

Project Title: Pilot Test of Recreational Released Catch Cards into the Sampling Design of the MRIP APAIS

Progress Report Period: April 1-September 30, 2025

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Objective

This project is piloting a modified sampling design to the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) to collect additional information from randomly selected anglers about their discarded fish during a recreational fishing trip. This calendar year 2025 project offers use of a catch card as a supplementary sampling design to enhance the understanding of discard information in recreational fisheries along the Atlantic Coast. Given their large estimated contribution to releases of many recreational fisheries along the coast, private/rental boat mode will be the main focus but collection from multiple modes will be possible at the discretion of participating state partners. The specific objectives include:

- Requesting prior to the start of a fishing trip that anglers record traditional discard information that is currently collected through the APAIS (e.g., species, count, hours fished, fishing area).
- Collecting additional fields relevant to discard mortality (e.g., depth and lengths of discarded fish). This would be beneficial for the private/rental boat mode which comprises the majority of recreational discards for several key species.
- Using the same stratified random sample design, or probability-based sampling, as the APAIS will allow comparison to existing APAIS discard data collection and explore if bias exists.
- Compare data collected via catch cards to existing headboat and dockside sampling or other data sources (i.e. volunteer anglers surveys, tagging data, etc.) for select species.
- Educate the recreational fishing community on the importance of accurate discard information in fisheries management and stock assessment.
- Educate the recreational fishing community on discard mortality, barotrauma and safe fish handling techniques.

Activities Completed and Progress of Incomplete Activities

Work on the pilot catch card project at the beginning of the year was focused on preparing for the 2025 sampling season which began in May 2025. More details on the activities completed and in progress are provided below.

- Preparation for field sampling
 - Finalized the Catch Card–Project partners from the eight participating pilot states finalized the design of the catch card, deciding on what fields would be collected as well as the layout of the pre-paid postcard. The final catch card can be found in Figure 1.
 - Setting up Business Reply Mail (BRM) Accounts and Printing of Catch Cards–ACCSP staff met with the U.S. Postal Service to set up BRM accounts for the eight pilot states under a centralized ACCSP account and made sure the catch cards were formatted properly for BRM. Once finalized, the catch cards were printed and mailed to each pilot state.
 - Training Materials Developed and Staff Training Conducted–Training materials were developed by the eight pilot states describing the catch card procedures. Each state conducted their own training with field staff identified to participate in the catch card pilot program.

- Ordered Catch Card Supplies–Pilot states ordered additional materials for field sampling, specifically golf pencils and measuring tapes to give out to anglers along with the catch cards to aid them in measuring and recording their released fish. States at their discretion could also purchase additional items to hand out to anglers such as small clipboards, stickers, etc. to either help them collect the data and/or to thank them for their participation.
- Coordination with MRIP staff for Assignment Draws–Based on the field implementation schedule for 2025 (Table 1), ACCSP staff coordinated with MRIP to provide overdrawn (i.e. extra) sampling assignments for those states participating in the pilot project. These assignments were focused on the 8 am-2 pm and 11 am-5 pm assignment intervals to allow field interviewers to hand out catch cards to anglers as they departed for their fishing trips which predominantly occur in the morning hours.
- Developed Outreach Materials–A website (https://www.accsp.org/release_project/) was developed which provides additional information on the project. In addition to explaining the project in greater detail, it includes examples of how to fill out the card as well as how to measure total length of the fish. It also links to websites that describe best practices for releasing fish. Anglers can access this information using the QR code found on the top right of the catch card (Figure 1).
- State Conduct of Catch Card Assignments–Pilot states began conduct of the catch card project in May 2025. These assignments are still in progress with sampling assignments scheduled through October or December of 2025, depending on state (see Table 1 for the 2025 implementation by month and state). Specific activities related to state conduct that are ongoing include:
 - Catch cards distributed to anglers and collected while on site at sampling assignments by field interviewers. Catch cards not returned to the field interviewer can also be returned to the state either by mail, email, or for Connecticut via a drop box.
 - Catch cards returned to the states from all methods are entered into a specially designed section of the Assignment Tracking Application (ATA) by state staff.
 - Data entered by state staff undergo data review and checking after entry.
 - The subcommittee of pilot states have had monthly check-in calls to resolve issues with field implementation of the catch card project and to ensure that all states are conducting the project the same way.

Table 1. Months of sampling overdrawn APAIS assignments for pilot project 2025.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Massachusetts					X	X	X	X	X	X			60
Rhode Island					X	X	X	X	X	X			70
Connecticut					X	X	X	X	X	X			75
New York					X	X	X	X	X	X			65
Maryland					X	X	X	X	X	X			65
North Carolina					X	X	X	X	X	X	X		50
South Carolina					X	X	X	X	X	X	X		50
Georgia					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	50

Preliminary Results

From May to September 2025 a total of 380 catch card assignments have been completed. A total of 1,780 cards were distributed during the assignments, with 368 cards returned. While return rates varied between states, the preliminary coastwide return rate was 20.67% (Table 2). Most cards received were returned to the interviewer on site (59%) and the remainder were submitted via mail (26%), email (4%), drop box (2%, CT only), or unknown source (9%). A total of 1,100 fish were submitted on the cards and entered into the ATA through September 2025. Out of that total, 1,037 fish had associated lengths with the number of lengths submitted per catch card varying quite a bit between states. The species with the most recorded lengths were Black Sea Bass (226), Summer Flounder (129) and Scup (128) (Table 3). While lengths were recorded for many species along the coast, no lengths have been submitted at this point for Haddock, Weakfish, Gray Triggerfish, Red Porgy, or Vermilion Snapper, species which had been identified as priority species in the initial proposal.

Preliminary length frequencies for Black Sea Bass, Summer Flounder, Scup, Spotted Seatrout, Striped Bass, and Red Drum are shown in Figure 2. These species were chosen due to having the most lengths collected through the end of September. While anglers are asked to measure fish rounding up to the nearest ¼”, as can be seen in the figure, most anglers are providing information by inch bins rather than ¼” bins. However, these figures are still informative regarding whether releases are regulatory or not.

Activities for next reporting period

In the next reporting period (October-December 2025), the catch card pilot project will:

- Complete field sampling and data entry for cards received October to end of 2025
- Continue meeting monthly to review data
- Complete the final review of data for 2025 & QA/QC of data
- Prepare data for analysis in 2026
- Review data to determine potential protocol changes for future sampling years in order to increase return rates and obtain more release lengths

Table 2. Basic metrics of catch card assignments by state and overall. Data for May-September 2025.


State	Year	Number of Completed Catch Card Assignments	Number of Completed Interviews on Catch Card Assignments	Number of Catch Cards Handed Out	Number of Catch Cards Entered	Number of Lengths Submitted	Number of Catch Cards Handed Out Per Assignment	Catch Card Return Rate (%)	Number of Lengths Per Catch Card
Massachusetts	2025	50	167	87	17	73	1.74	19.54	4.29
Rhode Island	2025	59	319	151	44	216	2.56	29.14	4.91
Connecticut	2025	56	463	231	59	142	4.13	25.54	2.41
New York	2025	52	135	227	49	141	4.37	21.59	2.88
Maryland	2025	54	398	426	71	70	7.89	16.67	0.99
North Carolina	2025	40	417	184	19	52	4.60	10.33	2.74
South Carolina	2025	36	336	190	47	163	5.28	24.74	3.47
Georgia	2025	33	240	284	62	180	8.61	21.83	2.90
Total	2025	380	2,475	1,780	368	1,037	4.68	20.67	2.82

Table 3. Number of lengths submitted on the catch cards for selected species. A total of 1,100 fish were entered into the ATA and 1,037 had recorded lengths. Most recorded lengths were for Black Sea Bass, Summer Flounder and Scup. Data collected May-September 2025.

Species	Number of Lengths
Atlantic Croaker	36
Black Drum	5
Black Sea Bass	226
Bluefish	23
Cobia	1
Red Drum	70
Red Snapper	5
Scup	128
Sheepshead	11
Spanish Mackerel	2
Spot	11
Spotted Seatrout	43
Striped Bass	43
Summer Flounder	129
Tautog	59

Figure 1. Example final catch card for the 2025 pilot catch card project.


For detailed instructions, scan the QR Code:
12345678 Control # _____ Site # _____



Only record **YOUR** released fish on this trip, not the entire fishing group.

Primary Targeted Fish: _____ Fishing From: Boat Shore
 Average Depth Fished (ft): _____ Hours Fished to Nearest 1/2 Hour: _____
 Area Fished: Inshore (Bay, Sound, River) Ocean <3 Miles Ocean >3 Miles
 Trip End Time (Return to Shore): _____ AM PM
 I DID NOT RELEASE ANY FISH TODAY

List every fish **RELEASED** on this trip and its condition with **Y** for Alive or **N** for Not Alive.
 Only measure released fish that have a size or bag limit.
 Record total length rounded up to the nearest 1/4 inch. →



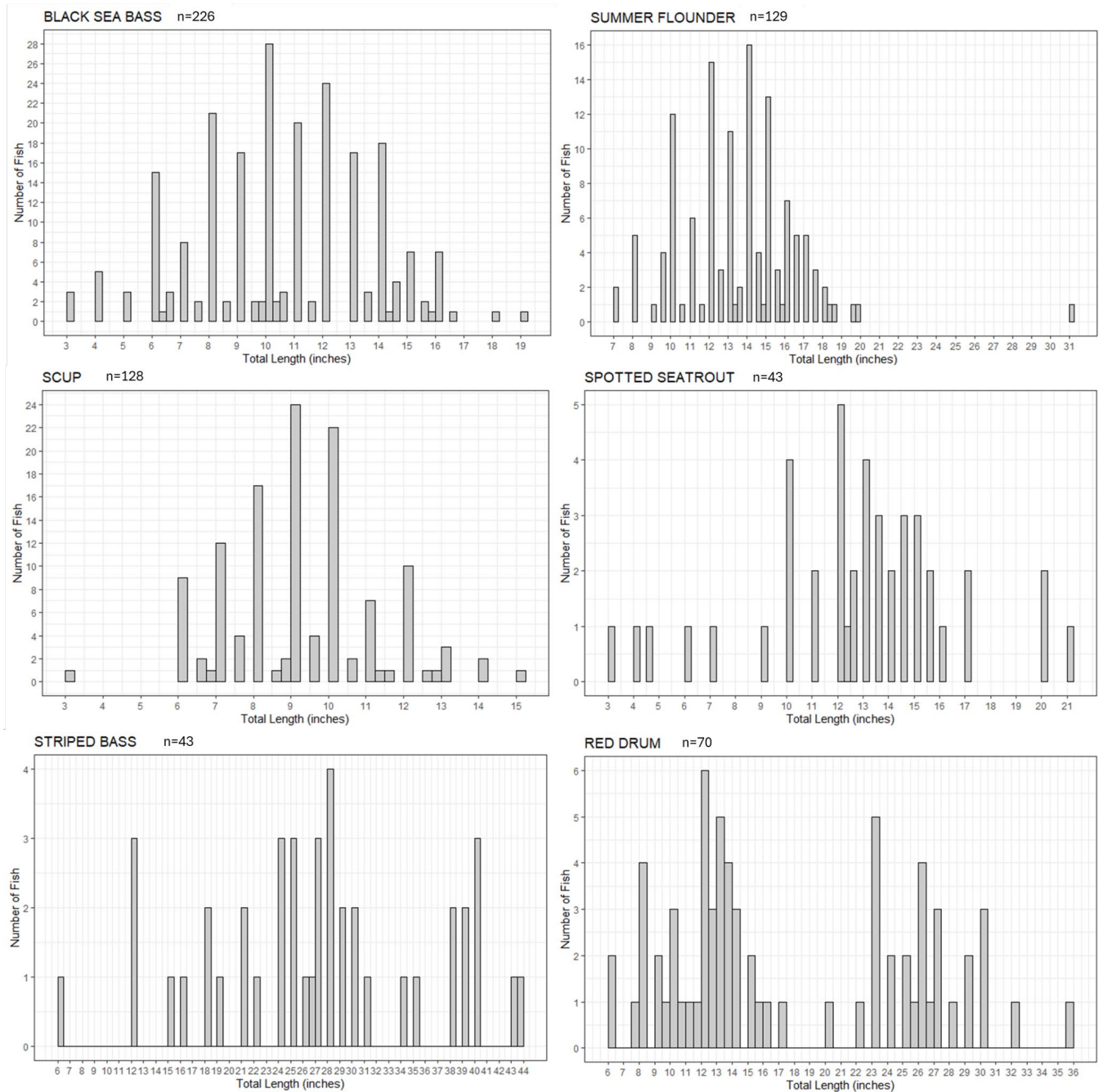
	Released Fish Species Name	Alive? (Y/N)	Total Length
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
19			
20			

Counts of released fish NOT listed above

Released Fish Species Name	# Released Alive	# Released Dead

Return this postage paid card in the mail or take a picture and send to [cards@state.gov]

Figure 2. Preliminary raw length frequencies as collected from the pilot discard catch card project through September 2025, all states, modes (private/rental boat and shore), and areas (inland and ocean) combined. Note the different scales of the x- and y-axes. While most x-axes show 1/4" bins, striped bass and red drum are shown with 1/2" bins due to the wide range of release lengths.



Milestone Chart

Date	Event
Mar, 2025	Overdrawn Assignment Allocation request to MRIP
Apr, 2025	Training sessions for Pilot states, order supplies, ship to states
May, 2025	Pilot Project Conduct begins (Table 2)
Jun 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for May
Jun, 2025	Pilot Partner Meeting – check in on process
Jul 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Jun
Jul, 2025	Pilot Partner Meeting – Wave review (May-Jun)
Aug 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Jul
Aug, 2025	Pilot Partner Meeting – Mid Season review (May to July)
Sep 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Aug
Sep, 2025	Pilot Partner Meeting – Wave review (Jul-Aug)
Oct 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Sep
Nov 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Oct
Nov, 2025	Pilot Partner Meeting – Wave review (Sep-Oct)
Dec 15, 2025	Deadline for card data entry and data review for Nov
Dec 31, 2025	Deadline for final data review for May-Nov
Jan 1, 2026	Data available for analysis