N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

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Contact: Patricia Smith
Phone: (252) 726-7021

Summer Flounder Declared Viable in 2011 Stock Status Report

MOREHEAD CITY – The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries declared summer flounder "viable" in its 2011 Stock Status Report released today.

Summer flounder had been listed as "recovering" since 2009, and according to the latest assessment by the National Marine Fisheries Service Northeast Science Center the stock is no longer overfished and overfishing is not occurring. Fishing mortality has steadily decreased and the stock has generally increased since the early 1990s.

"This is truly a fisheries management success story," said Louis Daniel, director of the state Division of Marine Fisheries. "Both commercial and recreational fishermen did their part, through regulatory restrictions, to bring the stocks back to where they are today."

Summer flounder is managed under a joint Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission/Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council fishery management plan. Management measures include commercial quotas, minimum mesh sizes for trawls, minimum fish size limits, recreational bag limits and a moratorium on new entrants into the commercial fishery.

In other changes in stock status this year, striped bass in the Central/Southern Management Area moved from "depleted" to "concern" due to the lack of a useable stock assessment. However, the stock continues to show signs of low abundance and an absence of older fish, and the division believes regulatory restrictions need to continue. The stock's "depleted" status had been based on a 2004 stock assessment that was not peer reviewed. The methodology used for the 2004 stock assessment was rejected by peer review in 2010 leading the stocks to be assessed as unknown and to be listed as "concern" in the stock status report.

Also, bay scallops changed from "recovering" to "concern." While bay scallop abundance has shown improvement from the no harvest period from 2006 to 2008 and seasonal openings have occurred in some areas since, the main harvest season did not open in 2011 due to limited availability.

Finally, Atlantic menhaden changed from "viable" to "concern" based on a corrected version of a 2010 Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission stock assessment that found that the coast-wide stock is not overfished (the population is not too low), but is experiencing overfishing (the rate of removal is too high).

Staff considered upgrading Atlantic croaker from "concern" to "viable" based on a 2010 Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission/ Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review stock assessment that found that Atlantic croaker is not experiencing overfishing. However, due to data limitations, it is not certain whether the stock is overfished, so the division chose to keep croaker at "concern."

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Diana Kees, Communications Director
Phone: (919) 715-4112
1601 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1601

diana.kees@ncdenr.gov
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/ncdenr
RSS feed: http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/opa/news-releases-rss
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"If positive trends continue, a viable status is possible in the near future for croaker," Daniel said.

The division annually grades the status of marine finfish, shellfish, shrimp and crabs as either viable, recovering, concern, depleted or unknown. The grades serve as a barometer of the overall health of the state's fishery resources, and they are used to prioritize development of fishery management plans.

A stock is considered "viable" when it exhibits stable or increasing trends in a number of biological factors associated with healthy populations, such as a normal distribution of sizes, ages and spawning-age females or when it has met biological targets for sustainable harvest.

A "recovering" stock shows marked and consistent improvement in the criteria listed for a "viable" stock, but has not yet reached its target.

Stocks designated as "concern" are those that do not have an approved stock assessment or fishery management plan, but have seen increased fishing pressure, a decline in landings, lack a normal age distribution or are negatively impacted by environmental factors that cannot be controlled.

A "depleted" stock is a population in which there are too few spawning females to support an active fishery. Factors that can contribute to this status include overfishing, poor water quality, habitat loss, larvae survival and disease. This status determination is based on an approved stock assessment or fishery management plan.

A stock is classified as "unknown" when there is not sufficient data to determine trends in fishing pressure, landings or biological factors. Stocks designated as unknown are often prioritized for research programs.

A complete list of the 2011 Stock Status Report can be found at the division website at http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/mf/home under the "Quick Links" section.

For more information, contact Kathy Rawls in the division's Elizabeth City office, at (252) 264-3911 or Kathy.Rawls@ncdenr.gov.

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Diana Kees, Communications Director
Phone: (919) 715-4112
1601 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1601
diana.kees@ncdenr.gov
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/ncdenr
RSS feed: http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/opa/news-releases-rss
Twitter: http://twitter.com/NCDENR

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