

Marine Industry Trends- A Tale of Two Fisheries

By Tom Murray

With continued growth in both recreational saltwater angling and traditional commercial fishing, one wonders how the resources—as measured by overall catches—are faring, and how relative shares of the total harvest are playing out. Most feel that although government-associated harvest data are not without some shortcomings, they represent the best information available to assess catches and gain some insight into fishery trends. And while commercial and recreational data collection efforts differ in their approaches (the former, generally mandatory; the latter, primarily by voluntary angler surveys), use of the data to track overall catch is helpful.

The striped bass represents an economically important inshore finfish

species to the Commonwealth. It therefore serves as a useful example in gauging both the growth in catches overall and the relative harvests by user group. The final 2001 catch statistics are not yet available for either commercial or recreational landings. However, between the commercial catch data available from Virginia's Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) and the recreational catch estimates provided by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), some trends and comparisons are readily available for Virginia fisheries. As depicted in Figure 1, under recent management practices the average total catches in both sport and commercial fishing have increased since 1994.

Another important Virginia fishery, summer flounder, has exhibited a mixed

Figure 1. Striped Bass Catch by Sport and Commercial Fishermen (lbs.) 1993-2000

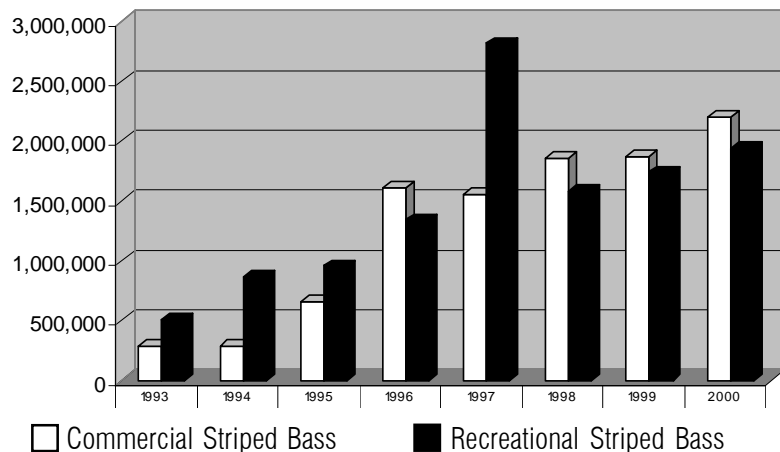
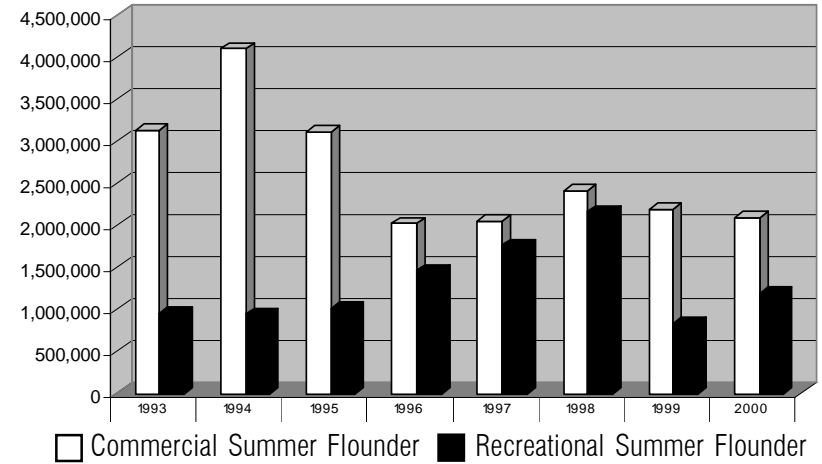


Figure 2. Sport and Commercial Catch of Summer Flounder in Virginia (1993-2000)



track record for the same eight-year period according to the same databases summarized in Figure 2.

The summer flounder stock has been managed federally since 1989 and is believed to be rebuilding under a catch quota system adopted in 1993. Reportedly, the coast-wide (Maine-North Carolina) commercial summer flounder fishery continues to exhibit strength but, according to the NMFS, it has been “encountering a bumpy road along the way.” Many believe that additional management measures are needed for the inshore component of the fishery.

Currently, the VMRC proposes to reduce the recreational harvest of summer flounder in 2002 by 43.8 percent in order to comply with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) *Interstate*

Fishery Management Plan for Summer Flounder. The VMRC is looking at combining several management options. Increasing the minimum size limit to 18 inches, reducing the possession limit to as few as two fish, and closing seasons for several months will all be considered.

At the same time, new regulations developed by the NMFS and the ASMFC will allow an increase in catch limits for 2002. The new quota allocates 60 percent (or 14.58 million pounds) to the commercial industry and 40 percent (or 9.72 million pounds) to sport fishermen, representing an overall increase of 36 percent from the 2001 quota of 17.9 million pounds. How the future fishery for summer flounder develops is the subject of much discussion and confusion as we begin 2002.