

# Accountability Measure Options for Pelagic Stocks

Discussion Paper, August 2025

## Background

Pelagic stocks under each of Puerto Rico, St. Croix, and St. Thomas/St. John FMPs (Island-based FMPs) are new to federal management (Table 1) (CFMC 2019 a, b, c). The Council relied on existing landings data to develop management reference points for pelagic fish included in the FMPs. However, it is uncertain if this data fully represents the actual harvest. Because these stocks were not federally managed before, data collection for some stocks may have been less complete, likely missing key temporal and spatial variations in the fisheries.

Reflecting economic and cultural considerations guiding the harvest of pelagic stocks in all three islands, the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (Council) used a different approach to manage pelagic stocks until a more complete understanding of these important fisheries is obtained (CFMC 2019 a, b, c). As required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), the island-based FMPs established annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) for all pelagic stocks. However, instead of applying an AM in the event of an ACL overage that reduces the length of the fishing season to prevent the ACL from being again exceeded as is done for reef fish and spiny lobster, the Council established an annual catch target (ACT) that would serve as the AM trigger, as described below.

**Table 1. List of pelagic species managed under each of the Island-based FMPs**

Species	Puerto Rico	St. Croix	St. Thomas/St. John
Dolphinfish	Y	Y	Y
Pompano dolphinfish	Y	N	N
Wahoo	Y	Y	Y
Little tunny	Y	N	N
Blackfin tuna	Y	N	N
King mackerel	Y	N	N
Cero mackerel	Y	N	N
Great barracuda	Y	N	N
Tripletail	Y	N	N

### **Current AMs applicable to Pelagic Stocks under each of the island-based FMPs**

The ACTs were established to address uncertainty in the landings of these species, all of which are new to management, and are consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act National Standard 1 Guidelines. The ACT for each pelagic stock or stock complex serves as a target below the ACL, but provides stability for fisheries that are apt to fluctuate around a target catch rate. The ACTs for each pelagic stock/stock complex in all three FMPs were set at 90% of the applicable ACL and serve as the AM trigger.

As discussed in the Island-based FMPs, an AM would be triggered if the applicable landings (e.g., sector landings, as available) exceed the applicable ACT for that stock/stock complex. For Puerto Rico - when landings for one sector are not available for comparison to that sector's ACL and ACT, the ACL and ACT for the sector with available landings are the ACL and ACT for the stock or stock complex (see process for applying AMs below).

#### *Application of AMs for Pelagic Stocks (Puerto Rico, St. Croix, St. Thomas/St. John)*

At or near the beginning of the fishing year, landings for each stock, stock complex, or indicator stock will be evaluated relative to the applicable ACT for the stock or stock complex based on a moving multi-year average of landings, as described in the FMP. If NMFS estimates that landings have exceeded the applicable ACT for a stock or stock complex, NMFS in consultation with the Council will determine appropriate corrective action.

#### ***Annual Catch Monitoring Process***

Step 1. As soon as landings are available each year, Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff compares each pelagic stock/stock complex's landings to the applicable ACT.

- If landings < ACT, then no corrective action is required.
- If landings > ACT, then NMFS notifies the Council of the overage.

Step 2. Although not required by the AM, SERO staff sends a summary memo listing those pelagic stocks with ACT overages to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) for review.

Step 3. NMFS and the Council discuss and determine appropriate corrective action.

Currently, there is a need for the Council to specify AM corrective actions when an overage occurs. Although recent monitoring of pelagic species landings has triggered AMs for some species (Table 2), no corrective action has been taken to date because there are no specific correction actions currently identified in regulations. Note that for many of the stocks, both the ACT and the ACL were exceeded, which may emphasize the need to review the use of an ACT as to whether it is serving its purpose. The Council may want to consider removing the ACT and use the ACL as the trigger for the pelagic AM or implementing other management measures that may constrain harvest to the ACT/ACL. For instance, NMFS recently implemented new size limits for dolphin and wahoo that may be sufficient to constrain catches to the ACT and/or ACL.

Additionally, the Council could evaluate possible actions that could be implemented to address instances where ACLs or ACTs for pelagic species are exceeded.

Table 2. Summary of annual catch monitoring for pelagic stocks that exceeded their ACT and/or ACL since implementation of the island-based FMPs in 2022.

Pelagic Stock (FMP)	Year when detn. was made	Year(s) of landings evaluated	Applicable Landings (lb)	Applicable ACL (lb)	Applicable ACT (lb)	ACT Overage in %	ACL Overage in %
Dolphin (STT)	2024	2022	10,035	9,778	8,800	14	2.6
Barracuda (PR)	2023	2019	1,916	495	445	330.6	287
	2024	2022	1,837	495	445	312.8	271.1
	2025	Avg 2022-2023	1,889	495	445	445	278
Wahoo (PR)	2024	2022	24,216	25,911	23,320	4	-
	2025	Avg 2022-2023	26,724	25,911	23,320	15	3

## Potential options for pelagic stocks corrective actions

### 1. *Potential Actions if the ACT is exceeded*

- a. If the ACL is not exceeded, then no corrective action is required.
- b. If the ACL is exceeded, NMFS implements a corrective action as recommended by the Council.

If corrective action is needed, NMFS would implement a corrective action as recommended by the Council through an amendment to the FMP.

#### *Pros and Cons of NMFS-implemented AM Options*

##### *Pros:*

- The AM could be implemented following the year(s) of an overage and would define a clear AM corrective measure without further consultation with the CFMC.

##### *Cons:*

- Delays in landings limit how quickly an AM can be implemented following an overage.

- Changing corrective actions each year could create confusion among fishers.

Note on the use of ACTs as a trigger for AMs: The ACT/ACL monitoring process in place may not serve its purpose for some of these pelagic stocks, based on past monitoring, when both ACTs and ACLs were exceeded (Table 1). Additionally, there are no real-time commercial landings available or collection of recreational landings by the Marine Recreational Information Program, thus monitoring commercial and recreational landings to the ACT in-season is not possible at this time.

## 2. *Potential Corrective Actions*

A corrective action could be specified in the AM. The following could be considered as a post-season corrective action:

- a. **Temporary Fishery Closure:** Implement a temporary fishery closure, which could be similar to that established in the process for the Reef Fish AM application (see CFMC 2019 a, b, c).

*Pros:*

- Reduces the rate of harvest in federal waters.

*Cons:*

- May not have the intended effect due to temporal and spatial variability of pelagic fish.
- Requires territories to adopt compatible regulations to be fully effective.

- b. **Trip/Bag Limit Adjustments:** Implement or modify existing commercial trip or recreational bag limits.

*Pros:*

- A commercial trip limit could slow the rate of harvest.
- A recreational bag limit is already in place for dolphin and wahoo.

*Cons:*

- For a commercial trip limit or changes to existing recreational bag limits to be effectively implemented will need support from territorial natural resource agencies (compatible regulations).
- Establishing a commercial trip limit as an accountability measure action could increase enforcement issues and require additional communication with fishermen.
- Imposing changes in trip limits in-season or from year-to-year will require increased communication with fishers and could create confusion about existing restrictions.

c. **Size Limit Adjustments:** Implement or modify current size limits for stocks.

*Pros:*

- Slows the rate of harvest.
- Size limits were recently implemented for dolphin and wahoo in all islands.

*Cons:*

- May need support from the territorial natural resource agencies to be fully effective.
- Imposing changes in size limits in-season or from year-to-year will require increased communication with fishers and could create confusion about existing restrictions.

d. **Other Measures?**

**Additional considerations:**

- Gear modifications - for example, use of non-offset circle hooks to decrease discard mortality for small fish released or that shake off before being landed (reference in [Merten et al. 2022](#)) - Not affect legal landed catch, but prevents mortality for others.