# Small-Mesh Multispecies
# Fishery Performance and Risk Policy Factor Data

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NEFMC - Whiting PDT

New England Fishery Management Council

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# 2. Advice and Management Background

## 2.1 PDT Comments and Recommendations

- Comments
  - The mis-assignment of whiting trips to fishery group in CAMS for ‘state’, ‘uncategorized’ and ‘whiting’ categories should be investigated and potentially revised.
  - The social sciences branch should investigate the causes for the rapid decline in whiting prices since 2022. These declines may be related to seasonal factors or imports or consumer preference.
  - More granular analysis of individual exemption area fishery characteristics would be useful for evaluating fishery trends and their implications for management.
  - The information in Section 3 of this report was used by the PDT for risk factor scoring. Additional fishery information is generated for context.

- Management Recommendations and comments:

  - Silver hake biological reference points are static based on a 1972-1980 period as a proxy for MSY conditions and is long overdue for re-evaluation by a formal assessment process.

  - Red hake stocks have no overfishing level specification because the AIM assessment model on which it was based had been rejected. The SSC chose a more recent static period to represent an acceptable level of exploitation, but the official overfishing definition has not been modified (based on a 1980-2010 proxy for MSY)

  -- In 2023 following an assessment update, the SSC said that fishing was an unlikely cause in reductions in southern red hake biomass

  -- Uncertainty in the index-based assessment

  -- Existing proxy reference points that define overfishing are inconsistent with more recent assessment information.

  - Exemption area fishing programs should be reviewed and adjusted as needed to respond to new environmental and stock conditions of SMS and stocks that are commonly caught by SMS trips.

## 2.3 Brief Management Background

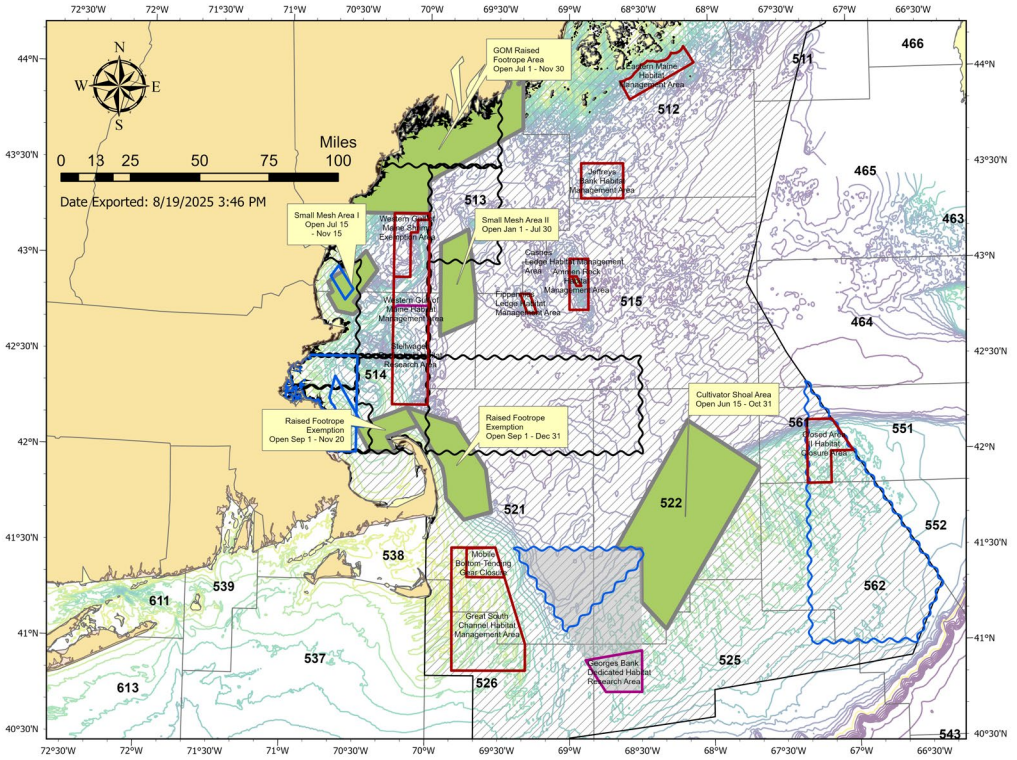
The Small-Mesh Multispecies FMP specifies the management measures for the northern and southern stocks of silver hake (Merluccius bilinearis), the northern and southern stocks of red hake (Urophycis chuss), and a single stock of offshore hake (Merluccius albidus), which primarily co-occurs with the southern stock of silver hake. Catches of silver hake and offshore hake are generally not differentiated in the market and are therefore collectively referred to as “whiting” with the fishery that harvests these species referred to as the “whiting” fishery. Silver hake and red hake are both managed as two distinct stocks, a northern and a southern, based on geographic delineations.

## 2.4 Brief Management Background

The small mesh multispecies fishery is managed by a collection of exemptions to the NE Multispecies FMP. These exemptions allow a fishery to be exempt from the minimum mesh size provided they catch less than 5% of regulated multispecies. There are currently five exemption areas (see following slide) in the northern management area that are open seasonally with possession limits dependent upon the species and mesh size . In the southern management area, small-mesh multispecies fishing is open year-round with certain requirements in the Southern New England and Georges Bank regulated mesh area.

## 2.5 Brief Management Background

Small-mesh exemption areas in the Gulf of Maine and on Georges Bank shown in green with open season labels. Northern management area statistical areas are shown in light grey shading. The GOM/GB regulated mesh area is hatched. Habitat management areas and groundfish closure areas are also shown as an outline.




Small-mesh exemption areas with groundfish and habitat management areas

Northern area exemption calendar

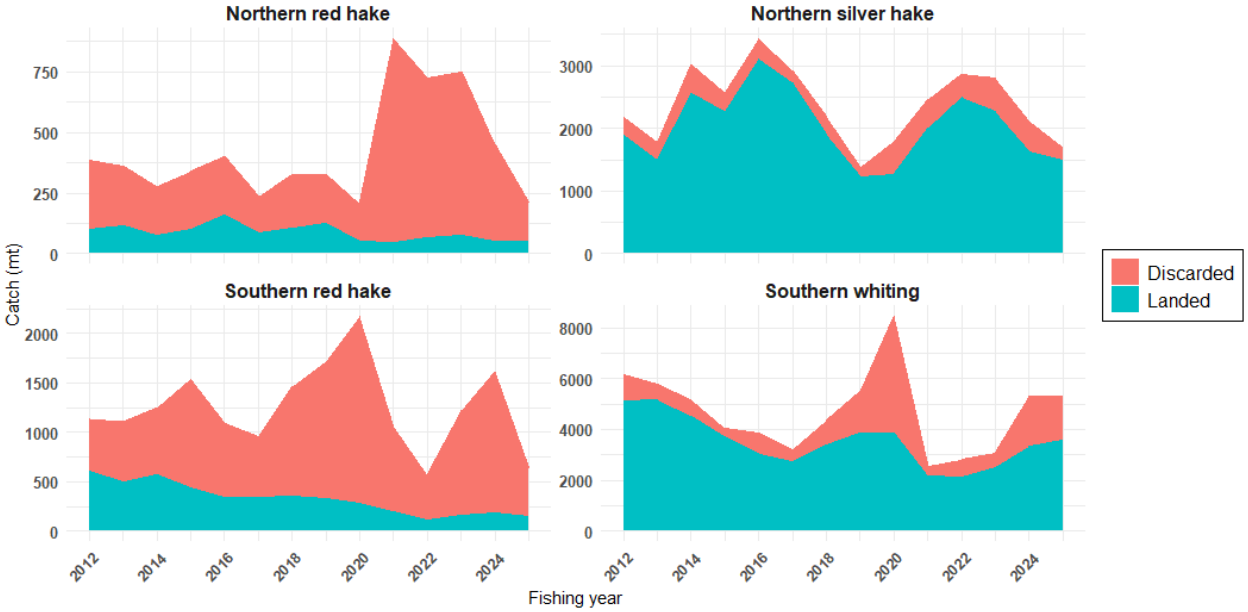
| | May | Jun | July | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cultivator | | June 15 – October 31 | | | | | | | | | | |
| GOM* Grate | | | July 1 – November 30 | | | | | | | | | |
| Small I | | | July 15 – November 15 | | | | | | | | | |
| Small II | – June 30 | | | | | | | | January 1 – | | | |
| Cape Cod RFT† | | | | | Sept 1 – Nov 20 | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | September 1 – December 31 | | | | | | | |

# 3. Fishery Performance Report

- Updated catch history by stock
- Current year catch estimates by stock
- Catch by fishery trends
- Utilization: Previous fishing year catch vs specifications (All)
- Bycatch: managed stocks by the fishery
- Bycatch: other finfish in the directed fishery
- Risk policy: Trends in recruitment and spawning biomass
- Economic trends
- Top port trends

### 3.1 Updated catch history by stock

- Full range of reported landings updated via CAMS
- Estimated discards for 2018 to 2025 update via CAMS




Catch history by disposition and stock

## 3.2 Northern red hake catch summary for FY 2025

- Catch was 7 percent of the ACL, so overfishing is not occurring and accountability measure changes are unnecessary. Utilization declined from 15% of the ACL in 2024
- Discards were 75 percent of total catch, a decline from 89% in 2024.

| Disposition | Jurisdiction | Catch (lbs) | Catch (mt) 2,973 mt ACL | Percent of ACL | Percent of catch | Trips | Permits | Catch per trip (lbs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Landed | Federal | 113,922 | 51.7 | 1.7% | 24.7% | 439 | 58 | 259.5 |
| Landed | Research | 381 | 0.2 | 0.0% | 0.1% | 7 | 4 | 54.4 |
| Landed | State | 46 | | 0.0% | 0.0% | 2 | <3 | |
| Discarded | Federal | 347,615 | 157.7 | 5.3% | 75.2% | 11,281 | 1326 | 30.8 |
| **Total** | **All** | **461,918** | **209.6** | **7.0%** | **100.0%** | **11,727** | **1388** | **39.4** |

### 3.3 Northern red hake catches

- Most catch is discarded, except in the whiting and squid/whiting fishery groups
- Significant northern red hake bycatch declines in the groundfish, lobster/crab, and squid fishery groups, but an increase in the sea scallop fishery group




Change in northern red hake catch by fishery group

## 3.4 Southern red hake catch summary for FY 2025

- Catch was 49 percent of the ACL (including a 25% rebuilding adjustment), so overfishing did not occur in 2025 and accountability measure changes are unnecessary. Utilization decreased from 118% of the ACL in 2024
- Discards declined from 89 percent of total catch in 2024 to 75% of the catch in 2025

| Disposition | Jurisdiction | Catch (lbs) | Catch (mt) 1,301 mt ACL | Percent of ACL | Percent of catch | Trips | Permits | Catch per trip (lbs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Landed | Federal | 311,956 | 141.5 | 10.9% | 22.3% | 2,341 | 613 | 133.3 |
| Landed | Research | 50 | | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1 | <3 | |
| Landed | State | 26,379 | 12.0 | 0.9% | 1.9% | 544 | 34 | 48.5 |
| Discarded | Federal | 1,062,040 | 481.7 | 37.0% | 75.8% | 34,262 | 3072 | 31.0 |
| **Total** | **All** | **1,400,375** | **635.2** | **49.0%** | **100.0%** | **37,147** | **3719** | **37.7** |

### 3.5 Southern red hake catches

- Most catch is discarded, except in the whiting and squid/whiting fishery groups
- Discards in the fluke, scup, groundfish, lobster/crab, and scallop fishery groups and state catches declined significantly compared to 2024.




Change in southern red hake catch by fishery group

### 3.6 Southern red hake catches by quarter

Year over year catches by fishing year quarter and fishery-group is more granular and may reveal seasonal patterns, but plotting three years of data may not work, unless there is a slide for each fishery group.




Change in southern red hake catch by fishery group and quarter

## 3.7 Northern silver hake catch summary for FY 2025

- Catch was 4 percent of the ACL, so overfishing did not occur and accountability measure changes are unnecessary. Utilization decreased from 5% of the ACL in 2024 and 14% of the ACL in 2023.
- Discards were 12 percent of total catch, an decrease from 22 % in 2024

| Disposition | Jurisdiction | Catch (lbs) | Catch (mt) 38,825 mt ACL | Percent of ACL | Percent of catch | Trips | Permits | Catch per trip (lbs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Landed | Federal | 3,268,870 | 1,482.7 | 3.8% | 87.8% | 1,591 | 223 | 2,054.6 |
| Landed | Research | 174 | | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1 | <3 | |
| Landed | State | 4,016 | 1.8 | 0.0% | 0.1% | 129 | 7 | 31.1 |
| Discarded | Federal | 448,541 | 203.5 | 0.5% | 12.1% | 12,466 | 1374 | 36.0 |
| **Total** | **All** | **3,721,427** | **1,688.0** | **4.0%** | **100.0%** | **14,186** | **1604** | **262.3** |

### 3.8 Northern silver hake catches

- GARFO should investigate how so much landings are assigned to the ‘squid/whiting’ vs ‘whiting’ fishery groups in CAMS. The ‘state’ fishery group is vessels without a federal fishing permit while fishing in state waters.
- Most catch is retained and landed, particularly in the whiting, herring, squid and squid/whiting fishery groups.
- Meaningful increase of whiting landings in the herring fishery - resulting from higher possession limit while using less than 3-inch mesh trawls? Whiting discards in the herring fishery declined in 2025, which is what increasing the possession limit was intended to do.
- Northern silver hake landings in the Herring fishery group peaked in 2024, a notable increase from prior years. The reasons for this change is being investigated, but may be due to herring catch restrictions combined with increasing the silver hake possession limit to 15,000 lb.




Change in northern silver hake catch by fishery group

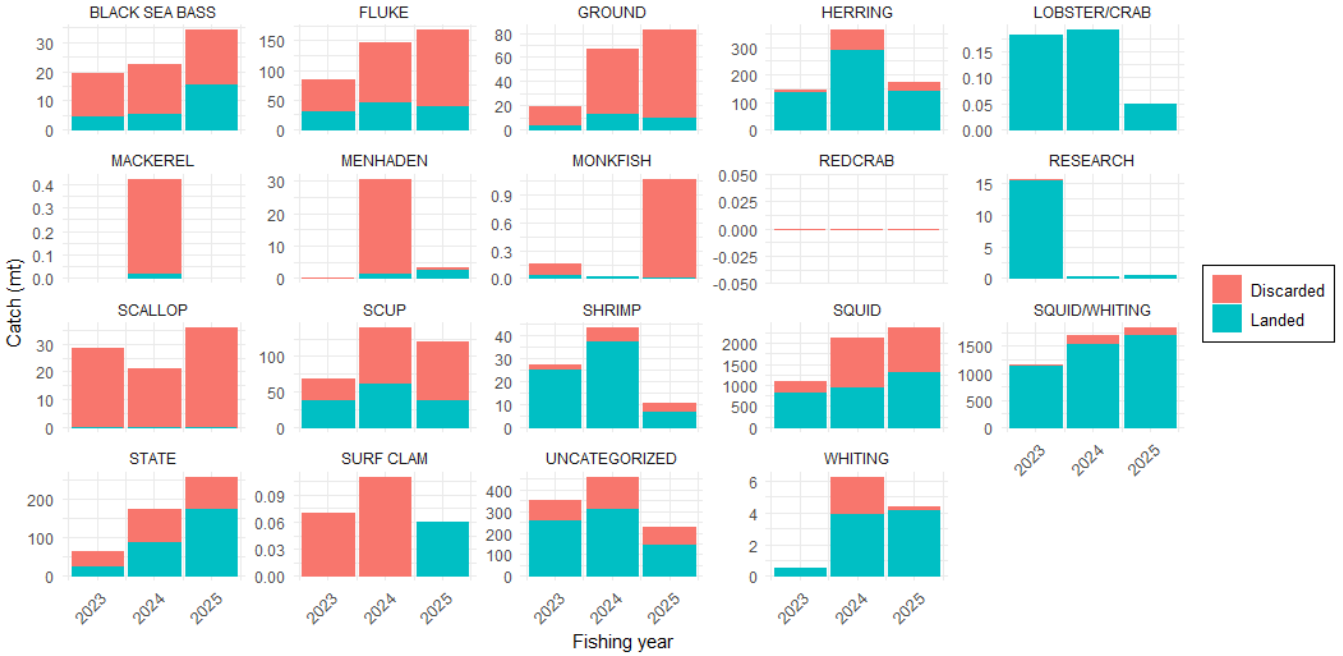
# 3.9 Southern whiting catch summary for FY 2025

- Catch was 28 percent of the ACL, so overfishing did not occur and accountability measure changes are unnecessary. Utilization increased from 8% of the ACL in 2023 and 16% of the ACL in 2024.
- Discards were 33 percent of total catch however, a significant increase from 18% in 2024.

| Disposition | Jurisdiction | Catch (lbs) | Catch (mt) 19,142 mt ACL | Percent of ACL | Percent of catch | Trips | Permits | Catch per trip (lbs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Landed | Federal | 7,456,603 | 3,382.3 | 17.7% | 63.7% | 4,398 | 926.0 | 1,695.5 |
| Landed | Research | 1,084 | 0.5 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6 | 3.0 | 180.7 |
| Landed | State | 402,376 | 182.5 | 1.0% | 3.4% | 1,300 | 52.0 | 309.5 |
| Discarded | Federal | 3,843,464 | 1,743.3 | 9.1% | 32.8% | 30,250 | 3,384.0 | 127.1 |
| **Total** | **All** | **11,703,527** | **5,308.6** | **28.0%** | **100.0%** | **35,954** | **4,365.0** | **325.5** |

### 3.10 Southern whiting catches

- GARFO should investigate how so much landings are assigned to the ‘uncategorized’ and ‘state’ fishery group in CAMS. The ‘state’ fishery group is categorized as vessels without a federal fishing permit while fishing in state waters.
- Most catch is retained and landed, particularly in the whiting, herring, squid, the squid/whiting, and the uncategorized fishery groups. Discards increased as a proportion of catch in the fluke, groundfish, and scallop fishery groups.
- State catches increased about five-fold, compared to FY 2023.
- There have been significant increase of southern whiting discarding in the squid fishery.




Change in southern whiting catch by fishery group

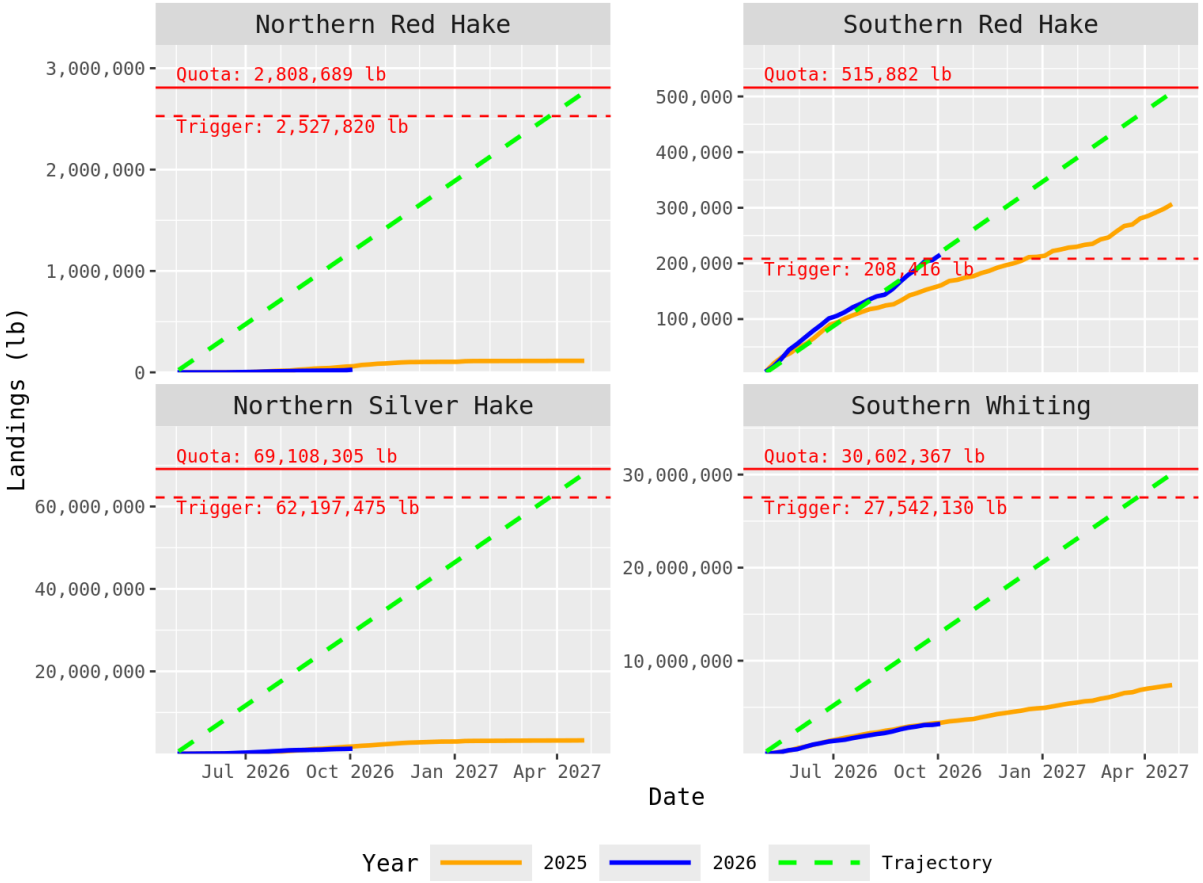
## 3.11 Utilization, 2012-2025




Trend in specifications, catch, and utilization by stock

### 3.12 2026 Landings monitoring - TAL trigger

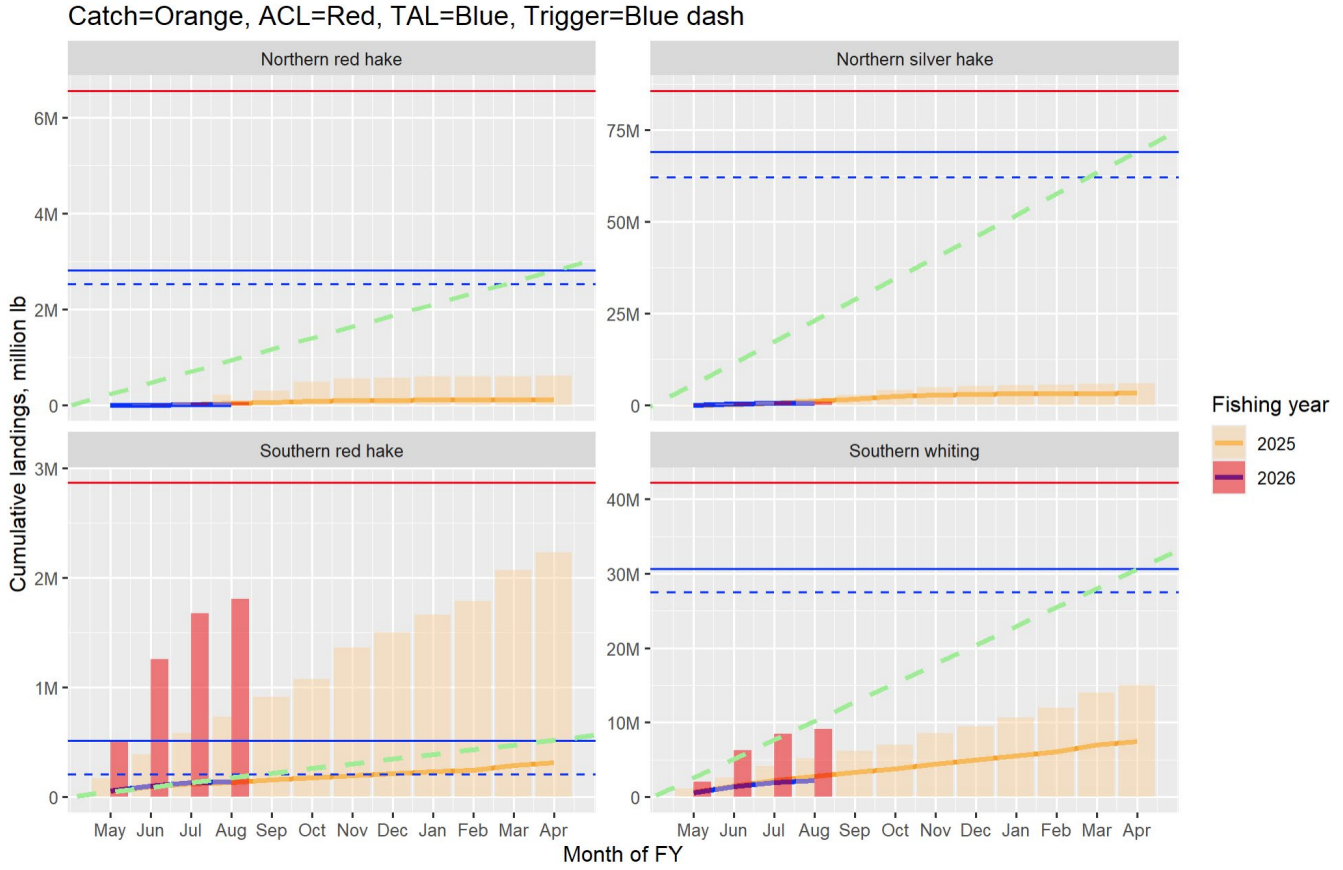
- YTD landings are running about the same as they were in fishing year 2025
- Except southern red hake landings are tailing off and remain below the TAL trigger.
- Southern red hake landings are not tailing off as they did in the prior year and are approaching the TAL trigger, potentially on track to reach the quota




Current year quota plot

## 3.12 2026 Catch monitoring – 2026 vs 2025

- Note the higher southern red hake catch estimates through August.



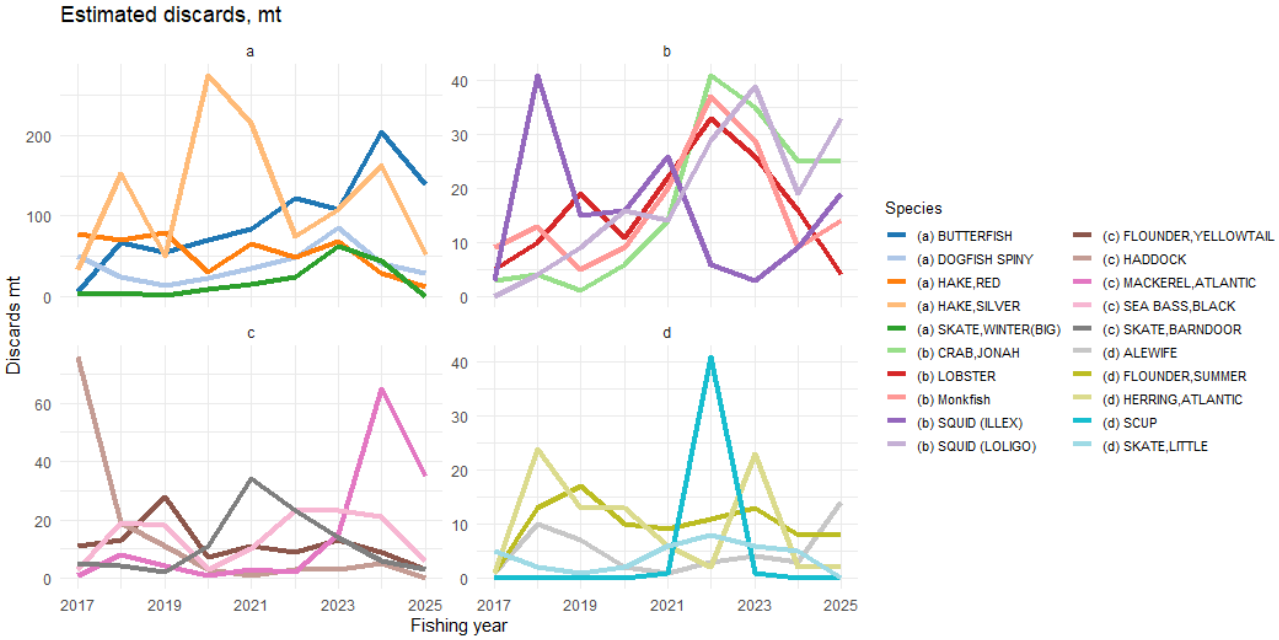

Current year catch plot

### 3.13 Finfish bycatch in the fishery

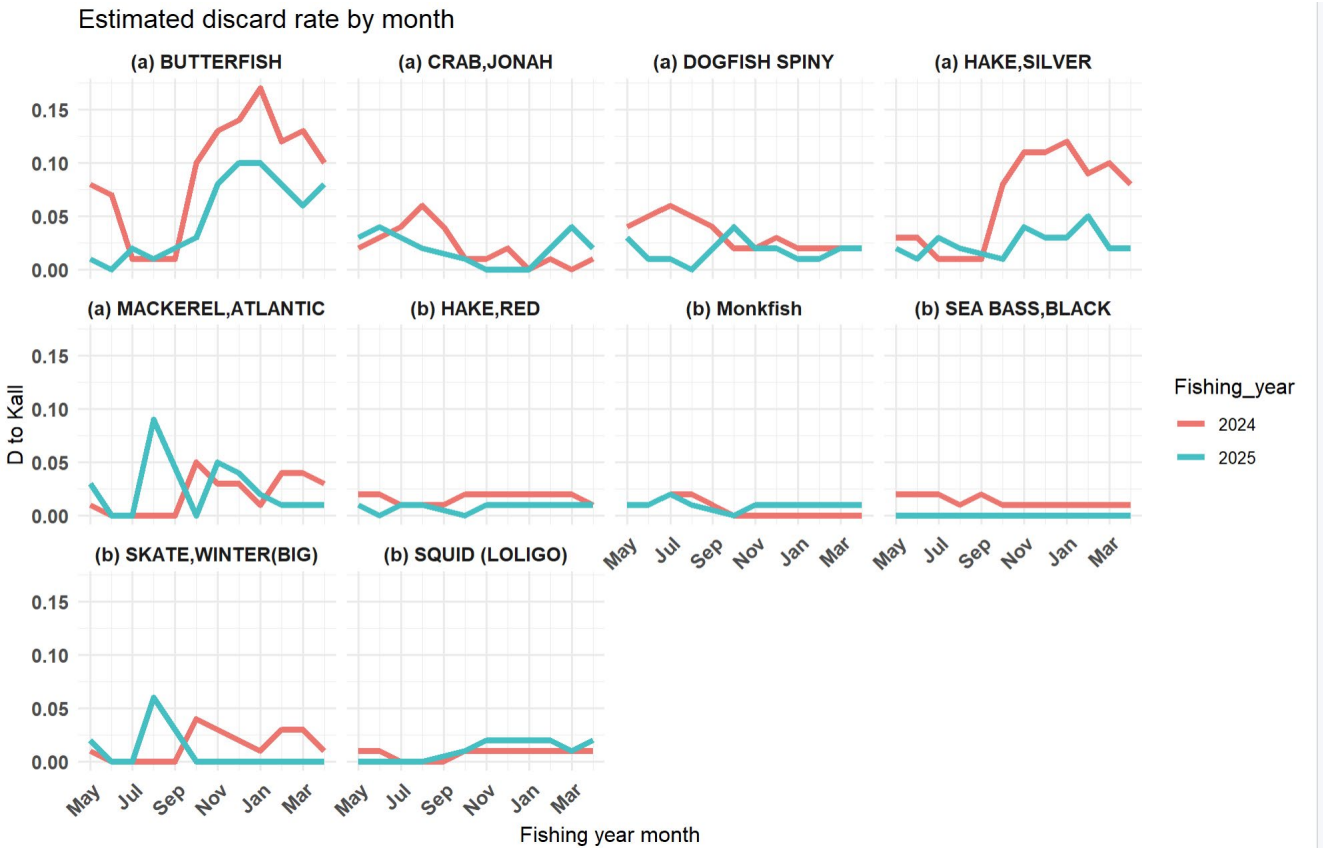
- Trends in most common finfish bycatch
- Trips landing > 2000 lb whiting OR 400 lb red hake

### 3.13.1 Northern management area bycatch

- Top species by weight in FY 2025: Butterfish, spiny dogfish, red hake, silver hake, and winter skate
- Top species by weight in FY 2024: Haddock, silver hake, winter skate, spiny dogfish, red hake
- ‘Angler’ = ‘Monkfish’



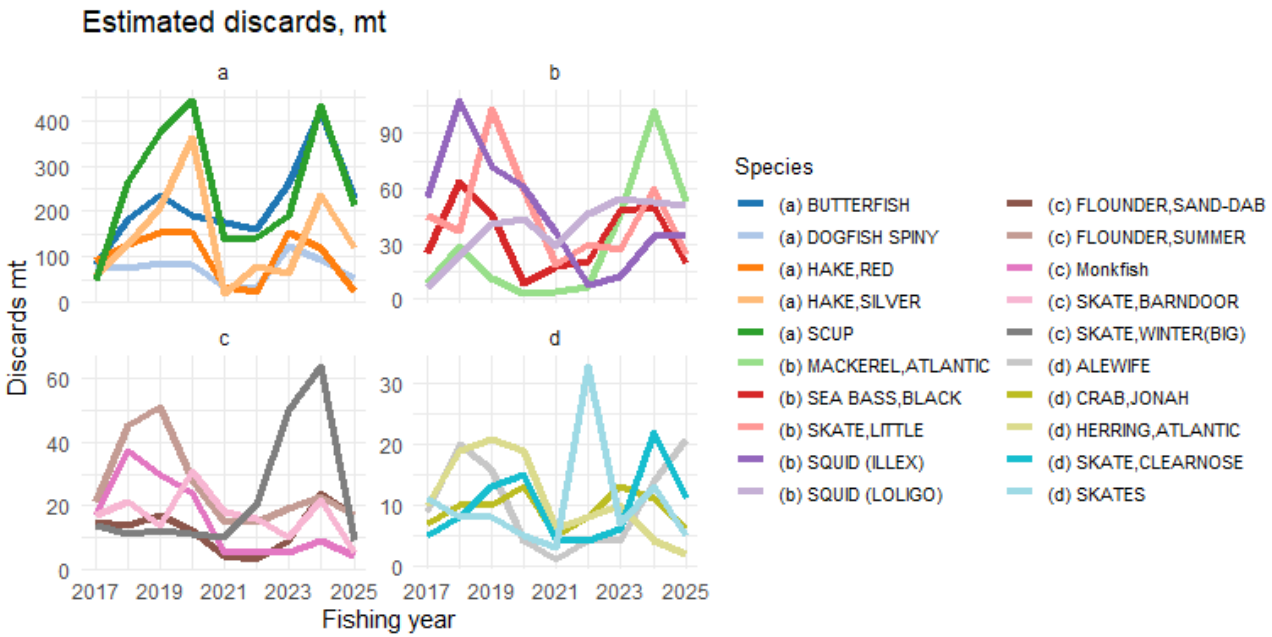

Top 20 finfish estimated discards by fishing year, northern management area, grouped by total weight



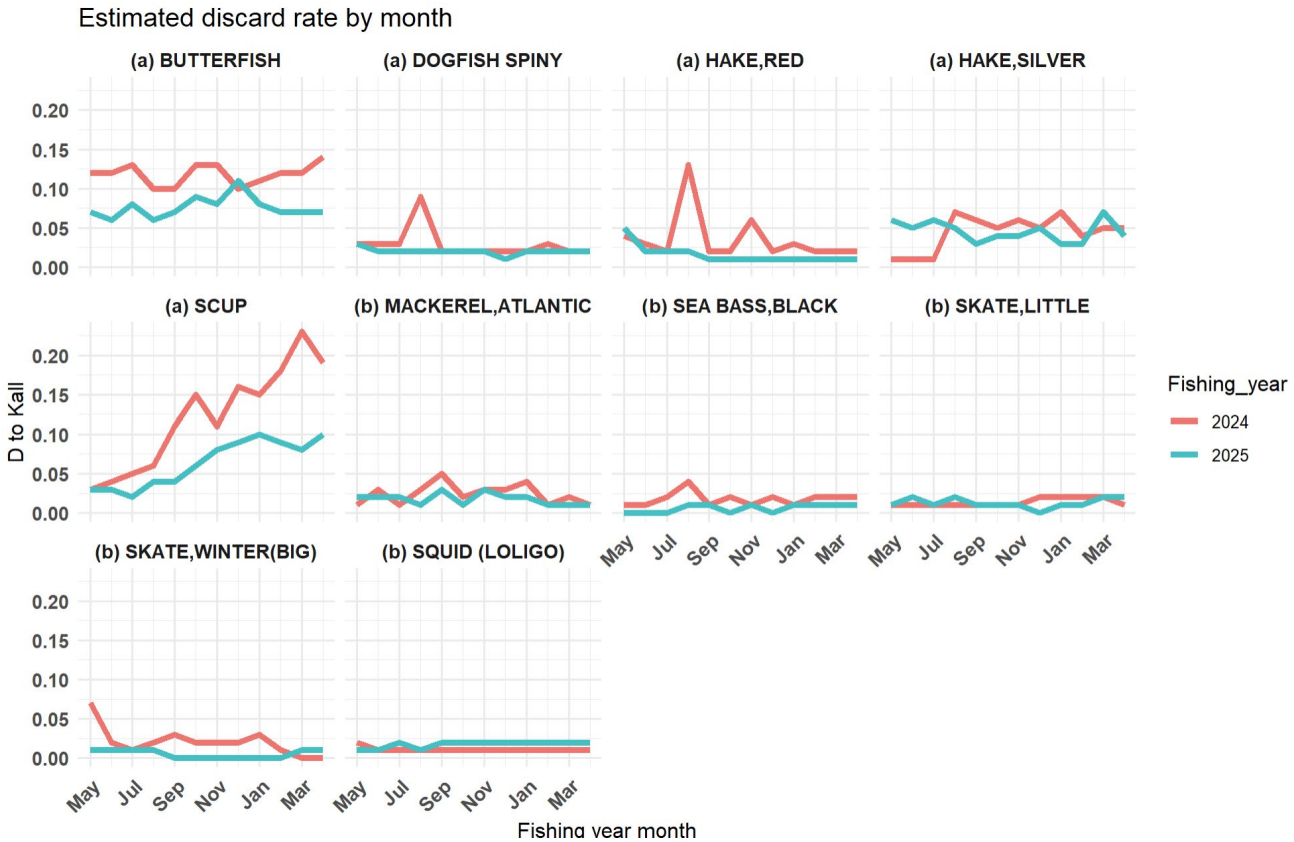

Seasonal discard rate, northern management area

### 3.13.2 Southern management area bycatch

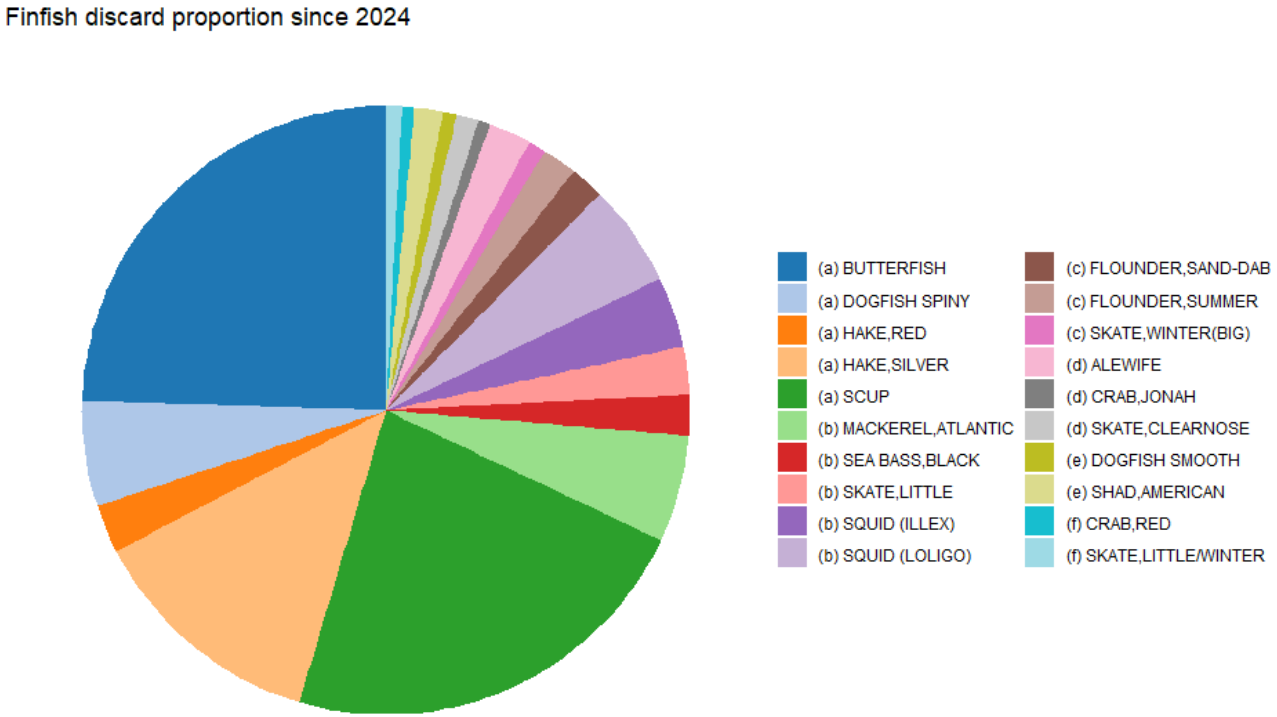
- Top species by weight in FY 2025: Butterfish, spiny dogfish, red hake, silver hake, and scup
- Top species by weight in FY 2024: Atlantic herring, butterfish, silver hake, red hake, spiny dogfish




Top 20 finfish estimated discards by fishing year, southern management area, grouped by total weight



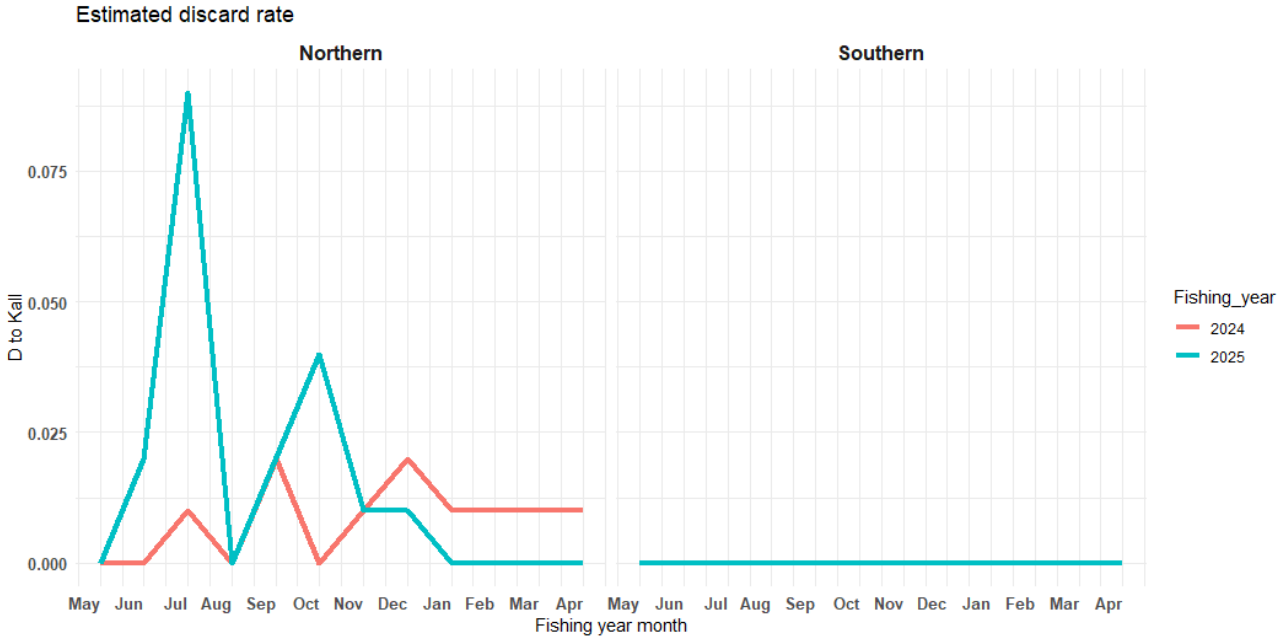

Seasonal discard rate, southern management area




Top 20 finfish discards by weight since 2024, all areas

### 3.13.3 Large-mesh multispecies bycatch

- Except for March 2018 in the northern area, multispecies bycatch has been consistently below 5% of landings on small-mesh trips.




Large-mesh groundfish discard rate by area

# 4. Risk Policy Factors

**Risk Policy Matrix**

- Stock status and uncertainty
  - Quota utilization
  - Recruitment and spawning biomass trend, compared to time series quartiles
- Assessment description, uncertainty and retrospective pattern
- Climate and Ecosystem Considerations
- Economic and Community Importance
  - Commercial fishery characteristics
  - Recreational fishery characteristics

**4.1 Stock status and uncertainty**

- Overfishing is not occurring on any of the four stocks
- Southern red hake is characterized as overfished and a rebuilding plan applies
- Northern silver hake and southern whiting utilization rates are low
- Assessments are index-based. Data update provided for establishing new catch specifications

## 4.2 Utilization

- Percent utilization of ACL and TAL (quota). All values in metric tonnes.
- Risk policy: Quota utilization below 80% in all years
- Southern red hake overfishing occurred in fishing year 2024

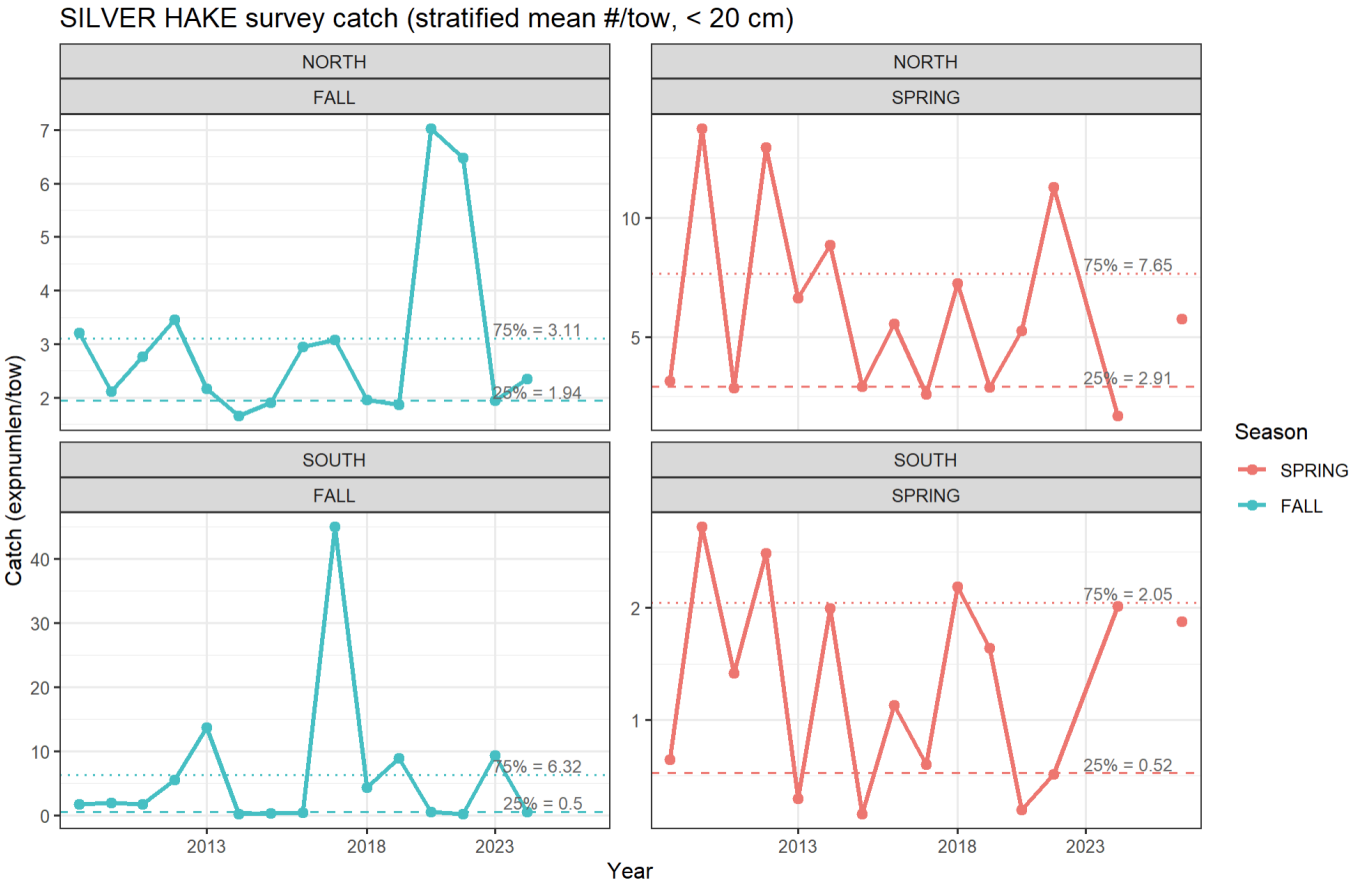
| Fishing year | stock | ACL | Catch | Percent of ACL | TAL | Landings | Percent of TAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2023 | Northern red hake | 2,973 | 750.8 | 25.3% | 1,274 | 74.1 | 5.8% |
| 2024 | Northern red hake | 2,973 | 451.2 | 15.2% | 1,274 | 49.3 | 3.9% |
| 2025 | Northern red hake | 2,973 | 209.5 | 7.0% | 1,274 | 51.9 | 4.1% |
| 2023 | Northern silver hake | 38,825 | 2,801.9 | 7.2% | 31,347 | 2,264.1 | 7.2% |
| 2024 | Northern silver hake | 38,825 | 2,107.5 | 5.4% | 31,347 | 1,634.4 | 5.2% |
| 2025 | Northern silver hake | 38,825 | 1,688.1 | 4.3% | 31,347 | 1,484.6 | 4.7% |
| 2023 | Southern red hake | 1,301 | 1,218.4 | 93.7% | 234 | 156.9 | 67.1% |
| 2024 | Southern red hake | 1,301 | 1,612.2 | 123.9% | 234 | 181.7 | 77.6% |
| 2025 | Southern red hake | 1,301 | 635.2 | 48.8% | 234 | 153.4 | 65.6% |
| 2023 | Southern whiting | 19,142 | 3,073.0 | 16.1% | 13,881 | 2,484.6 | 17.9% |
| 2024 | Southern whiting | 19,142 | 5,300.9 | 27.7% | 13,881 | 3,325.7 | 24.0% |
| 2025 | Southern whiting | 19,142 | 5,308.6 | 27.7% | 13,881 | 3,565.3 | 25.7% |

## 4.3 Climate and Ecosystem Considerations

- Climate vulnerability of managed stocks
- Productivity: fish condition, recruitment trends, and spawning biomass of managed stocks

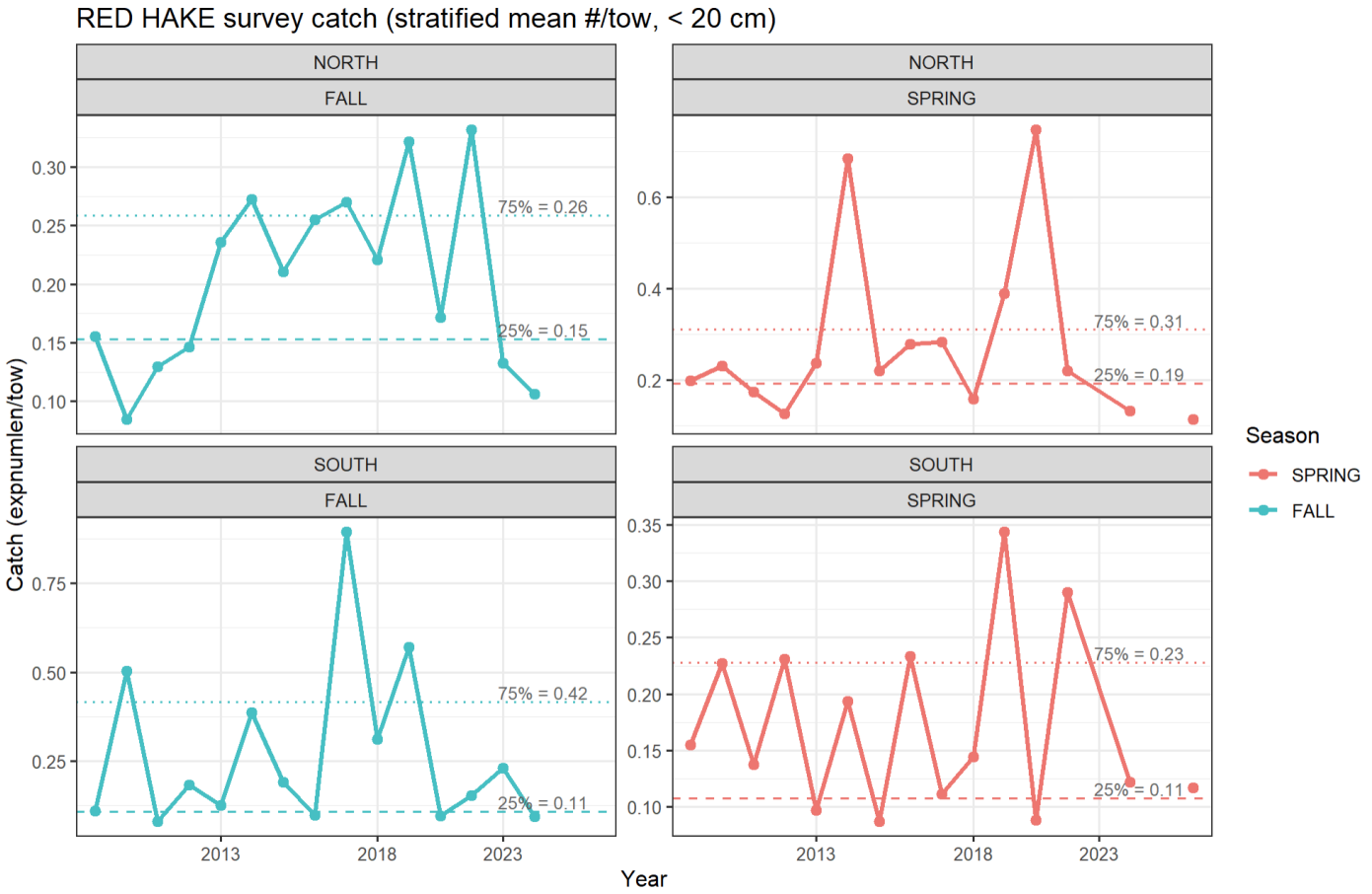
## 4.4 Silver hake recruitment

- Recent silver hake recruitment levels compared to time series quartiles (excluding last five years).
- Recent five-year trend: – **Northern silver hake** recruitment above the 75th percentile for 3 of 10 observations in both fall and spring; below the 25th percentile 1 of 10 observations
- **Southern silver hake** recruitment above 75th percentile for 1 of 10 observations in both fall and spring; below the 25th percentile 1 of 10 observations



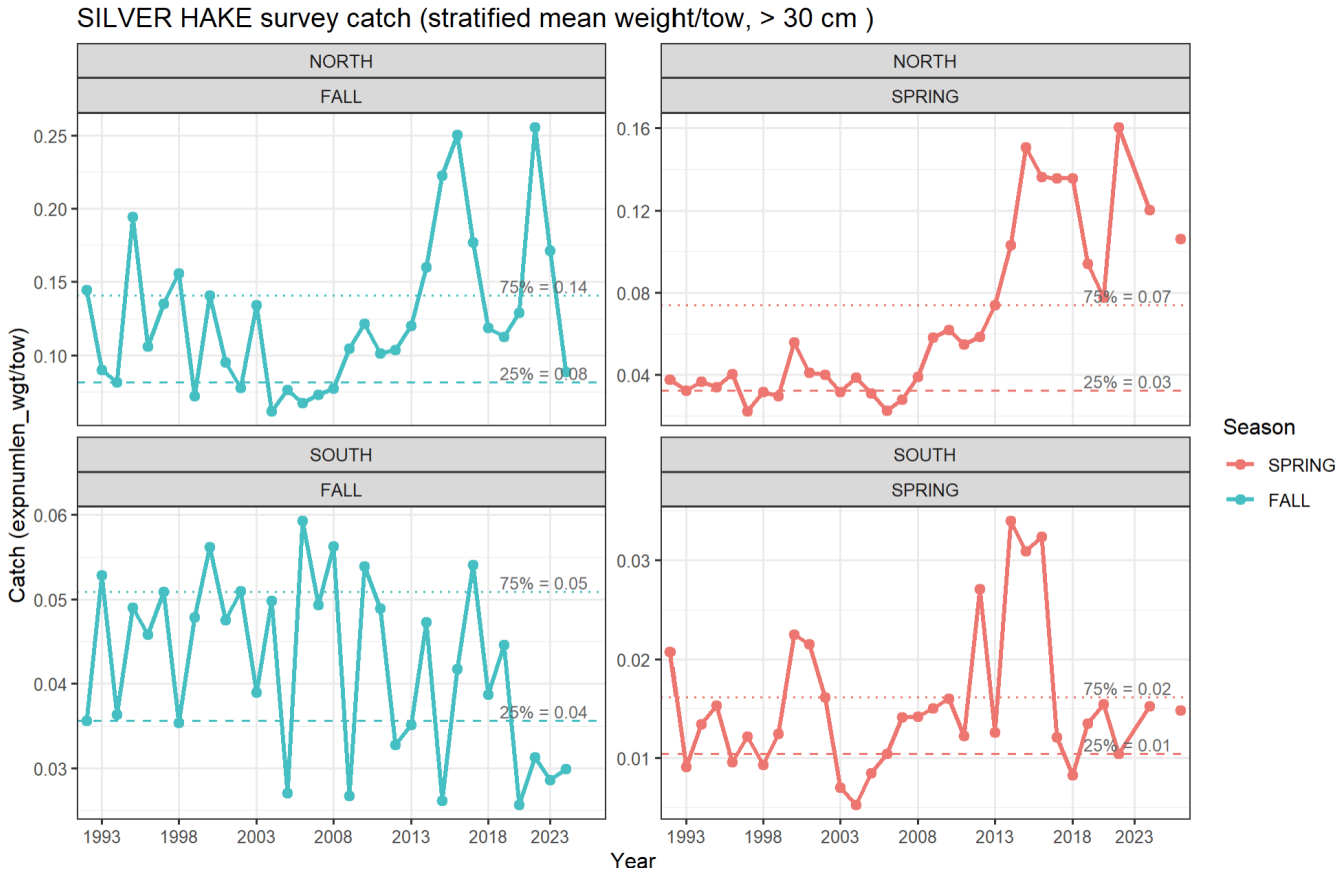
## 4.5 Red hake recruitment

- Recent red hake recruitment levels compared to time series quartiles (excluding last five years).
- Recent five-year trend: – **Northern red hake** recruitment above the 75th percentile for 4 of 10 observations in both fall and spring; below the 25$^{th}$ percentile 3 of 10 observations
- **Southern red hake** recruitment above 75th percentile for3 of 10 observations in both fall and spring; below the 25$^{th}$ percentile 3 of 10 observations



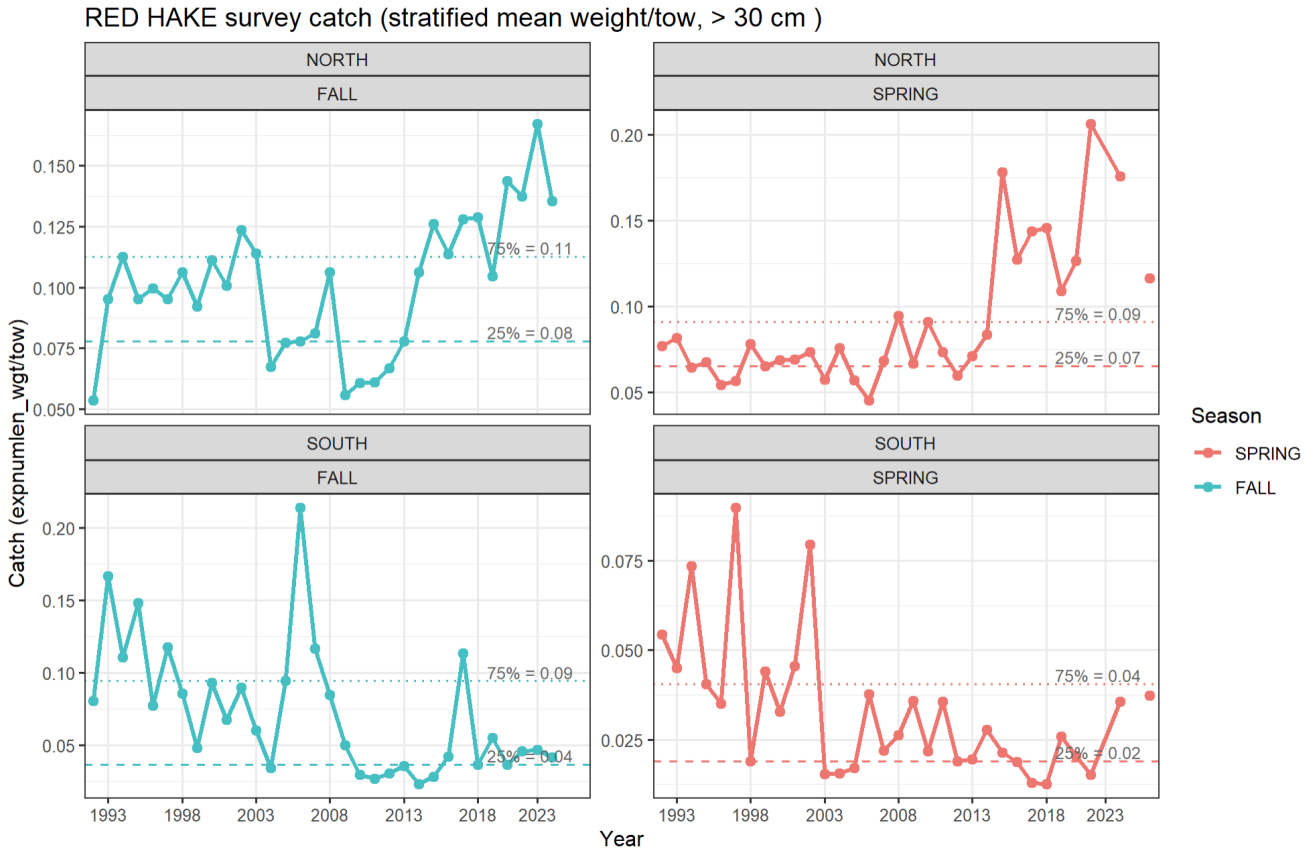
## 4.6 Silver hake spawning biomass

- Recent silver hake spawning biomass levels compared to time series quartiles (excluding last five years), adjusted for RV Bigelow years and converted to biomass based on accepted survey length/weight parameters..
- Recent five-year trend: – **Northern silver hake** spawning biomass above the 75th percentile for 7 of 10- observations in fall and spring and below the 25th percentile for 0 of 10 observations.
- **Southern silver hake** spawning biomass above the 75th percentile for 0 of 10 observations in fall and spring and below the 25th percentile for5 of 10 observations.



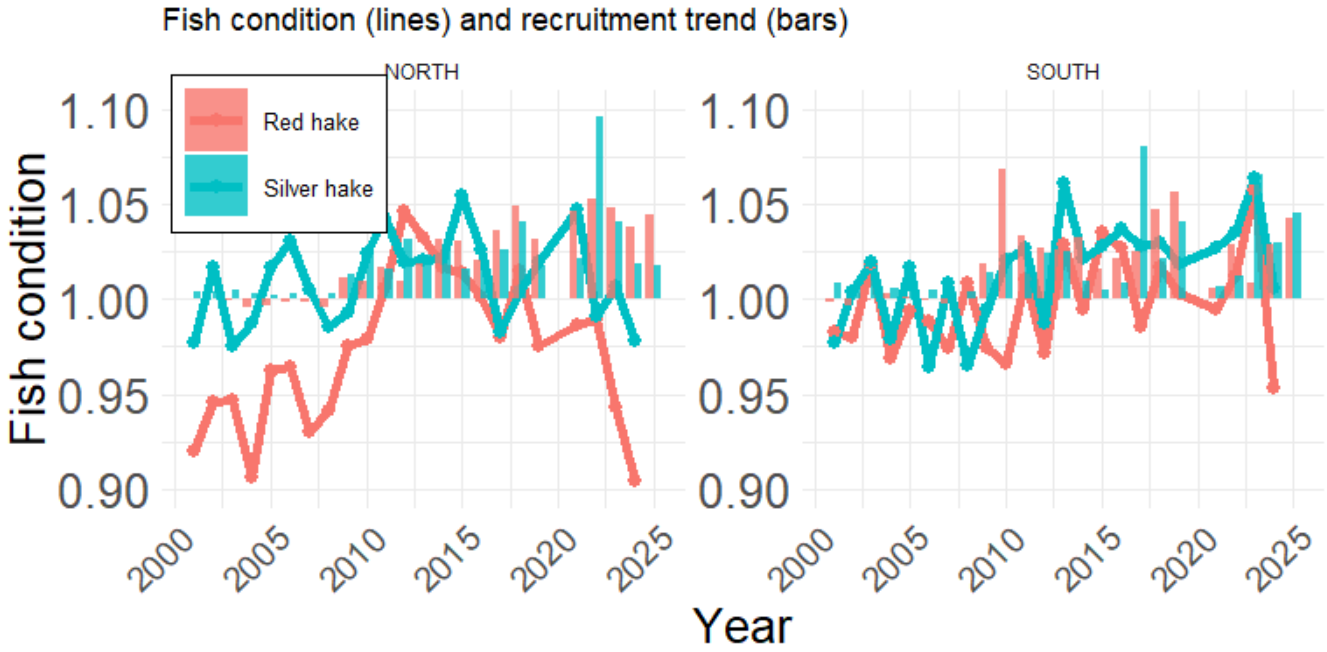
## 4.7 Red hake spawning biomass

- Recent red hake spawning biomass levels compared to time series quartiles (excluding last five years), adjusted for RV Bigelow years and converted to biomass based on accepted survey length/weight parameters.
- Recent five-year trend: – **Northern red hake** spawning biomass above the 75th percentile for 9 of 10 observations in fall and spring and below the 25th percentile for 0 of 10 observations.
- **Southern red hake** spawning biomass above the 75th percentile for 0 of 10 observations in fall and spring and below the 25th percentile for 3 of 10 observations.

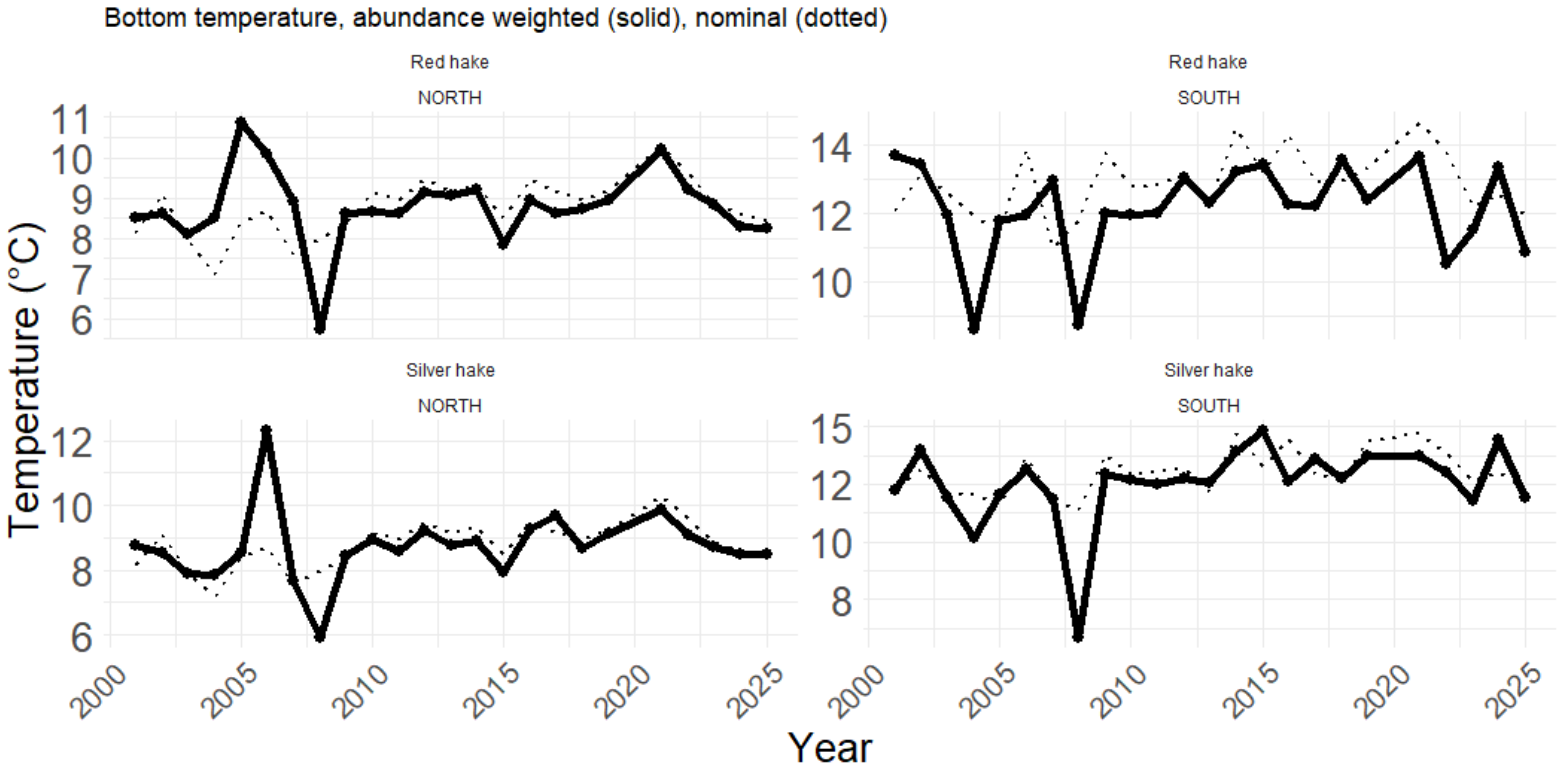


**4.8 Fish Condition**

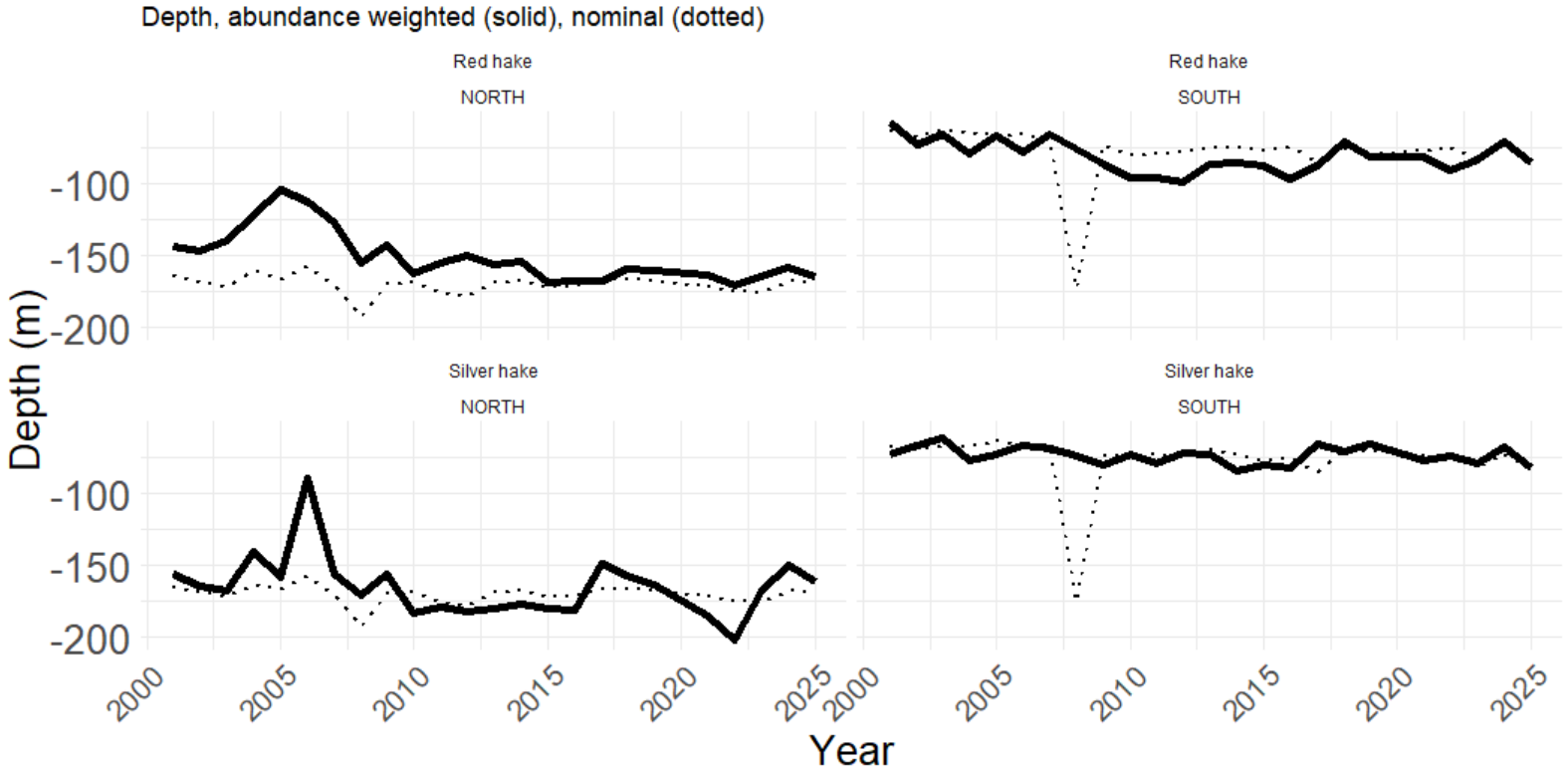
- Fish condition varies, sometimes related to prey abundance but also may vary due to predator abundance
- Fish condition may also vary due to changes in distribution and the effects of temperature on digestion




Fish condition by stock




Temperature weighted by abundance by stock




Depth weighted by abundance by stock

## 4.9 Economic and Community Importance

### 4.9.1 Commercial fishery characteristics

- Economic and effort trends - Small-mesh multispecies
  - Landings and revenue by species
  - Trips and active vessels
  - Prices by species
  - Trips and vessels by pounds landed group
  - Landings and price by pounds landed group
  - Finfish price trends
  - Fishery reliance
    - Percent of annual revenue derived by vessels from the fishery
  - Catch per effective area swept

- Landings for all stocks have declined. More stable in recent years, but were lowest in FY 2025
- Most silver hake landings were caught in the southern area, the proportion shifts to the north in recent years.
- Red hake landings come primarily from the southern area, but have been significantly declining in both stock areas.

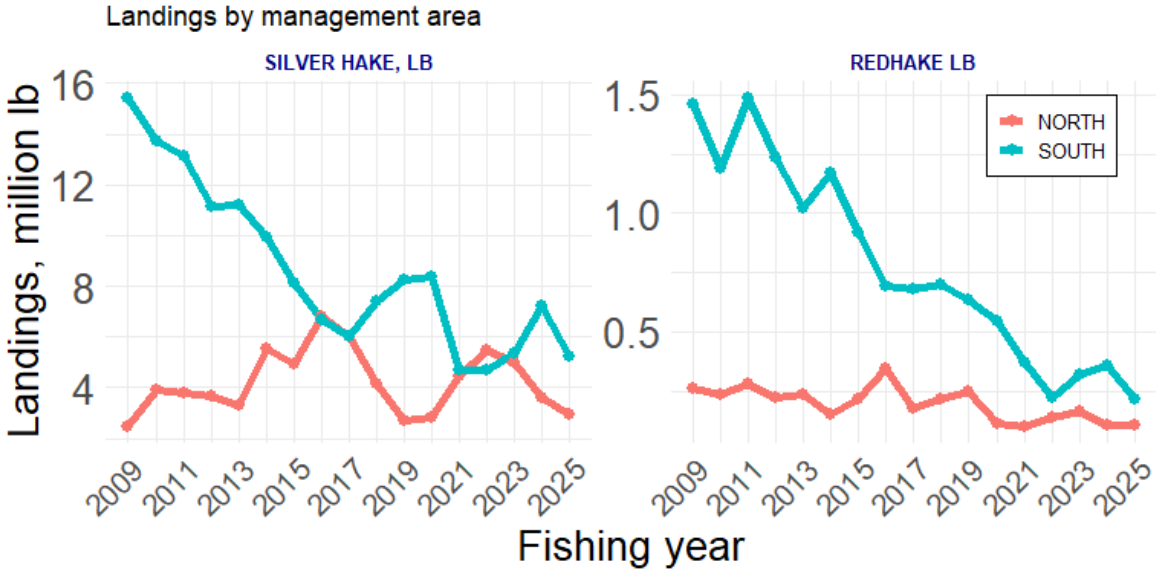



Figure 1: Landings by management area (Silver hake LEFT, Red hake RIGHT)

- Continuous declines in silver and red hake revenues
- Compared to 2012-2015, a greater proportion of silver hake revenue comes from northern area landings.
- 80% or more of red hake revenue comes from southern area landings

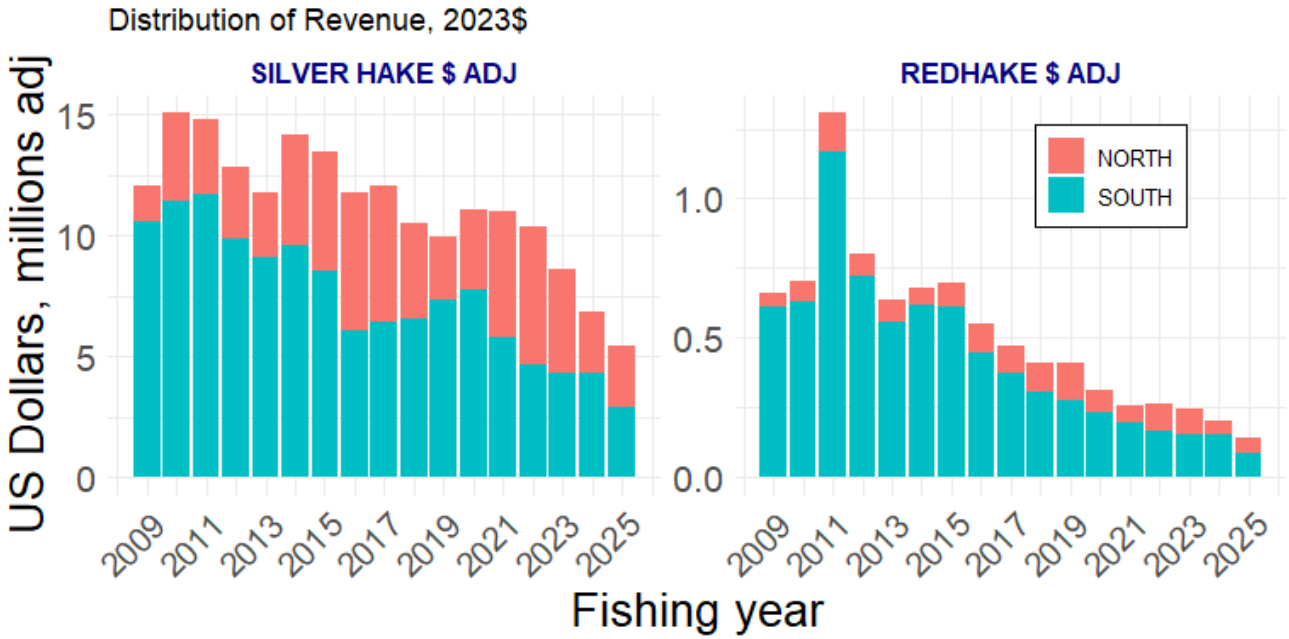



Figure 2: Revenue trends by species (Silver hake LEFT, Red hake RIGHT)

**Alternative risk policy plot with quartiles.**

The PDT uses the quartiles for the last five years for risk-factor scoring. The quartile values are calculated from the plotted time series, excluding the last five years.

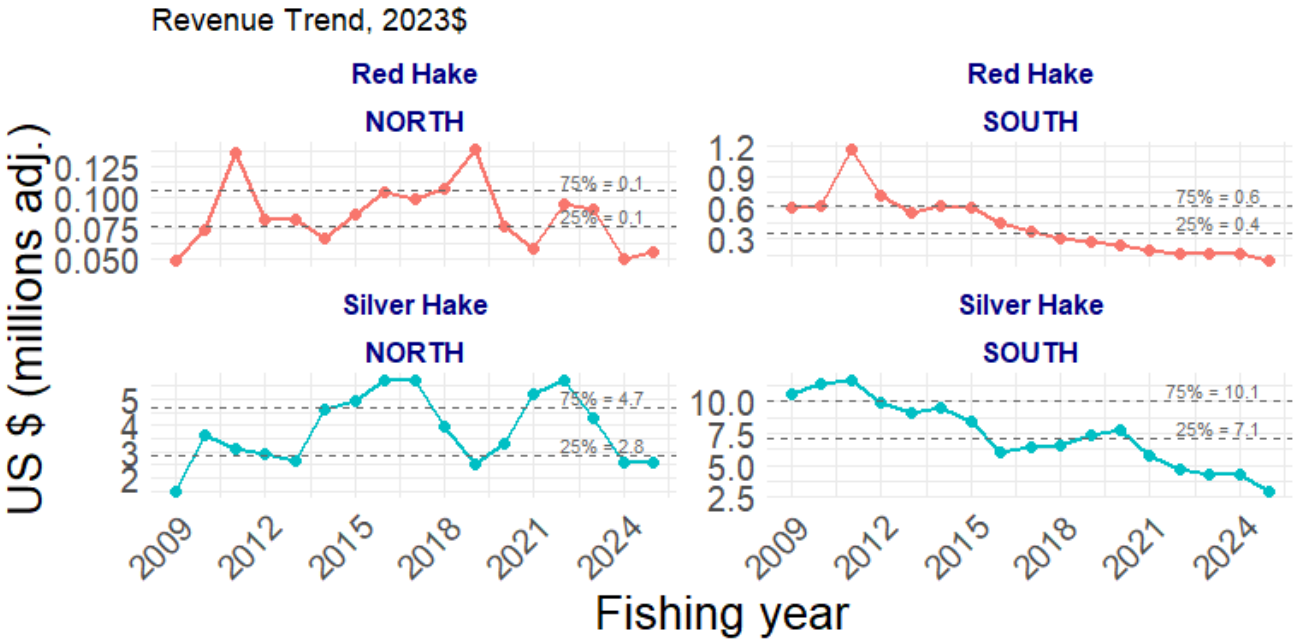



Figure 3: Revenue trends by species (Silver hake LEFT, Red hake RIGHT)

- Considerable decline in trips and vessels targeting whiting since 2020, possibly related to relative squid abundance and price for vessels that are in both fisheries.
- Higher targeted fishing effort in the northern area since 2020, possibly vessels that targeted whiting in the southern area now fishing more often on Cultivator Shoals.
- Southern area fleet size has dropped particularly since 2023

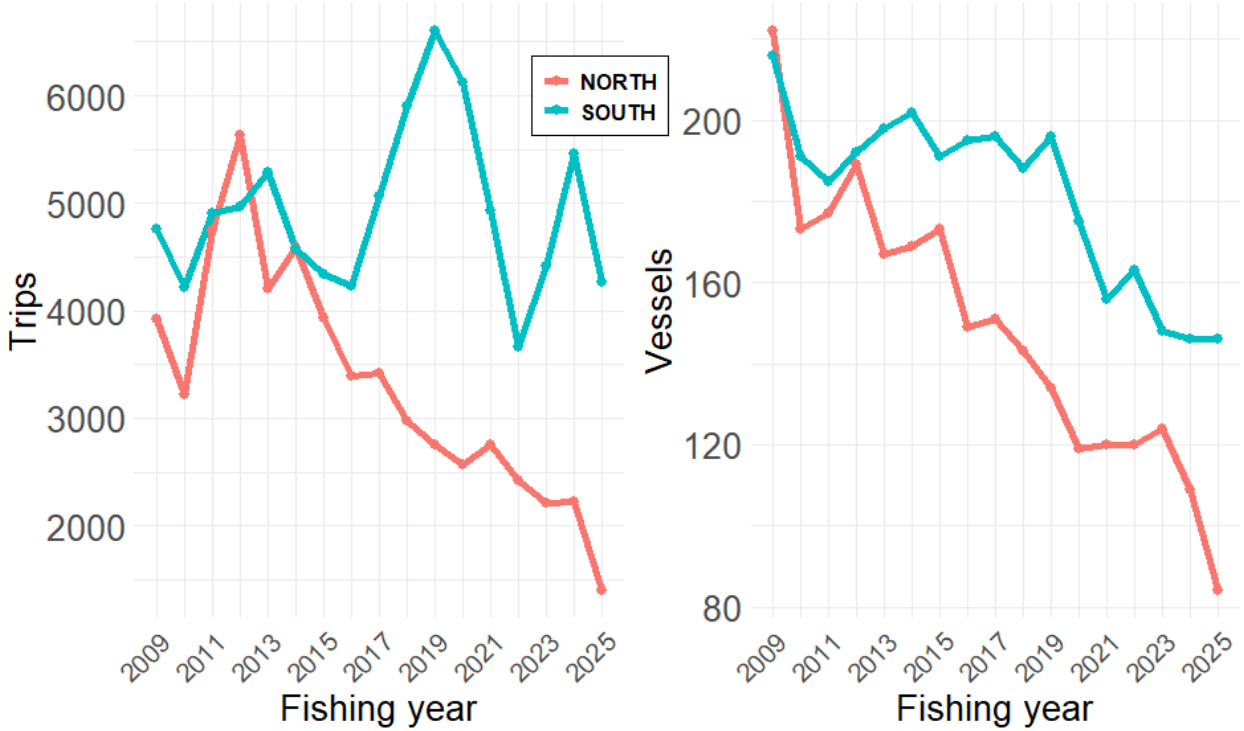



Figure 4: Trends in small-mesh multispecies trips > 2000 lb silver hake or > 400 lb red hake

Considerable decline in whiting and red hake price since 2021.

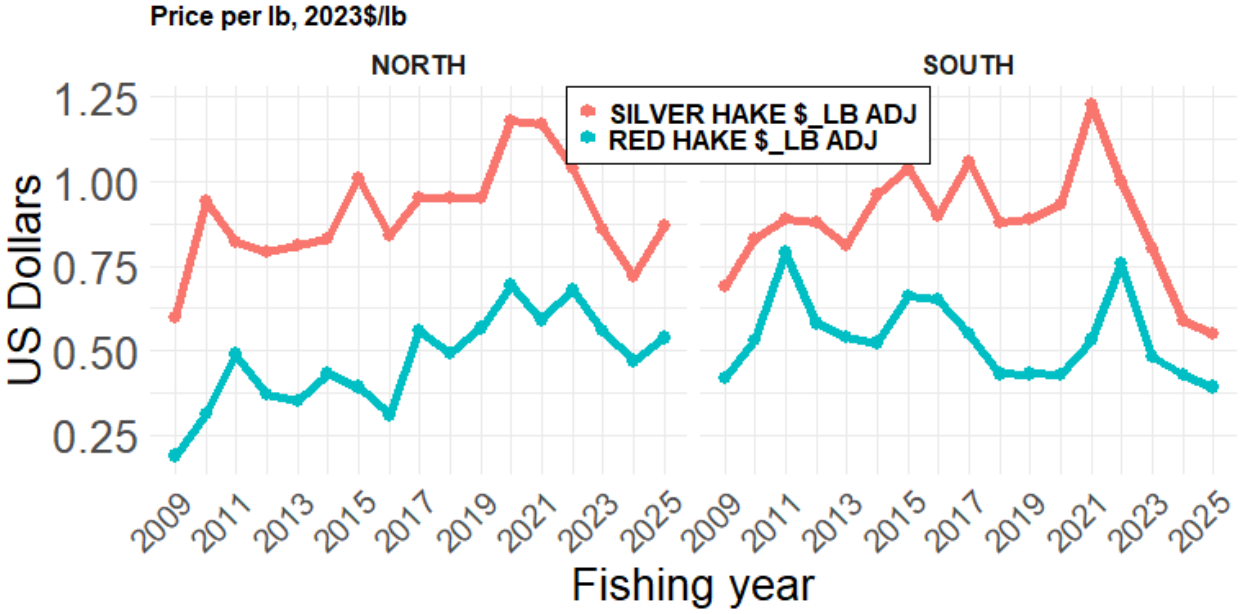



Figure 5: Small-mesh multispecies price trends

**4.10 Number of trips and vessels binned by total landings of silver hake**

- Orange = Trips landing between 10,000 and 15,000 lb silver hake
- Green = Trips landing between 15,000 and 30,000 lb silver hake
- Blue = Trips landing more than than 30,000 lb silver hake
- Steady decline of trips and vessels targeting whiting in the southern area
- Recent spike in trips and vessels landing between 10,000 and 15,000 lb whiting in 2024 (related to recent increase in possession limit?).
- Trips landings 15,000 to 30,000 lb (the possession limit) predominate in the northern area

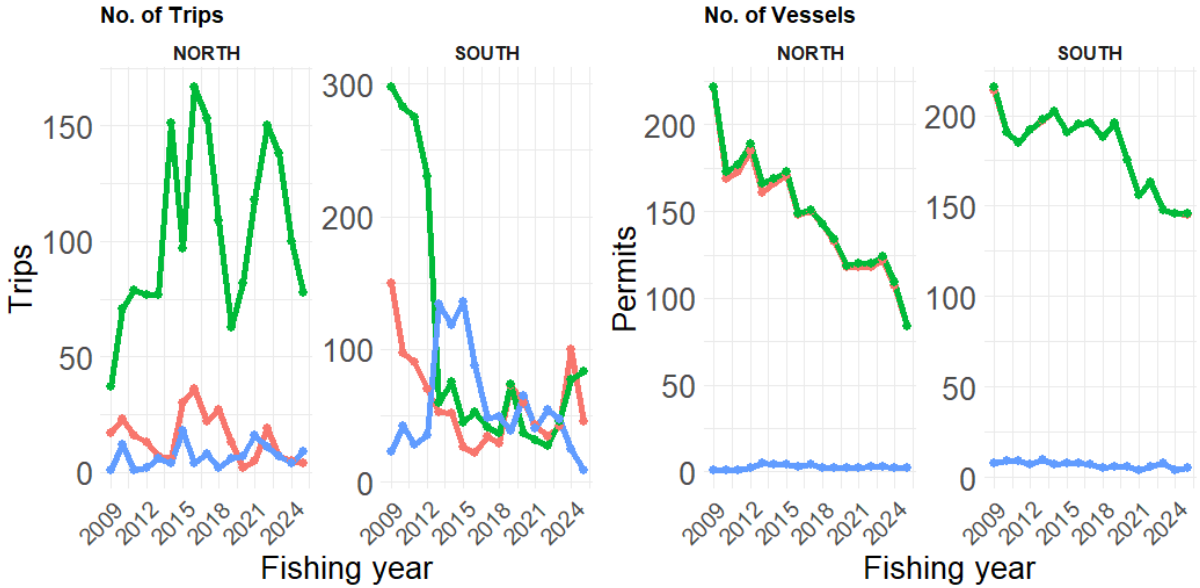



Figure 6: Trends in small-mesh multispecies trips by trip category, North (left) & South (right)

- General decline in southern whiting landings for all trip categories.
- Slight increase in trips landing < 10,000 lb.
- Northern area landings varies between 2 and 4 million lb for trips landing between 15,000 and 30,000 lb, which contributes to the majority of the silver hake landings in this area.

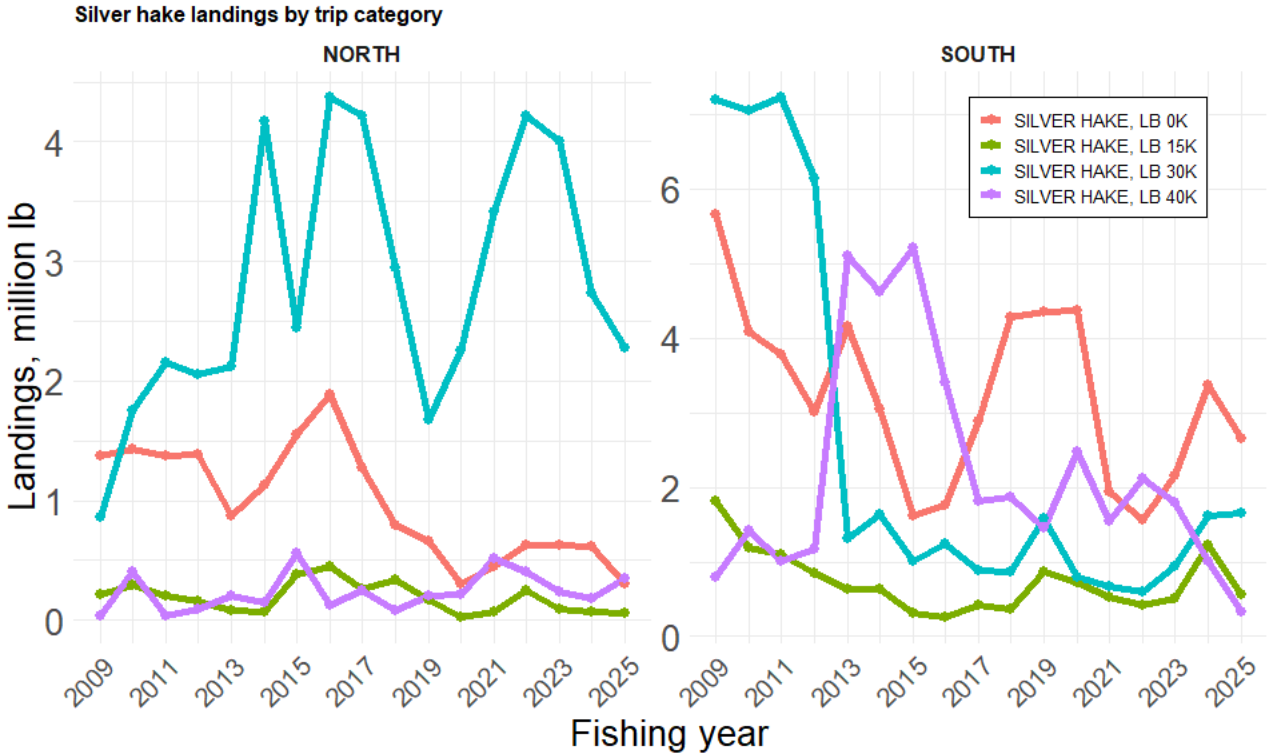



Figure 7: Trends in silver hake landings by trip category: Trip categories: 0 to 10k, 10-15k, 15-30k and > 30k lb silver hake landings.

Considerable declines in whiting prices since 2021 for all trips classified by landings category in both management areas.

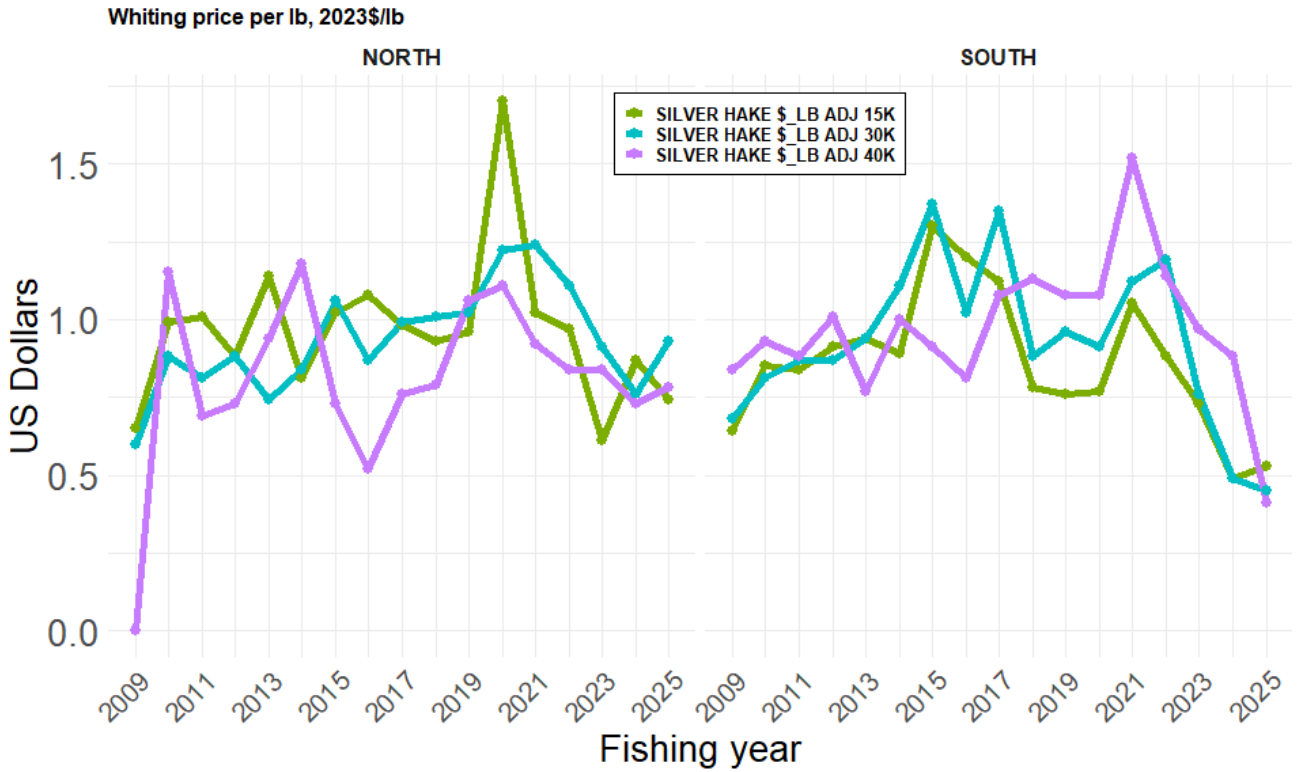
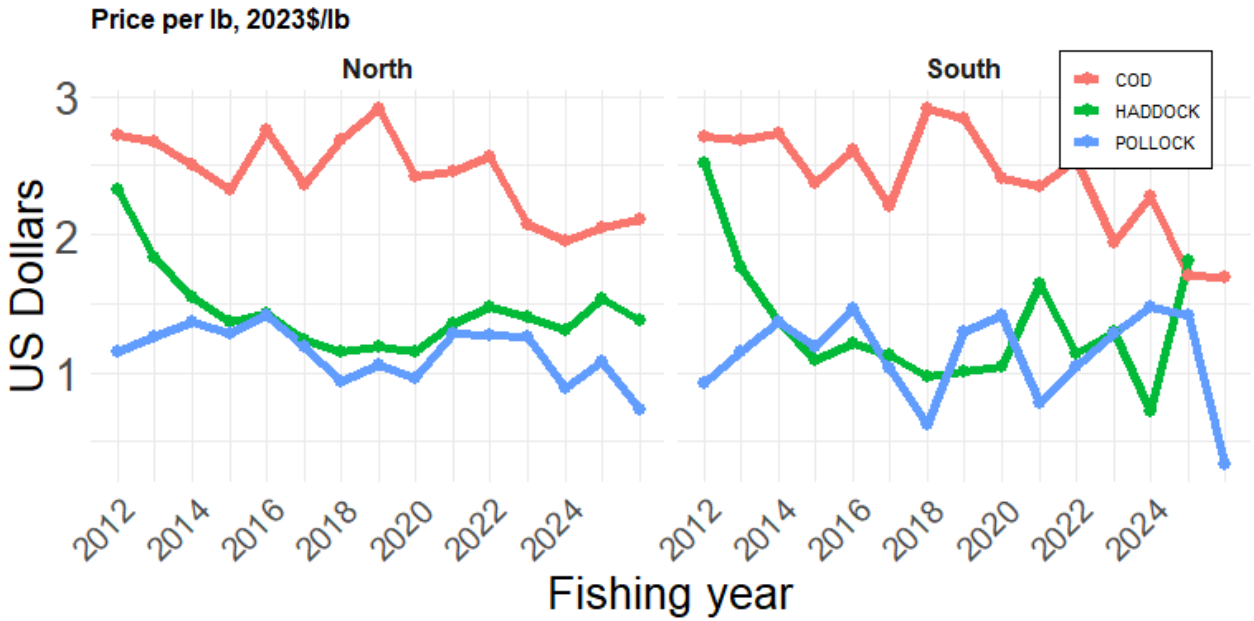



Figure 8: Trends in silver hake price by trip category: Trip categories: 10-15k, 15-30k and > 30k lb. silver hake landings

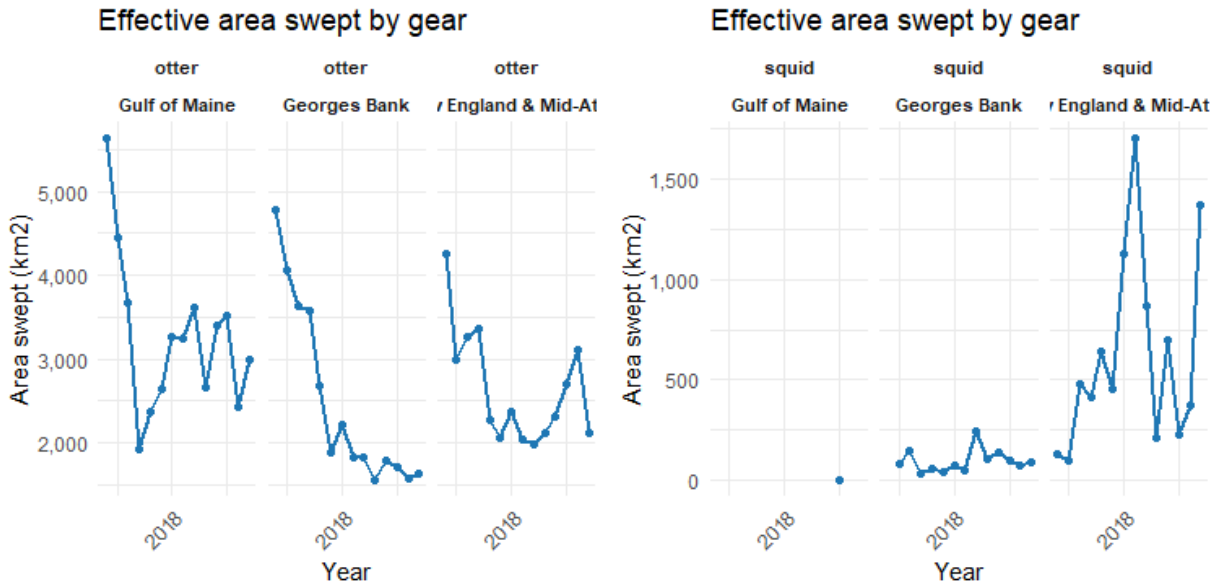
- General decline in commonly landed NER finfish prices in both regions, with a significant decline in cod price since 2018 from the southern area.
- Steady decline in monkfish and haddock prices in both regions.
- Slight cod price increase for 2025 in the northern area; 2025 haddock price spike in the south (possibly low amount of landings)




Trends in fish prices by management area. ‘ANGLER’ = Monkfish

**4.11 Effective area swept by gear and area**

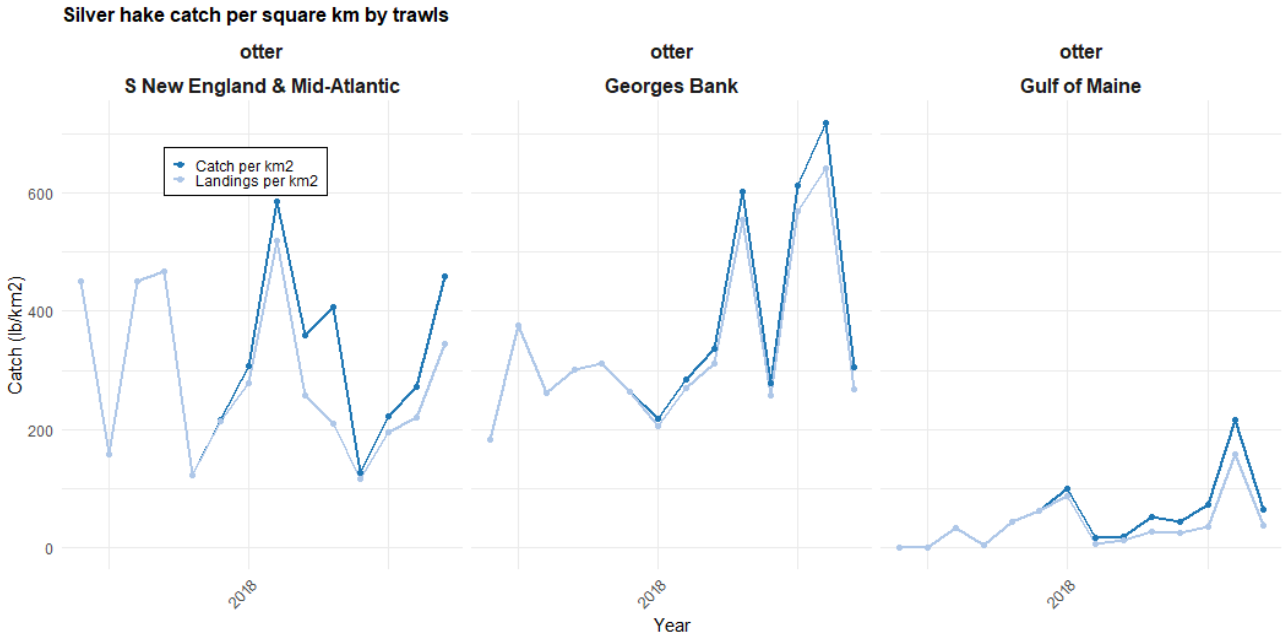
- Total area swept trends by region for otter trawls and squid trawls
- Otter trawl effort declines
- Squid trawl effort variable in Southern New England




Otter and squid trawl area swept by area

**4.12 Silver hake catch (2017 to present) or Kept (pre-2017) per km2 effective swept area by otter trawls**

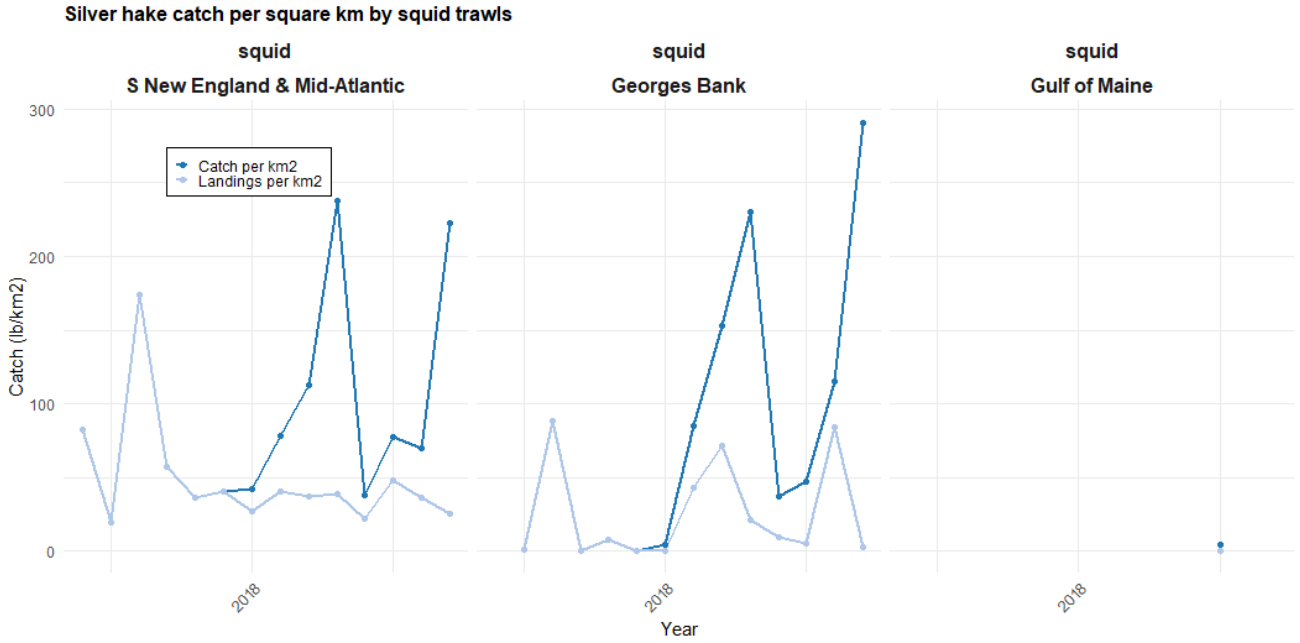
- Increasing commercial CPUE increasing in the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank, but declining in Southern New England
- Evidence of distribution change




Otter trawl silver hake catch per square km

**4.13 Silver hake catch (2017 to present) or Kept (pre-2017) per km2 effective swept area by squid trawls**

- Minimal squid trawl fishing in the Gulf of Maine
- Greater proportion of silver hake discarded. Considerable increase in 2025 discards.
- Declining CPUE in Southern New England
- Evidence of distribution change




Squid trawl silver hake catch per square km

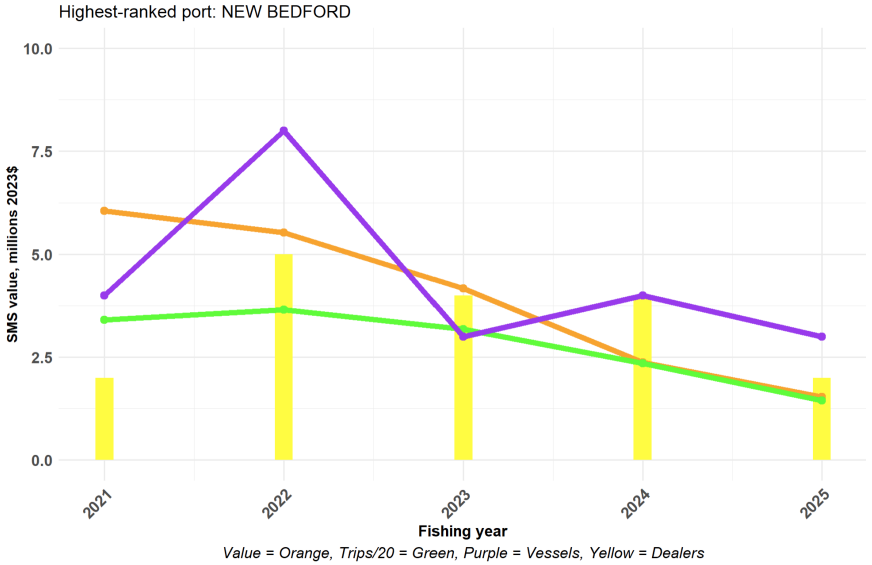
# 3.15. **Top ports by SMS fishery value, FY 2021-2025**

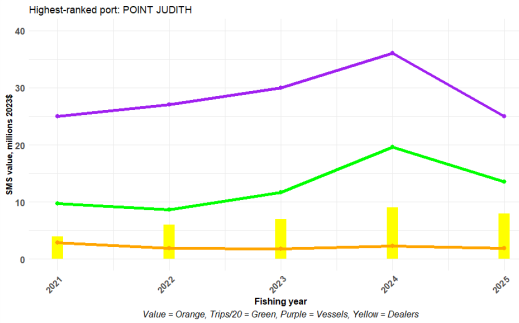
Values represent five-year averages

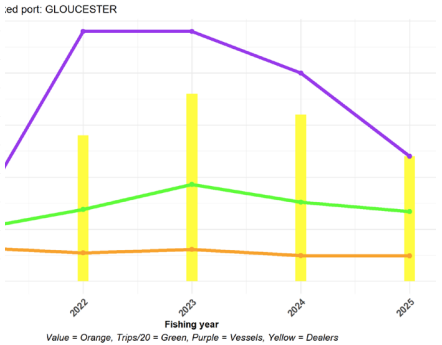
| State | Port | Trips | Days absent | Crew days | Vessels | Ave length | Age | SMS Value (2023$) | Discards | SMS_Discards | Dealers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MA | NEW BEDFORD | 112 | 399 | 600 | 4 | 82 | 43 | 3,929,277 | 927,967 | 280,311 | 3 |
| RI | POINT JUDITH | 379 | 703 | 1,371 | 29 | 68 | 45 | 2,149,037 | 1,523,841 | 234,437 | 7 |
| MA | GLOUCESTER | 71 | 517 | 685 | 9 | 78 | 29 | 1,392,412 | 1,416,109 | 396,231 | 7 |
| NY | MONTAUK | 50 | 420 | 359 | 9 | 69 | 40 | 790,746 | 563,407 | 73,722 | 8 |
| MA | BOSTON | 11 | 45 | 43 | 3 | 67 | 32 |  | 71,282 | 6,521 | <3 |
| CT | NEW LONDON | 7 | 105 | 114 | <3 | 47 | 30 |  | 188,098 | 66,858 | <3 |
| NY | HAMPTON BAYS | 7 | 9 | 18 | 3 | 55 | 27 | 59,477 | 20,806 | 628 | 3 |
| CT | EAST HAVEN | 5 | 24 | 24 | <3 | 69 | 40 |  | 40,700 | 9,214 | <3 |

# Commercial fishery activity

- **5.1 Relative SMS activity trends in top 3 ports**
- NEW BEDFORD
- POINT JUDITH
- GLOUCESTER

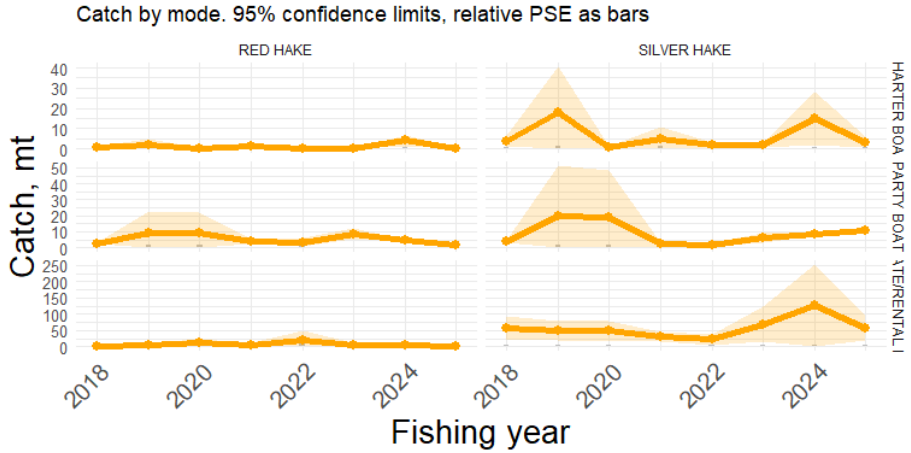


**5.2 MRIP Estimated catch by region and mode, MRIP query tool**

North Atlantic region




Mid-Atlantic region

