



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[Docket No. 260609-0139; RTID 0648-XF172]

Fisheries of the Northeastern United States; Mid-Atlantic Blueline Tilefish and Golden Tilefish Fisheries; 2026 Specifications

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: This final rule implements and informs the public of specifications for the 2026 fishing year for the golden tilefish and blueline tilefish fisheries north of the North Carolina/Virginia border. This action is necessary to establish allowable harvest levels and other management measures to prevent overfishing while allowing optimum yield, consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) and the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP).

DATES: This rule is effective [INSERT DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER].

ADDRESSES: Copies of the supporting documents for these specifications are available from Dr. Christopher M. Moore, Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 800 North State Street, Suite 201, Dover, DE 19901. These documents are also accessible via the Internet at <https://www.mafmc.org>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Matthew Rigdon, matthew.rigdon@noaa.gov, 978-281-9336.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The golden tilefish and blueline tilefish fisheries north of the North Carolina/Virginia border are managed under the Tilefish FMP, which outlines the process for establishing annual specifications. The Tilefish FMP requires the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) to recommend acceptable biological catch (ABC), annual catch limit (ACL), annual catch target (ACT), total allowable landings (TAL), and other management measures for the commercial and recreational sectors of the fisheries. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) provides ABC recommendations for both species to the Council to derive these catch limits. The Council makes recommendations to NMFS that may not exceed the SSC's ABC recommendation. The Council's recommendations must include supporting documentation concerning the environmental, economic, and social impacts of the recommendations. NMFS reviews these recommendations, proposes them for public comment, and, if approved, publishes the final specifications in the **Federal Register**. A proposed rule for these specifications was published on March 30, 2026 (91 FR 15585), and comments were accepted through April 14, 2026. Additional information on the process for setting these specifications is contained in the proposed rule and is not repeated here.

Final Specifications

Blueline tilefish

Consistent with recommendations made by the Council, this action implements specifications for blueline tilefish for fishing year 2026 that increase the commercial TAL by 426 percent and the recreational TAL by 350 percent. The increased catch limits are primarily due to updated data analyses of fishing effort but may represent some increased fishing opportunity for both the commercial and recreational fisheries. Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries are valued at approximately \$439 million as of 2021. The blueline tilefish recreational fishery represents one component of this value, and the increased

recreational TAL for fishing year 2026 could contribute additional value to Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries. The blueline tilefish commercial fishery was valued at approximately \$67,000 in fishing year 2024 based on recent ex-vessel value data. This action would authorize approximately \$454,000 in commercial blueline tilefish value due to the increased commercial TAL for fishing year 2026.

Landings data indicate commercial landings exceeded the 2025 ACL by 43 pounds (lb) (0.02 mt). The regulations require an overage to be deducted in the following year. The resulting final specifications recommended are summarized in table 1.

Table 1 -- Blueline tilefish specifications for fishing year 2026 with 2025 specifications for comparison

Specification	2025	2026
ABC – North of NC/VA line	100,520 lb (45.6 mt)	452,200 lb (205.1 mt)
Recreational ACL	73,380 lb (33.3 mt)	330,106 lb (149.7 mt)
Recreational TAL	71,912 lb (32.6 mt)	323,504 lb (146.7 mt)
Commercial ACL	27,140 lb (12.3 mt)	122,094 lb (55.4 mt)
Commercial Overage Adjustment	-5,975 lb (2.7 mt)	-43 lb (0.02 mt)
Adjusted Commercial ACL	21,165 lb (9.6 mt)	121,051 lb (54.9 mt)
Commercial TAL	20,894 lb (9.5 mt)	109,846 lb (49.8 mt)

Golden tilefish

The directed golden tilefish fishery is managed under an individual fishing quota (IFQ) program, with a small amount of non-IFQ catch allowed under an incidental permit. On April 1, 2025, NMFS proposed 2025 specifications for golden tilefish and announced projected specifications for fishing years 2026 and 2027 based on Council recommendations (90 FR 14350). Public comments on the proposed specifications were accepted through April 16, 2025. A final rule implementing these specifications was published on June 26, 2025 (90 FR 27257). The previously projected 2026 specifications equal those implemented for 2025, resulting in no change to the fishery. In addition, there is no new biological information or ACL overages that would require altering the projected 2026 specifications. Therefore, we are implementing 2026 golden tilefish specifications as previously projected, outlined in table 2.

Table 2 -- Proposed golden tilefish specifications for fishing year 2026

Specification	2026
ABC	1,878,338 lb (852.0 mt)
ACL	1,878,338 lb (852.0 mt)
IFQ ACT	1,733,109 lb (786.1 mt)
Incidental ACT	91,216 lb (41.4 mt)
IFQ TAL	1,728,590 lb (784.1 mt)
Incidental TAL	68,949 lb (31.3 mt)

This action does not change the landing limits for non-IFQ commercial fisheries. A vessel fishing under a non-IFQ Federal commercial tilefish vessel permit will continue to be prohibited from possessing more than 500 lb (227 kilograms (kg)) of gutted golden tilefish at any time, or 50 percent, by weight, of the total of all species, including golden tilefish, being landed (whichever is less). This landing limit does not apply to a vessel authorized to land golden tilefish under a Tilefish IFQ permit. A vessel fishing under a non-IFQ commercial tilefish permit will also continue to be prohibited from possessing more than 500 lb (227 kg) of gutted blueline tilefish per trip. If 70 percent of the blueline tilefish commercial TAL is landed, the Regional Administrator may reduce the blueline tilefish possession limit to 300 lb (136 kg).

This action does not change the recreational management measures for golden or blueline tilefish. Any vessel used to fish recreationally for golden or blueline tilefish must have the appropriate Federal vessel permit. Boats used to take anglers for hire must have the Charter/Party Tilefish Permit, while private recreational vessels need to have the Private Recreational Tilefish Permit. Both permit types require the submission of vessel trip reports. Additional information about permitting and reporting requirements is available from the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office's Permits Office at (978) 282-8438 or *NMFS.GAR.Permits@noaa.gov*.

The 2026 fishing year for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish began on January 1, 2026. The regulations include rollover provisions for both species that allow the fisheries to operate under status quo specifications until new specifications are finalized.

Comments and Responses

We received three comments on the proposed rule. No changes were made to this rule as a result of the comments.

Comment: One commenter opposed all fishing, stating that no fish should be killed and that NMFS should protect all fish.

Response: NMFS disagrees that fishing for tilefish should be prohibited as it would prevent the fishery from achieving optimum yield on a continuing basis as required by National Standard 1 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Comment: One commenter stated that seafood gleaning should be incorporated in the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan.

Response: This action implements specifications and sets quotas for golden and blueline tilefish fisheries for 2026 and does not consider any changes to the Tilefish FMP. While the comment is not relevant to this action, NMFS encourages the commenter to suggest changes or improvements to the Tilefish FMP to the Council for consideration. Changes or modifications to an FMP are considered and developed through the Council's open and public process.

Comment: One commenter who participates in the golden tilefish fishery expressed general support for the 2026 tilefish specifications.

Response: NMFS agrees. This action approves 2026 specifications for the blueline and golden tilefish fisheries.

Changes From the Proposed Rule

The final rule incorporates a 43-lb (20 kg) deduction to the blueline tilefish commercial ACL based on final landings data for 2025. The proposed rule indicated that preliminary data suggested an overage of 617 lb (280 kg) based on preliminary landings data at the time of the proposed rulemaking. NMFS reviewed all landings information while drafting this final rule and determined that the ACL overage was lower, at 43 lb

(20 kg). Therefore, this final rule incorporates a deduction of 43 lb (20 kg) instead of 617 lb (280 kg) based on the most recent and accurate landings information.

Classification

NMFS is issuing this rule pursuant to section 305(d) of the Magnuson Stevens Act (16 U.S.C. 1855(d)). The reason for using this regulatory authority for this action is that, in a previous action taken pursuant to section 304(b) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (16 U.S.C. 1854(b)), the FMP and implementing regulations created the process by which specifications are developed through a NMFS rulemaking process distinct from that of section 304(b). See 50 CFR 648.292. As such, NMFS is issuing this rule pursuant to section 305(d).

The 30-day delay in effective date requirement under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) does not apply to this rule because it relieves a restriction for the blueline tilefish fishery (5 U.S.C. 553(d)(1) by implementing an increased quota for 2026 and because there is good cause for the rule to take effect upon publication (5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3)). The 2026 fishing year began on January 1, 2026, operating under a rollover provision using specifications from the prior fishing year. Implementing the blueline tilefish specifications relieves that restriction by allowing blueline tilefish fishery participants to fish under the higher 2026 quotas. The 2026 fishing year blueline tilefish quotas are higher than the 2025 quotas currently in effect, so continued delay in the effectiveness of those specifications could prevent fishing vessels from taking full advantage of the higher quotas. Therefore, the 30-day delay in effective date does not apply to the blueline tilefish specifications set by this rule under 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(1).

Additionally, there is good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3) to implement this action upon publication in the **Federal Register**. This is a routine specifications action that occurs every year, and stakeholder and industry groups have been involved with the development of this action and have participated in public meetings throughout its

development. Further delay in the date of effectiveness would be contrary to the public interest as it could increase confusion in the tilefish industry around current quotas. Furthermore, regulated parties do not require any additional time to come into compliance with this rule and a 30-day delay before the final rule becomes effective does not provide any benefit. Unlike actions that require an adjustment period, tilefish fishing vessels will not have to purchase new equipment or otherwise expend time or money to comply with these management measures. Rather, complying with this final rule simply means adhering to the new catch limits set for the 2026 fishing year. Finally, fishery stakeholders have also been involved in the development of this action and are anticipating this rule.

This action is exempt from review under Executive Order (E.O.) 12866.

This final rule is not an E.O. 14192 regulatory action because this rule is not significant under E.O. 12866.

The Chief Counsel for Regulation of the Department of Commerce certified to the Chief Counsel for Advocacy of the Small Business Administration during the proposed rule stage that this action would not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities. The factual basis for the certification was published in the proposed rule and is not repeated here. No comments were received regarding this certification. As a result, a regulatory flexibility analysis was not required and none was prepared.

NMFS has determined that this action would not have a substantial direct effect on one or more Indian Tribes, on the relationship between the Federal Government and Indian Tribes, or on the distribution of power and responsibilities between the Federal Government and Indian Tribes; therefore, consultation with Tribal officials under E.O. 13175 is not required, and the requirements of section (5)(b) and (c) of E.O. 13175 also

do not apply. A Tribal summary impact statement under section (5)(b)(2)(B) and (c)(2)(B) of E.O. 13175 is not required and has not been prepared.

This final rule contains no information collection requirements under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: June 9, 2026.

Samuel D. Rauch III,

Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

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