



NEWS RELEASE



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ASMFC and MAFMC Approve Changes to Summer Flounder Commercial Mesh Size Exemptions

Annapolis, MD – The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) have jointly approved modifications to two exemptions from the summer flounder commercial minimum mesh size requirements. The Board adopted these changes through Addendum XXXV to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan, and the Council recommended identical measures through a framework action which will be submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service for review and implementation.

Current regulations for the summer flounder trawl fishery require a minimum mesh size of 5.5-inch diamond mesh or 6.0-inch square mesh to retain more than 200 pounds of summer flounder from November through April, or 100 pounds of summer flounder from May through October. The Small Mesh Exemption Program provides an exemption from these requirements for authorized vessels fishing in a designated area from November 1 through April 30. This exemption is designed to allow vessels to retain some bycatch of summer flounder while operating in other small-mesh fisheries. Through this action, the Board and Council agreed to expand the exemption area by moving the boundary of the northern portion of the area approximately five miles west, then connecting the western boundary to the southern scup Gear Restricted Area. While this has the appearance of notably increasing the size of the exemption area, a large portion of the area overlaps with the Frank R. Lautenberg deep sea coral zone, where bottom tending gear is already prohibited. The intent of this change is to increase economic opportunities for industry while continuing to protect the summer flounder stock and prevent regulatory discards.

The Board and Council also voted to implement a tiered monitoring approach for the Small Mesh Exemption Program. Current regulations allow the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office Regional Administrator to terminate the program for the remainder of the season if vessels fishing under the exemption are discarding on average more than 10%, by weight, of their entire catch of summer flounder per trip. Under the new tiered monitoring approach, the discard trigger will be increased to 25%, and once the trigger is reached, a more detailed review of discards will be conducted to determine whether the exemption should be rescinded. The intent of this review is to allow for a more comprehensive consideration of the drivers of, and appropriate response to, discards.

Given summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass’s presence in, and movement between, state waters (0-3 miles from shore) and federal waters (3-200 miles from shore), the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) jointly manage these species.

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Finally, the Board and Council approved a revised definition of the term “flynet” as it relates to the flynet exemption from the summer flounder commercial minimum mesh size requirements. The revised definition encompasses similar high-rise net types which have very large mesh in the wings, with mesh size decreasing through the body of the net. These nets are not designed to catch flatfish and generally catch small amounts of summer flounder.

Addendum XXXV, including the map showing the approved boundaries, will be posted at <https://asmfc.org/species/summer-flounder> under Management Plans and FMP Reviews once the map is finalized. Updates on the Council’s framework will be posted at <https://www.mafmc.org/actions/summer-flounder-commercial-mesh-exemptions>.

For more information, please contact either Chelsea Tuohy, ASMFC Fishery Management Plan Coordinator at ctuohy@asmfc.org or Kiley Dancy, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, at kdancy@mafmc.org.

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