



MID-ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

# 2025-2029 Strategic Plan

*Approved October 2024*

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## Acronyms

ASMFC	Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
CEFI	Climate, Ecosystems, and Fisheries Initiative
EAFM	Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management
E3CG	East Coast Climate Coordination Group
EFH	Essential Fish Habitat
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FMP	Fishery Management Plan
HAPC	Habitat Area of Particular Concern
GARFO	Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office
IRA	Inflation Reduction Act
MAFMC	Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
MREP	Marine Resource Education Program
MSA	Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
MSE	Management Strategy Evaluation
NEAMAP	Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program
NEFMC	New England Fishery Management Council
NEFSC	Northeast Fisheries Science Center
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NRCC	Northeast Region Coordinating Council
OLE	Office of Law Enforcement
SSC	Scientific and Statistical Committee
VTR	Vessel Trip Report

# Introduction

## The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (hereafter the Council) is responsible for the conservation and management of more than 65 fish and shellfish stocks that are found within the federal 200-mile limit of the mid-Atlantic region.

The Mid-Atlantic Council was established in 1976 by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act (later renamed the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, or MSA). The MSA created a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), eliminated foreign fishing within the EEZ, and charged eight regional councils with management of fishery resources in the newly expanded federal waters. The Council plays a crucial role in conserving marine resources while supporting the commercial, recreational, and economic interests of coastal communities throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

The Council develops fishery management recommendations which must be approved by the Secretary of Commerce before they are finalized and implemented by NOAA Fisheries. All of the Council's fishery management recommendations must be consistent with the ten national standards as defined by the MSA and must be developed in an open, public process as prescribed by law.

Fifteen species are directly managed with specific fishery management plans (FMPs). These include summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, Atlantic bluefish, Atlantic and chub mackerel, *Illex* and longfin squids, butterfish, Atlantic surfclam, ocean quahog, golden and blueline tilefish, spiny dogfish (joint with the New England Council), and monkfish (joint with the New England Council). In addition, more than 50 forage species are managed as "ecosystem components" in all seven FMPs. The Council partners with other fishery management organizations, including states and NOAA Fisheries, in the development of effective management plans. For instance, spiny dogfish and monkfish are managed under joint FMPs developed in coordination with the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC). The Council also coordinates the management of summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, and spiny dogfish with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

The Council is made up of 21 voting members and four non-voting members from member states, New York to North Carolina. Seven of the voting members represent the constituent states' fish and wildlife agencies, one represents NOAA Fisheries, and 13 are private citizens who are knowledgeable about recreational fishing, commercial fishing, or marine conservation. Four non-voting members represent and facilitate coordination with the ASMFC, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Coast Guard. The Council also has a full-time support staff that is based in Dover, Delaware. The staff assists with tasks such as planning and facilitation of meetings, development of FMPs, and coordination with other management agencies. The Council also utilizes advisory bodies, including a Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and advisory panels for fisheries or other specific issues.

## The Strategic Landscape

Over the last 48 years the Council has made significant progress toward rebuilding stocks that were once overfished and ensuring sustainable fisheries that provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation. However, the Council still faces significant social, economic, and ecological challenges that impact the stability and sustainability of Mid-Atlantic fisheries. Over the next five years, the Council will confront new and ongoing challenges that will require it to prioritize management activities and make difficult decisions, including:

- Limited staff resources and capacity to respond to unforeseen circumstances.
- Competing constituent interests.
- Changing ocean conditions that impact the distribution, productivity, sustainability, and science of managed species.
- Competing ocean uses and their potential impacts on the Council's fisheries.
- Habitat loss and degradation.
- Interactions between protected resources and managed species.
- Availability of federal resources to adequately address the Council's needs/priorities.

The strategic planning process is critical for defining the Council's future and will enable proactive, efficient, and effective responses to these challenges and others that lie ahead.

## Strategic Plan Purpose

The Council's 2025-2029 Strategic Plan was developed to meet the following overarching objectives:

- Maintain sustainable fisheries, ecosystems, and habitats in the Mid-Atlantic;
- Address specific issues identified by the Council and its constituents;
- Improve communication with constituents and other organizations;
- Improve the Council's ability to collect and use input from constituents and management partners;
- Increase efficiency in the management process;
- Promote stability in Mid-Atlantic fisheries; and,
- Establish a more proactive process for addressing management challenges.

Building on decades of collaboration, science-based management, and public engagement, the 2025-2029 Strategic Plan outlines a path forward to help the Council navigate the complexities of fisheries management in a dynamic and changing world. The goals and objectives described in this plan have been informed by the Council's previous strategic plans, as well as input from stakeholders, the public, and management partners.

# Vision

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Healthy marine ecosystems, thriving fishing communities, and sustainable fisheries that provide the greatest overall benefit to the nation.

# Mission

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The Council manages fisheries in federal waters of the Mid-Atlantic region for their long-term sustainability and productivity consistent with the national standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The Council is committed to the stewardship of these fisheries, and associated ecosystems and fishing communities, through the collaborative development of effective, science-based fishery management plans and policies.

# Core Values

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The Council's activities, operations, and decisions are guided by the following core values:

- Stewardship
- Integrity
- Effectiveness
- Fairness
- Competence
- Transparency

# Strategic Goals

The following goals have been identified to help the Council advance towards its Vision during the years 2025-2029.

Theme 1: <b>Communication</b>	Engage stakeholders and the public through outreach that fosters sustained participation in, and awareness of, the Council process.
Theme 2: <b>Science</b>	Ensure that management decisions are based on timely and accurate scientific information and methods.
Theme 3: <b>Management</b>	Develop effective management strategies that provide for sustainable fisheries and healthy marine ecosystems while considering the needs of fishing communities and other resource users.
Theme 4: <b>Ecosystem</b>	Support the ecologically sustainable utilization of living marine resources in a manner that maintains ecosystem productivity, structure, and function.
Theme 5: <b>Governance</b>	Ensure that the Council's practices accurately represent and consider the interests of fisheries, fishing communities, and the public through a transparent and inclusive decision-making process.

For each of these goals, the Council has developed a suite of objectives and associated strategies to guide its progress over the next five years.

# Theme 1: Communication

**Goal:** Engage stakeholders and the public through outreach that fosters sustained participation in, and awareness of, the Council process.

## **Objective 1. Improve and increase communication with target audiences.**

- Strategy 1.1:** Employ a variety of communication tools and platforms to disseminate relevant information and updates.
- Strategy 1.2:** Continue to update and improve the content, appearance, and organization of the Council’s website.
- Strategy 1.3:** Coordinate communication efforts with science and management partners and other organizations to expand the distribution of relevant information.
- Strategy 1.4:** Seek opportunities to expand media coverage of Council actions, managed fisheries, and opportunities for stakeholder participation.
- Strategy 1.5:** Engage the Council’s Communication and Outreach Advisory Panel to assist in the review and development of communication and outreach tools and approaches.

## **Objective 2. Increase stakeholder engagement in the management process.**

- Strategy 2.1:** During the development of management actions, conduct early and proactive outreach to inform and seek input from interested stakeholders.
- Strategy 2.2:** Organize workshops to facilitate collaborative development of innovative management approaches.
- Strategy 2.3:** Develop outreach materials to facilitate constructive input on proposed management actions (e.g., scoping guides, fact sheets, amendment summaries, etc.).
- Strategy 2.4:** Schedule, advertise, and conduct meetings and public hearings in a manner that encourages stakeholder attendance and participation.
- Strategy 2.5:** Use non-traditional formats, such as port meetings, listening sessions, or Q&A sessions, to engage hard to reach audiences.
- Strategy 2.6:** Create dedicated web pages for Council actions under development to allow stakeholders to track updates and find relevant documents.

**Objective 3. Increase awareness and understanding of the Council and its managed fisheries.**

- Strategy 3.1:** Develop and distribute outreach materials that inform and educate the public about Council-managed fisheries, the Council process, and other relevant issues.
- Strategy 3.2:** Partner with external organizations, such as the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP), to support educational opportunities for stakeholders.
- Strategy 3.3:** Collaborate with science and management partners and other academic or research institutions to develop outreach materials that explain fisheries science and data collection.
- Strategy 3.4:** Use plain language in Council documents to improve public understanding.



## Theme 2: Science

**Goal:** Ensure that management decisions are based on timely and accurate scientific information and methods.

**Objective 4. Collaborate with science partners and research institutions to ensure that the Council’s science priorities are addressed.**

- Strategy 4.1:** Develop and implement a comprehensive research plan to address the research needs identified in the Five-Year Research Priorities document.
- Strategy 4.2:** Conduct a mid-cycle review of the Council’s Five-Year Research Priorities to ensure the document addresses current Council research priorities.
- Strategy 4.3:** Support the continued implementation of the Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) stock assessment process to increase the number and quality of assessments.
- Strategy 4.4:** Support the development and implementation of new assessment modeling approaches.
- Strategy 4.5:** Collaborate with research institutions on projects that address research needs for Council-managed species.
- Strategy 4.6:** Explore opportunities to increase cross-communication and collaboration between the Council’s SSC and other council SSCs to promote sharing of scientific approaches, methods, and information.

**Objective 5. Support the use and expansion of collaborative research to meet the Council’s science, data, and information needs.**

- Strategy 5.1:** Collaborate with the NEFSC to expand and enhance existing cooperative research initiatives carried out by the NEFSC’s Cooperative Research Branch.
- Strategy 5.2:** Engage with science and management partners to identify priority research needs and external funding opportunities that can be addressed using collaborative approaches with commercial, for-hire, and recreational fishery participants.
- Strategy 5.3:** Support the use of “vessels of opportunity” from all sectors to address science and research needs.
- Strategy 5.4:** Collaborate with regional science and management partners to support and identify the fishery-independent science priorities for the Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (NEAMAP).
- Strategy 5.5:** Support innovations in gear development and configuration that increase efficiency and reduce catch of non-target species in commercial and recreational fisheries.

**Objective 6. Promote efficient and accurate data collection, monitoring, and reporting systems.**

- Strategy 6.1:** Support implementation of improvements in fishery data accuracy, efficiency, and timeliness as identified in the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)/NEFSC Fishery Dependent Data Initiative.
- Strategy 6.2:** Work with science and management partners to develop and implement a unique trip identifier to integrate different individual reporting programs (e.g., fisherman, dealer, observer, port sampler, etc.).
- Strategy 6.3:** Collaborate with science and management partners to identify areas for data reporting consistency and improvements across regions and coast-wide commercial and for-hire fisheries.
- Strategy 6.4:** Collaborate with management and enforcement partners to develop and implement strategies to address Vessel Trip Report (VTR) compliance issues.
- Strategy 6.5:** Explore the utility of emerging technologies, such as electronic reporting phone apps, to collect recreational angler data and improve our understanding of recreational catch and effort in the Mid-Atlantic region.

**Objective 7. Support the collection and use of relevant social and economic data and on-the-water observations.**

- Strategy 7.1:** Engage the Council's SSC to identify existing studies or other sources of social and economic information that could be used to inform management decisions.
- Strategy 7.2:** Support efforts to incorporate fishermen's knowledge in the stock assessment process.
- Strategy 7.3:** Identify data/information gaps that can be addressed with on-the-water observations.
- Strategy 7.4:** Continue to support data collection efforts for improved social and economic impact analyses, such as cost-benefit analysis, for all fisheries.

# Theme 3: Management

**Goal:** Develop effective management strategies that provide for sustainable fisheries and healthy marine ecosystems while considering the needs of fishing communities and other resource users.

**Objective 8. Strengthen state, federal, and interstate partnerships to promote coordinated, efficient, and effective management of fishery resources.**

**Strategy 8.1:** Continue to use the NRCC process as a forum for Atlantic coast management entities to enhance communication, coordination, and pursue shared objectives.

**Strategy 8.2:** Coordinate with management partners to ensure efficient allocation of staff resources for jointly managed species and issues of common interest.

**Strategy 8.3:** Collaborate with management partners to address inconsistencies in regulations across state, federal, and regional boundaries.

**Objective 9. Develop management approaches that are adaptable and robust to the impacts of climate change.**

**Strategy 9.1:** Develop and test a framework for monitoring and evaluating species distribution changes.

**Strategy 9.2:** Develop a policy for responding to changes in stock and fishery distributions, including when to consider requesting a review of geographic scope of a fishery pursuant to MSA §304(f)

**Strategy 9.3:** Coordinate Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)-funded projects to support the development, advancement, and implementation of climate-related fisheries management efforts.

**Strategy 9.4:** Collaborate with East coast management partners to address the action items identified through the East Coast climate change scenario planning process.

**Strategy 9.5:** Consider climate resilience and adaptive capacity during the development of Council management actions.

**Strategy 9.6:** Use the information and tools developed through NOAA's Climate, Ecosystems, and Fisheries Initiative (CEFI) to support development of climate ready management actions.

**Objective 10. Adapt management approaches and priorities to address emerging issues and changing conditions.**

**Strategy 10.1:** Use fishery performance reports and State of the Ecosystem reports as tools to develop management responses to changing fishery conditions.

**Strategy 10.2:** Develop a process and timeline to periodically review the performance of existing management measures and outcomes of past management decisions.

**Strategy 10.3:** Address emerging issues, such as aquaculture, as needed.

**Objective 11. Ensure that social, economic, and community impacts and opportunities are considered in management decisions.**

**Strategy 11.1:** Expand the use of Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) to evaluate the impacts of management decisions on fishing communities and other resource users.

**Strategy 11.2:** Evaluate the impacts of current management approaches on recreational angler fishery participation and satisfaction.

**Strategy 11.3:** Expand the use of multi-year management approaches to increase fishery stability and predictability to the extent practicable.

**Strategy 11.4:** Evaluate the impacts of management decisions on the economic efficiency and sustainability of commercial and for-hire businesses and associated shoreside operations.

# Theme 4: Ecosystem

**Goal:** Support the ecologically sustainable utilization of living marine resources in a manner that maintains ecosystem productivity, structure, and function.

**Objective 12. Implement the Council’s Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) as described in the EAFM Guidance Document.**

**Strategy 12.1:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the Council’s EAFM Guidance Document to ensure the policies, recommendations, and approaches align with management needs and the latest scientific information.

**Strategy 12.2:** Use the EAFM structured framework approach as a tool to implement the Council’s EAFM policy and incorporate species, fleet, habitat, and climate interactions into the Council’s science and management programs.

**Strategy 12.3:** Collaborate with the Council’s science partners and stakeholders to increase the collection, utilization, and consideration of ecosystem-level biological, social, and economic information.

**Objective 13. Identify, designate, and protect fish habitat.**

**Strategy 13.1:** Identify and document the contributions of inshore habitats to offshore productivity.

**Strategy 13.2:** Review and strengthen essential fish habitat (EFH) designations to account for species interactions, connectivity, and changing ocean conditions.

**Strategy 13.3:** Participate in regional and national habitat partnerships.

**Strategy 13.4:** Develop the linkages between habitat science and conservation and fishery outcomes with a focus on ecosystem resiliency and productivity.

**Strategy 13.5:** Ensure that the Council’s habitat policies reflect current scientific information and best management practices.

**Strategy 13.6:** Examine the use of the Council’s existing EFH/Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) authorities and designations to ensure ecosystem integrity and services are maintained.

**Objective 14. Engage in the offshore energy development process to address impacts to Council-managed species and associated habitats.**

**Strategy 14.1:** Collaborate on offshore energy issues with state and federal management partners and other relevant organizations to identify information needs and evaluate potential impacts of offshore energy development on marine resources.

**Strategy 14.2:** Comment on proposed offshore energy and development projects to ensure developers and permitting agencies are aware of natural resource and habitat concerns and Council priorities.

**Objective 15. Support the maintenance of an adequate forage base to ensure ecosystem productivity, structure, and function.**

**Strategy 15.1:** Consider and account for, to the extent practicable, the role of Council-managed species in the ecosystem, including roles as prey, predator, and food for humans.

**Strategy 15.2:** Consider and account for, to the extent practicable, the impact of Council-managed fisheries on the forage base.

**Strategy 15.3:** Monitor landings of currently unmanaged species, and respond to changes if necessary.

**Objective 16. Develop management approaches that minimize adverse ecosystem impacts.**

**Strategy 16.1:** Annually review information from the NEFSC's Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem report and the Council's EAFM risk assessment to identify potential ecosystem impacts of the Council's management approaches.

**Strategy 16.2:** Develop management measures that consider ecological interactions to reduce regulatory discards, promote greater utilization of catch, and minimize impacts to habitat.

**Strategy 16.3:** Consider fishery management approaches that avoid or reduce negative impacts on protected resources.

# Theme 5: Governance

**Goal:** Ensure that the Council's practices accurately represent and consider the interests of fisheries, fishing communities, and the public through a transparent and inclusive decision-making process.

## **Objective 17. Maintain an open, accessible, and clearly defined process.**

**Strategy 17.1:** Develop, refine, and communicate policies regarding operations of the Council and its committees and advisory and technical bodies.

**Strategy 17.2:** Develop a repository for critical Council procedural documents to increase transparency and facilitate cross-organizational understanding.

**Strategy 17.3:** Provide annual updates on Council activities and progress towards implementation of the Strategic Plan.

## **Objective 18. Enhance the efficiency and adaptability of the Council process.**

**Strategy 18.1:** Prioritize and implement, as appropriate, the recommendations identified in the MAFMC/GARFO Council process review.

## **Objective 19. Enhance coordination and collaboration with management partners.**

**Strategy 19.1:** Review regional operating agreement with GARFO, the NEFSC, and Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) and revise if necessary.

**Strategy 19.2:** Collaborate with the ASMFC to define roles, responsibilities, and procedures for joint meetings and joint action development.

**Strategy 19.3:** Consider development of agreements with the New England and/or South Atlantic Councils to define management roles and processes for joint and/or cross-jurisdictional species management.

**Strategy 19.4:** Collaborate with management partners through the East Coast Climate Coordination Group (E3CG) to coordinate climate-related management and governance actions.

**Strategy 19.5:** Evaluate and consider potential changes to the composition and operation of Council species committees in collaboration with New England and South Atlantic Councils.

**Objective 20. Ensure that stakeholder interests are understood and meaningfully considered.**

**Strategy 20.1:** Engage stakeholders early and proactively to encourage input at appropriate points in the decision-making process.

**Strategy 20.2:** Implement effective engagement strategies to facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected by proposed management actions.

**Strategy 20.3:** Collect and summarize stakeholder input to allow the Council to meaningfully consider their viewpoints.

**Strategy 20.4:** Communicate the rationale for Council decisions, including explanation of how stakeholder input was used.

**Strategy 20.5:** Regularly evaluate the composition of advisory bodies to ensure effective representation of diverse interests.

**Objective 21. Provide training and development opportunities for Council members and staff to enhance organizational performance.**

**Strategy 21.1:** Provide opportunities for Council member training and development on topics such as parliamentary procedure and best practices for effective meetings.

**Strategy 21.2:** Support the ongoing professional development of Council staff.

**Strategy 21.3:** Continue to promote collaboration with GARFO, NEFSC, and ASMFC staff through staff-to-staff meetings.