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COMMON BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus truncatus*) St. Joseph Bay Stock

NOTE – NMFS is in the process of writing individual stock assessment reports for each of the 31 bay, sound and estuary stocks of common bottlenose dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico. Until this effort is completed and 31 individual reports are available, some of the basic information presented in this report will also be included in the report: "Northern Gulf of Mexico Bay, Sound and Estuary Stocks".

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Common bottlenose dolphins are distributed throughout the bays, sounds and estuaries of the Gulf of Mexico (Mullin 1988). Long-term (year-round, multi-year) residency by at least some individuals has been reported from nearly every site where photographic identification (photo-ID) or tagging studies have been conducted in the Gulf of Mexico (e.g., Irvine and Wells 1972; Shane 1977; Gruber 1981; Irvine *et al.* 1981; Wells 1986a; Wells *et al.* 1987; Scott *et al.* 1990; Shane 1990; Wells 1991; Bräger 1993; Bräger *et al.* 1994; Fertl 1994; Wells *et al.* 1996a,b; Wells *et al.* 1997; Weller 1998; Maze and Würsig 1999; Lynn and Würsig 2002; Wells 2003; Hubard *et al.* 2004; Irwin and Würsig 2004; Shane 2004; Balmer *et al.* 2008; Urian *et al.* 2009; Bassos-Hull *et al.* 2013). In many cases, residents occur predominantly within estuarine waters, with limited movements through passes to the Gulf of Mexico (Shane 1977; Shane 1990; Gruber 1981; Irvine *et al.* 1981; Shane 1990; Maze and Würsig 1999; Lynn and Würsig 2002; Fazioli *et al.* 2006; Bassos-Hull *et al.* 2013). Early studies indicating year-round residency in bays in both the eastern and western Gulf of Mexico led to the delineation of 33 bay, sound and estuary (BSE) stocks, including St. Joseph Bay, with the first stock assessment reports published in 1995.

More recently, genetic data also support the concept of relatively discrete BSE stocks (Duffield and Wells 2002; Sellas *et al.* 2005). Sellas *et al.* (2005) examined population subdivision among dolphins sampled in Sarasota Bay, Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor, Matagorda Bay, Texas, and the coastal Gulf of Mexico (1-12 km offshore) from just outside Tampa Bay to the south end of Lemon Bay, and found evidence of significant population differentiation among all areas on the basis of both mitochondrial DNA control region sequence data and 9 nuclear microsatellite loci. The Sellas *et al.* (2005) findings support the identification of BSE populations distinct from those occurring in adjacent Gulf coastal waters. Differences in reproductive seasonality from site to site also suggest genetic-based distinctions among areas (Urian *et al.* 1996). Photo-ID and genetic data from several inshore areas of the southeastern United States also support the existence of resident estuarine animals and a differentiation between animals biopsied along the Atlantic coast and those biopsied within estuarine

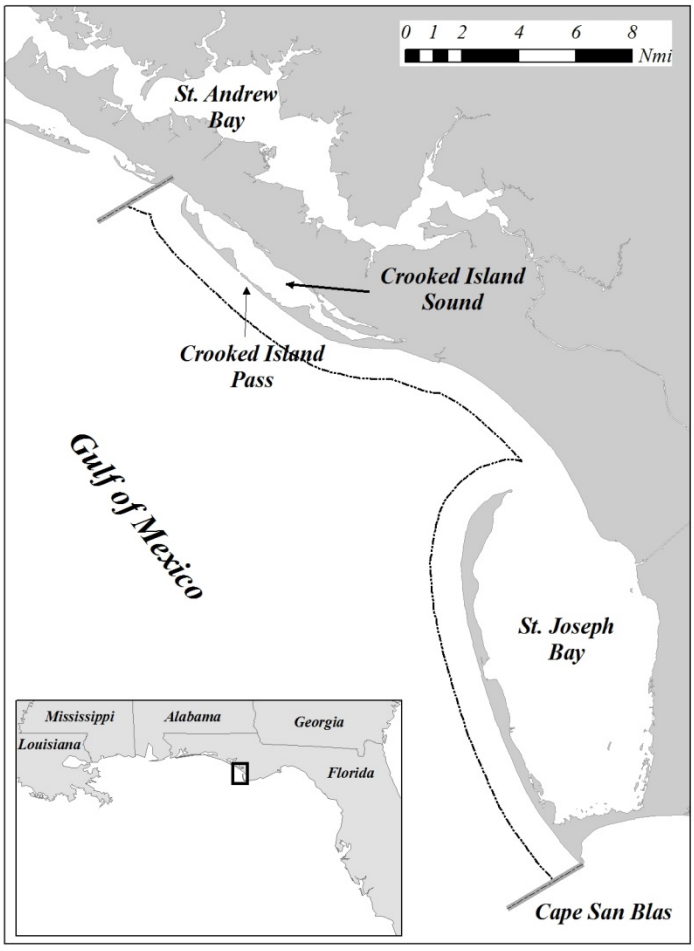

Figure 1. *Geographic extent of the St. Joseph Bay Stock, located in the Florida panhandle. The stock boundaries are denoted by dashed and solid lines.*

systems at the same latitude (Caldwell 2001; Gubbins 2002; Zolman 2002; Mazzoil *et al.* 2005; Litz 2007; Rosel *et al*. 2009; NMFS unpublished).

St. Joseph Bay is a relatively small embayment of 170km^2 in area, located just west of Apalachicola in the central panhandle of Florida (Figure 1). The bay is bounded in the south by Cape San Blas, in the west by the St. Joseph Peninsula and opens in the north to the Gulf of Mexico. St. Joseph Bay extends 21km in length and 10km in width at its widest point, and is characterized by extensive seagrass beds and salt marshes. The southern quarter of the bay is 1m or less deep whereas the deepest portions are in the northwest region at ~10m deep. Most of St. Joseph Bay has been designated as an aquatic preserve by the state of Florida. There is minimal freshwater inflow into the bay (U.S. EPA 1999; Balmer 2007; Moretzsohn *et al.* 2010). To the northwest of St. Joseph Bay, Crooked Island Sound (also known as St. Andrew Sound) extends 12km in length and 2km in width at its widest point. It varies in depth from 1m around the margins of the sound to 6-7m at the sound's entrance (Balmer 2007). The greatest environmental concerns for this area are declining water quality (mainly due to eutrophication), coastal development, loss of seagrass and saltmarsh habitats and beach erosion (Florida Department of Environmental Protection 2008).

In response to 3 unusual mortality events along the Florida panhandle which all impacted the St. Joseph Bay area, Balmer *et al.* (2008) conducted photo-ID surveys from April 2004 to July 2007 to examine seasonal abundance, distribution patterns and site fidelity of bottlenose dolphins in St. Joseph Bay and along the coast northwest to and inside Crooked Island Sound. In addition, during April 2005 and July 2006, NOAA and the Sarasota Dolphin Research Program along with other partners, conducted health assessments of bottlenose dolphins in the St. Joseph Bay area. Photo-ID data strongly suggested a movement of dolphins into the St. Joseph Bay region during spring and fall with lower abundance during winter and summer. Dolphins sighted in winter and summer displayed higher site fidelity, whereas the majority of dolphins sighted during spring and fall displayed the lowest site fidelity (Balmer *et al.* 2008). Radio-tracking results supported these findings, with animals tagged in spring 2005 (April) ranging the farthest of all dolphins tagged, extending outside the St. Joseph Bay Stock region. Overall, Balmer *et al.* (2008) found abundance to vary seasonally in the St. Joseph Bay area, and suggested the St. Joseph Bay area supports a resident community of bottlenose dolphins as well as seasonal visitors during spring and fall seasons.

The St. Joseph Bay Stock area includes St. Joseph Bay, Crooked Island Sound and coastal waters out to 2km from shore in between St. Joseph Bay and Crooked Island Sound, and coastal waters out to 2km from shore from Cape San Blas along St. Joseph Peninsula and along Crooked Island (Figure 1). The boundaries of this stock are based on photo-ID and radio-tracking studies conducted during 2004-2007 (Balmer 2007; Balmer *et al.* 2008), which support the inclusion of nearshore coastal waters within the boundaries for this particular stock. The boundaries are subject to change as additional research is conducted. There is strong support from the findings of Balmer *et al.* (2008) to include Crooked Island Sound in the St. Joseph Bay Stock. However, animals from nearby St. Andrew Bay, located to the northwest of St. Joseph Bay (see Figure 1) and surrounding Panama City, have also been sighted in Crooked Island Sound, suggesting Crooked Island Sound is an area of overlap for dolphins inhabiting both St. Joseph Bay and St. Andrew Bay. An example of overlap with St. Andrew Bay is given by Balmer *et al.* (2010), who show the sightings for a particular animal, tracked simultaneously via satellite-linked transmitter and VHF radio transmitter, sighted in both Crooked Island Sound and St. Andrew Bay as well as adjacent coastal waters.

POPULATION SIZE

In order to estimate seasonal abundance, Balmer *et al.* (2008) conducted photo-ID mark-recapture surveys across multiple seasons from February 2005 through July 2007 in St. Joseph Bay and along the coast to the northwest including Crooked Island Sound (St. Andrew Sound). Line and contour transects were used to cover the study area, and each survey was only conducted if Beaufort Sea State was 3 or less. Balmer *et al.* (2008) also calculated a distinctiveness rate, which was the proportion of distinctive (marked) dolphins to non-distinctive (un-marked) dolphins, for each survey season. Mark-recapture estimates factored in the distinctiveness rate and included animals with distinctive and non-distinctive fins. Seasonal abundance estimates using the robust 'Markovian Emigration' model ranged from 122 dolphins (CV=0.09) for winter 2006 to 340 dolphins (CV=0.09) for fall 2006. Summer and winter estimates provide the best estimate of the resident population as spring and fall estimates also include transient animals. The 2005 and 2006 estimates are considered outdated due to being more than 8 years old. Therefore, the best available abundance estimate for the St. Joseph Bay Stock is the summer 2007 estimate, which is 152 dolphins (CV=0.08).

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate for the St. Joseph Bay Stock is 152 (CV=0.08). The resulting minimum population estimate is 142.

Current Population Trend

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock. Balmer *et al.* (2008) provided abundance estimates from 2005 to 2007 but did not evaluate an interannual trend.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. The maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that cetacean populations may not grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive life history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3. 16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size of the St. Joseph Bay Stock of common bottlenose dolphins is 142. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The recovery factor is 0.5 because this stock is of unknown status. PBR for this stock of bottlenose dolphins is 1.4.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

The total annual human-caused mortality and serious injury to the St. Joseph Bay Stock of common bottlenose dolphins during 2009–2013 is unknown because this stock may interact with unobserved fisheries (see below), and also because the most current observer data for the commercial shrimp trawl fishery are for 2007-2011 and mortality rates were calculated at the state level (see Shrimp Trawl section below).

New Serious Injury Guidelines

NMFS updated its serious injury designation and reporting process, which uses guidance from previous serious injury workshops, expert opinion, and analysis of historic injury cases to develop new criteria for distinguishing serious from non-serious injury (Angliss and DeMaster 1998; Andersen *et al*. 2008; NOAA 2012). NMFS defines serious injury as an "*injury that is more likely than not to result in mortality*". Injury determinations for stock assessments revised in 2013 or later incorporate the new serious injury guidelines, based on the most recent 5-year period for which data are available.

Fishery Information

The commercial fisheries that interact, or that potentially could interact, with this stock are the Category II Southeastern U.S. Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico shrimp trawl; Gulf of Mexico menhaden purse seine; and Southeastern U.S. Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico stone crab trap/pot fisheries; and the Category III Gulf of Mexico blue crab trap/pot; and Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean commercial passenger fishing vessel (hook and line) fisheries (Appendix III). There are no recent observer program data for the Gulf of Mexico menhaden purse seine fishery. The menhaden fishery in this area was very limited during 2009–2013 in Gulf County, Florida. Number of menhaden fishing trips/year for Gulf County was as follows: 3 in 2009; 2 in 2010; 22 in 2011; 15 in 2012; and 9 in 2013 (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 2013). There have been no documented mortalities of St. Joseph Bay bottlenose dolphins in crab trap/pot fisheries. There have been no documented interactions between St. Joseph Bay common bottlenose dolphins and hook and line fisheries. There is no systematic observer coverage of crab trap/pot fisheries nor hook and line fisheries; therefore, it is not possible to quantify total mortality.

Shrimp Trawl

Between 1997 and 2011, 5 common bottlenose dolphins and 7 unidentified dolphins, which could have been either common bottlenose dolphins or Atlantic spotted dolphins, became entangled in the lazy line, turtle excluder device or tickler chain gear in the commercial shrimp trawl fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. All dolphin bycatch interactions resulted in mortalities except for 1 unidentified dolphin that was released alive in 2009. Soldevilla *et al.* (2015) provide mortality estimates calculated from analysis of shrimp fishery effort data and NMFS's Observer Program bycatch data. Observer program coverage does not extend into BSE waters; time-area stratified bycatch

rates were extrapolated into inshore waters to estimate bycatch mortalities from inshore fishing effort. Annual mortality estimates were calculated for the years 1997-2011 from stratified annual fishery effort and bycatch rates, and a 5-year unweighted mean mortality estimate for 2007-2011 was calculated for Gulf of Mexico dolphin stocks. The 4-area (Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi/Alabama, Florida) stratification method was chosen because it best approximates how fisheries operate (Soldevilla *et al.* 2015). The BSE stock mortality estimates were aggregated at the state level as this was the spatial resolution at which fishery effort is modeled (e.g., Nance *et al.* 2008). The BSE stock mortality estimates were aggregated at the state level as this was the finest spatial resolution available for fishery effort. The mean annual mortality estimate for Florida BSE stocks (from Perdido Bay east and south to the Florida Keys) was 3.4 (CV=0.99). This estimate does not include skimmer trawl effort, which may represent up to 50% of shrimp fishery effort in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi inshore waters, because Observer Program coverage of skimmer trawls is limited. Limitations and biases of annual bycatch mortality estimates are described in detail in Soldevilla *et al.* (2015).

Other Mortality

From 2009 to 2013, 4 common bottlenose dolphins were reported stranded within the St. Joseph Bay Stock area (NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 11 June 2014). This particular BSE stock includes nearshore coastal waters within its boundaries, and hence strandings that occurred along the coast within the bounds of this stock are also included in the total. However, because much of the stock area is contiguous, without physical barriers, with the Northern Coastal Stock of bottlenose dolphins, the stock of origin for animals that strand within the St. Joseph Bay Stock area is uncertain. It could not be determined if there was evidence of human interaction for 1 of these strandings. For 1 dolphin, no evidence of human interaction was detected, and for the remaining 2 strandings, evidence of human interactions was found. Both strandings with evidence of human interactions were determined to have lesions/scarring due to fishery interactions, but the fisheries could not be positively identified. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of human and fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the dolphins that die or are seriously injured in human interactions wash ashore, or, if they do, they are not all recovered (Peltier *et al*. 2012; Wells *et al*. 2015). Additionally, not all carcasses will show evidence of human interaction, entanglement or other fishery-related interaction due to decomposition, scavenger damage, etc. (Byrd *et al*. 2014). Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of human interaction.

St. Joseph Bay has been affected by 4 recent unusual mortality events (UMEs) and was the geographic focus of a UME in 2004. First, between August 1999 and May 2000, 150 bottlenose dolphins died coincident with *K. brevis* blooms and fish kills in the Florida Panhandle. This UME started in St. Joseph Bay and was concurrent spatially and temporally with a *K. brevis* bloom that spread east to west. There were 43 bottlenose dolphin strandings within the St. Joseph Bay Stock area during this event, which accounted for about 29% of the total bottlenose dolphin strandings for the 1999-2000 UME. Brevetoxin was determined to be the cause of this event (Twiner *et al.* 2012; Litz *et al.* 2014). Second, in March and April 2004, in another Florida Panhandle UME attributed to *K. brevis* blooms, 105 bottlenose dolphins and 2 unidentified dolphins stranded dead (Litz *et al.* 2014). This event also started in St. Joseph Bay, and 81 (76%) bottlenose dolphins stranded in the St. Joseph Bay Stock area. Although there was no indication of a *K. brevis* bloom at the time, high levels of brevetoxin were found in the stomach contents of the stranded dolphins (Flewelling *et al.* 2005; Twiner *et al.* 2012). Third, a separate UME was declared in the Florida Panhandle after elevated numbers of dolphin strandings occurred in association with a *K. brevis* bloom in September 2005. Dolphin strandings remained elevated through the spring of 2006 and brevetoxin was again detected in the tissues of most of the stranded dolphins. Between September 2005 and April 2006 when the event was officially declared over, a total of 88 bottlenose dolphin strandings occurred (plus strandings of 5 unidentified dolphins), with 12 (13%) occurring within the St. Joseph Bay Stock area. Brevetoxin was determined to be the cause of this event (Twiner *et al.* 2012; Litz *et al.* 2014). Health assessments of dolphins in the stock area found an eosinophilia syndrome, which could over the long-term produce organ damage and alter immunological status and thereby increase vulnerability to other challenges (Schwacke *et al.* 2010). However, the significance of the high prevalence of the syndrome to the observed mortality events in the St. Joseph Bay area is unclear. Finally, a UME was declared for cetaceans in the northern Gulf of Mexico beginning 1 February 2010; and, as of September 2014, the event is still ongoing (Litz *et al.* 2014). It includes cetaceans that stranded prior to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill (see "Habitat Issues" below), during the spill, and after. All 4 strandings during 2009–2013 from this stock area occurred during 2011 and 2012 and were considered to be part of the UME.

The problem of dolphin depredation of fishing gear is increasing in Gulf of Mexico coastal and estuary waters and illegal feeding or provisioning of wild bottlenose dolphins has been documented in Florida and Texas (Bryant 1994; Samuels and Bejder 2004; Cunningham-Smith *et al.* 2006; Powell and Wells 2011). There are emerging

questions regarding potential linkages between provisioning and depredation of recreational fishing gear and associated entanglement and ingestion of gear. Dolphins within the boundaries of this stock, primarily within Crooked Island Sound, have been observed to approach vessels in the area and beg for food (Balmer 2007; Balmer, pers. comm.). Begging behaviors are a result of being illegally fed. It is believed that the animals observed begging within Crooked Island Sound are members of the St. Andrew Bay Stock (the St. Andrew Bay Stock encompasses Panama City, an area where illegal feeding has been documented [Samuels and Bejder 2004]). Three dolphins, which were captured in Crooked Island Sound during the April 2005 health assessment, were observed begging during the 3 months of subsequent radio tracking (Balmer 2007; Balmer, pers. comm.). Two of these individuals, a mom/calf pair, were sighted exclusively within the boundaries of the St. Andrew Bay Stock during all radio tracking surveys. Both of these individuals were found stranded within 2 days of each other on 1 November and 3 November 2005 near Panama City and Panama City Beach. The other individual, an adult male, which was documented in Balmer *et al.* (2010), was sighted frequently in the waters from St. Andrew Bay to Crooked Island Sound and in association with individuals from both the St. Andrew Bay and St. Joseph Bay Stocks. Thus, the begging behaviors and overlap by individuals of the St. Andrew Bay Stock are likely affecting the behavior of individuals in the St. Joseph Bay Stock.

HABITAT ISSUES

The *Deepwater Horizon* (DWH) MC252 drilling platform, located approximately 50 miles southeast of the Mississippi River Delta in waters about 1500 m deep, exploded on 20 April 2010. The rig sank, and over 87 days up to ~4.9 million barrels of oil were discharged from the wellhead until it was capped on 15 July 2010 (McNutt *et al.* 2012). During the response effort dispersants were applied extensively at the seafloor and at the sea surface (Lehr *et al.* 2010; OSAT 2010). In-situ burning, or controlled burning of oil at the surface, was also used extensively as a response tool (Lehr *et al.* 2010). The oil, dispersant and burn residue compounds present ecological concerns (Buist *et al.* 1999; NOAA 2011). The magnitude of this oil spill was unprecedented in U.S. history, causing impacts to wildlife, natural habitats and human communities along coastal areas from western Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle (NOAA 2011). It could be years before the entire scope of damage is ascertained (NOAA 2011).

Some heavy to moderate oiling occurred on Alabama and Florida beaches, with the heaviest stretch occurring from Dauphin Island, Alabama, to Gulf Breeze, Florida. Light to trace oil was reported along the majority of Mississippi barrier islands, from Gulf Breeze to Panama City, Florida, and outside of Atchafalaya and Vermilion Bays in western Louisiana (OSAT-2 2011). A substantial number of beaches and wetlands along the Louisiana coast experienced heavy or moderate oiling (OSAT-2 2011). The heaviest oiling in Louisiana occurred west of the Mississippi River on the Mississippi Delta and in Barataria and Terrebonne Bays, and to the east of the river on the Chandeleur Islands.

Shortly after the oil spill, the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process was initiated under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. A variety of NRDA research studies are being conducted to determine potential impacts of the spill on marine mammals. These studies have focused on identifying the type, magnitude, severity, length and impact of oil exposure to oceanic, continental shelf, coastal and estuarine marine mammals. The research is ongoing. For coastal and estuarine dolphins, the NOAA-led efforts include: active surveillance to detect stranded animals in remote locations; aerial surveys to document the distribution, abundance, species and exposure relative to oil from the DWH spill; assessment of sublethal and chronic health impacts on coastal and estuarine bottlenose dolphins in Barataria Bay, Louisiana, Mississippi Sound, and a reference site in Sarasota Bay, Florida; and assessment of injuries to dolphin stocks in Barataria Bay and Chandeleur Sound, Louisiana, Mississippi Sound, and as a reference site, St. Joseph Bay, Florida.

The effects of oil exposure on marine mammals depend on a number of factors including the type and mixture of chemicals involved, the amount, frequency and duration of exposure, the route of exposure (inhaled, ingested, absorbed, or external) and biomedical risk factors of the particular animal (Geraci 1990). In general, direct external contact with petroleum compounds or dispersants with skin may cause skin irritation, chemical burns and infections. Inhalation of volatile petroleum compounds or dispersants may irritate or injure the respiratory tract, which could lead to pneumonia or inflammation. Ingestion of petroleum compounds may cause injury to the gastrointestinal tract, which could affect an animal's ability to digest or absorb food. Absorption of petroleum compounds or dispersants may damage kidney, liver and brain function in addition to causing immune suppression and anemia. Long term chronic effects such as lowered reproductive success and decreased survival may occur (Geraci 1990).

STATUS OF STOCK

Common bottlenose dolphins are not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Because the stock size is small and relatively few mortalities and serious injuries would exceed PBR, NMFS

considers this a strategic stock. Additionally, because a UME of unprecedented size and duration (began 1 February 2010 and is ongoing) has impacted the northern Gulf of Mexico, including the St. Joseph Bay Stock area, and the high number of bottlenose dolphin deaths associated with UMEs in the Florida panhandle since 1999 suggests that this stock may be stressed, NMFS finds cause for concern about this stock. The total human-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is unknown and there is insufficient information available to determine whether the total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The status of this stock relative to OSP is unknown. There are insufficient data to determine population trends for this stock.

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