interchangeable, depending on what level of flexibility managers want to provide for states with striped bass fisheries. Scientifically, management flexibility will add uncertainty at a time when we need to be maximizing our chance of achieving conservation goals while minimizing risk to the population.

Because Conservation Equivalency is one of the cornerstones of ASMFC management, CCA believes it would be prudent to require states that use CE agree to "pay" for using that privilege

with increases in the required mortality reduction when the striped bass stock is overfished or undergoing overfishing.

For example, let's suppose the Technical Committee determines a 20 percent reduction in harvest is necessary to end overfishing, and also sets coast-wide management measures to accomplish that goal. If a state is granted and implements Conservation Equivalency measures, then that state would commit to achieving at least a 25 percent reduction in their harvest.

Further, because striped bass are a cosmopolitan species that occur from North Carolina to Maine, regional management would make sense if the population dynamics were better understood. To that end, the stock assessment committee is developing a "two stock" model, which hopefully will be ready for use in the near future. If and when it is used, the Striped Bass Board should consider regional management.

The Board in the past has implemented coast-wide regulations and Chesapeake Bay regulations, as it is widely accepted that striped bass stay in the Bay for at least four to six years. Thus, separate coast-wide vs. Chesapeake Bay regulations make sense as long as they meet the required target F rate.

### **CCA Recommendations**

- Continue the development of a multi-stock model to improve managements understanding of stock dynamics.
- Delay the implementation of regional management until a multi-stock model has been approved for management use and the stock is showing signs of recovery.
- Restrict the use of conservation equivalency when the population is in a poor condition.
- Implement coast-wide and Chesapeake Bay-Potomac River regulations for regulatory consistency and stability.

### **7. Recreational Release Mortality**

Catching and releasing fish is a major part of all fishing, no matter the regulations or the fishery. Until anglers can truly pick the fish that bites their hook and only the fish they want to keep, release mortality will also be a part of fishing. Some anglers choose to release all of the fish they catch while others choose to keep a limit and turn their attention to other species. The possibilities in the recreational fishing world in this regard are truly endless. To manage this cause of mortality, managers recently implemented circle hook regulations.

Recognizing the important role that recreational anglers play in conservation, CCA, Shimano, and the Harte Research Institute developed [Releasense.org](http://Releasense.org), a program that strives to:

- Develop sensible recreational fishing principles that promote healthy and sustainable sport fish populations;
- Promote the best catch-and-release practices supported by sound science, and;

- Build partnerships with anglers and industry that allow for efficient access to information that maximizes fish survival and promotes conservation of our sport fish resources.

### **CCA Recommendations**

- Continue working with recreational fishery stakeholders through the advisory panel process to consider additional coast-wide or state based regulatory efforts.
- Leverage partnerships with recreational fishery stakeholders and sport fishing businesses that focus on education and outreach to address recreational release mortality.
- Prioritize funding for coast-wide and state-based education and outreach efforts developed in partnership with stakeholders.
- Coordinate cooperative research efforts that can enhance managements understanding of specific recreational fishery impacts.

### **8. Recreational Accountability**

The term “recreational accountability” directly relates to the management systems ability to account for the impact of recreational fishing. As a whole, recreational anglers are accountable to regulations where they fish and continue to support management through the purchase of fishing licenses and the numerous excise taxes that are placed on the gear anglers use.

As mentioned earlier, recreational fishing activities and the associated catch data can be highly variable. This variability is often increased when the analysis of catch data is broken down to the state level or even by fishing type, also known as “mode.” Put another way, recreational catch data is usually at its best when gathered and estimated coast-wide. It also takes a minimum of 45 days after the data is gathered before an estimate of the catch is known.

Striped bass do not have a recreational quota. Their harvest limit is a fishing mortality rate that is estimated every few years in a stock assessment. This is an acceptable approach given the way recreational catch data is currently gathered. As long as the fishing mortality rate is not exceeded, the stock should not experience problems.

A problem with annual catch limits is they are often based on projections. Projections are a “best guess” of how many fish will be available at some point in the future. It is usually based on “average recruitment,” yet the recreational fishery is fishing on the stock of fish that exist today. As the stock increases, so does the catch; as the stock decreases so does the catch. Putting a hard quota in place, especially one based on projections, often leads to management instability.

### **CCA Recommendations**

- Current limitations of recreational catch data make it difficult to measure accountability using a hard quota on an annual basis.
- Use rigorous stock assessments that occur over 2–3-year intervals to assess changes to recreational catch and its impact on the population.
- Explore Improving recreational catch data collection using electronic reporting and other programs supplemental to the Marine Recreational Information Program.

## **9. Coastal Commercial Quota Allocation**

Although the commercial fishery is now viewed as a smaller portion of the overall removals from the fishery, striped bass caught in this fishery definitely impacts the overall status of the coast-wide stock. Given the numerous changes in the commercial fishery that have occurred since the last change in commercial allocation, it is important to consider a new commercial allocation at this time.

### **CCA Recommendations**

- Developing methods for setting quotas and commercial allocation based on the selectivity of each component of the commercial fishery, and its impact on specific portions of the stock, e.g., harvest of SSB vs. juvenile stocks, and the relationship of harvest to spawning and migratory cycles.

## **10. Other Issues**

This section is used to provide ASMFC with ideas from the public that are not covered by the formal topics included in the PID.

### **CCA Recommendations**

- Amendment 7 should develop a better understanding of habitat and environmental issues that contribute to recruitment success and failure, and consider guidance to states on priorities or actions that may achieve specific outcomes for striped bass.
- Commit to investing in additional surveys to track recruitment throughout the striped bass's range, and to supplement existing indices of juvenile abundance in the Chesapeake Bay.
- Develop a stronger understanding of stock changes driven by climate change.