CCA Comments to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission on Addendum II Commercial Striped Bass Harvest Rollover Proposal

On Nov. 2 the Atlantic States Marine Fishery Commission will vote on a proposal to allow half the commercial striped bass quota that states fail to catch in one year to be added to the next year. We strongly disagree with this plan to kill more striped bass. Striped bass fishing has declined in recent years, and it is already costing jobs in the guiding and tackle communities where the value of striped bass far exceeds commercial landings. We base our concerns on the following:

* While recreational fishing effort coastwide has steadily increased, the number of striped bass encountered by recreational fishermen has decreased by over 50% since 2006 (See Figure 1). While recreational catch and releases are not exact indicators of abundance, they do represent an encounter rate for anglers. Thus we believe this represents a strong case that the underlying striped bass population is declining

* The total N.C. recreational catch and releases in the Atlantic, literally a measure of the number of fish encountered by anglers, has decreased by well over 60% since 2004. Similarly, the number of striped bass caught and released in Maine has declined dramatically. It appears that that Atlantic striped bass may be undergoing a range contraction, which may indicate a decrease in population or change in oceanographic conditions;

* Myco bacteria infects over half the striped bass in Chesapeake Bay (the cradle of the Atlantic striped bass population) and it is almost always fatal;

* The Fish and Wildlife Services Winter Tagging Cruise, conducted annually in the Atlantic Ocean off N.C., caught the fewest striped bass ever;

* North Carolina has not caught its commercial quota in several years;

While each of these facts by themselves are not compelling, when viewed together they present a strong case for concern about the health of the coastal population of striped bass

CCA has consistently maintained that current fishing levels have prevented the complete restoration of the striped bass population and prevented the age structure of the striped bass population from filling out.

In fact in a report to Congress, by the Secretary of Commerce and Secretary of the Interior, from as long ago as 2001, reached this very conclusion:

However, fishing mortality rates higher than 0.25 will result in a reduced proportion of older fish (age 10 and older) in the population and a decline in spawning stock

biomass. As fishing mortality is increased, the age structure of the spawning stock is progressively shifted towards younger spawning fish. Research on striped bass and other species indicate that spawning of smaller and younger fish is significantly less successful than older, more mature individuals. At fishing mortality rates greater than F=0.25, there is a heightened risk of reduced recruitment in the stock due to greater reliance on younger spawners.

We should not be trying to increase harvest of this valuable resource; we should be expressing concern about the long-term health and viability of this important fish.

Striped bass have been the crown jewel of fishery management successes for the ASMFC. It appears now that some of that luster is fading and precautionary management is now called for to prevent any further dimunition of this important resource. We should be looking for ways to conserve striped bass, not kill more.

I urge you to vote against this proposed quota roll-over at the upcoming meeting, and instead look for ways to conserve striped bass and restore it to its previous level of abundance.

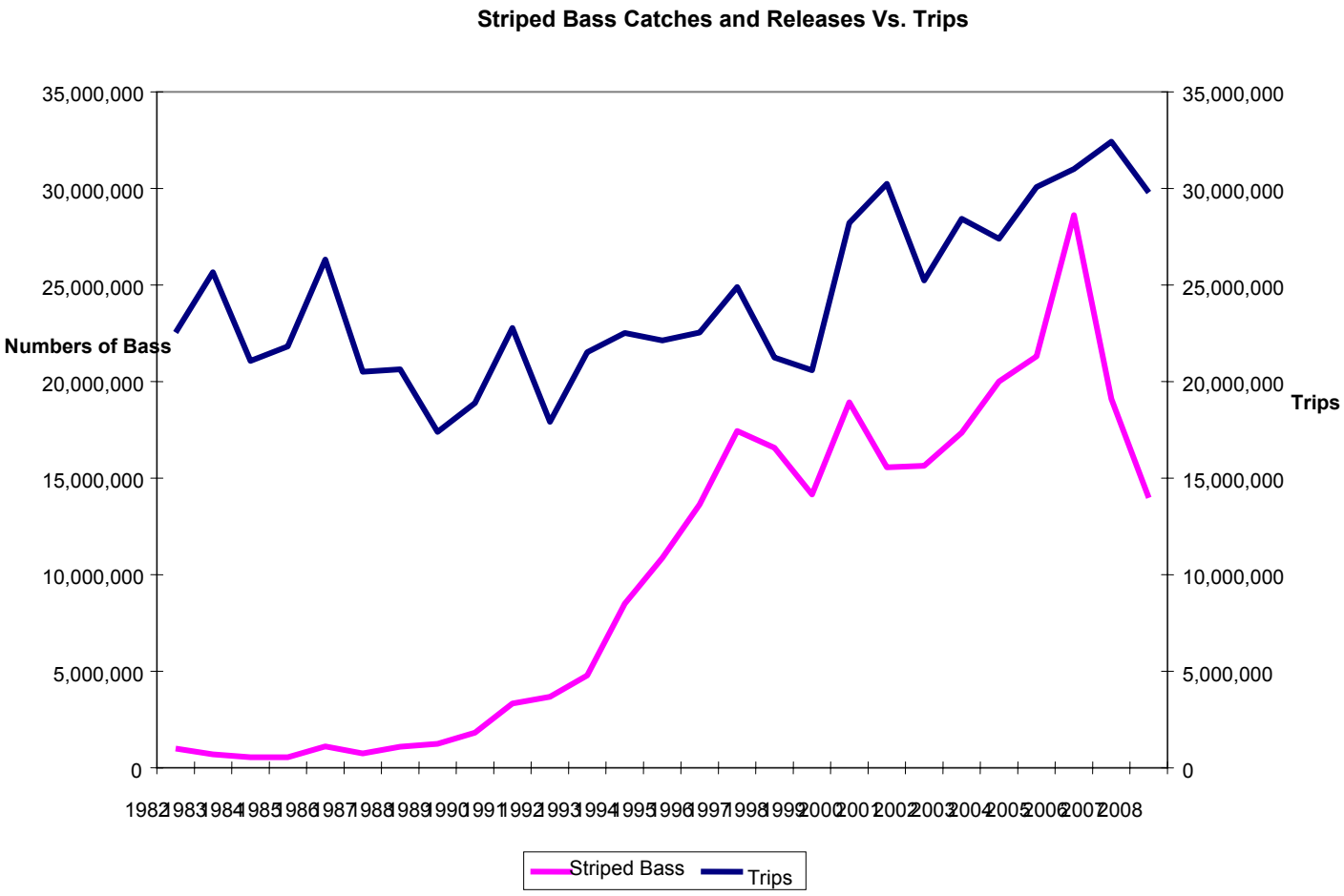

Figure 1. The total number of striped bass encountered by Atlantic recreational fishermen and the total number of Mid- and North Atlantic angler trips.