



Council Report

An update published by the New England Fishery Management Council – April 2009

The Council Report summarizes major issues voted on or discussed at each regularly scheduled meeting of the NEFMC. The Council met most recently on April 7-9, 2009 in Mystic, CT.

At its April meeting, the Council addressed management issues related to skates, sea scallops, herring, groundfish, interspecies and monkfish, and also received a report from its SSC.

NOAA Administrator Pays a Visit

Dr. Lubchenco Addresses the Council in Mystic

Attending the April Council meeting on short notice, NOAA's Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco explained the temporary rules that will govern the groundfish fishery for the next year, as the Council works to complete Amendment 16 to its Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. She termed the new interim rule one that will "build a solid bridge to a larger, long-term solution for managing the fishery through catch shares, which will help restore the ecosystem and the economic health of the fishing communities."

Dr. Lubchenco recognized the costs to the fishing industry during such a transition, and pledged to identify \$6 million dollars in agency funds that would support cooperative research efforts, assisting economically strapped fishermen while promoting innovative gear solutions, better fishing practices and enhanced data collection. She added that an additional \$10 million dollars would be dedicated to improved data reporting and fishery monitoring, infrastructure that is in need of an upgrade to support the sector management programs the Council is proposing in Amendment 16.

Skates

Amendment 3 Finalized

By a 15-1 vote, the Council approved Amendment 3 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Northeast Skate Complex. The Secretary of Commerce will receive, for final approval, a package which includes an annual catch limit framework with accountability measures to account for any excess catch, or overages, and prevent overfishing. Other measures include a three-season quota allocation, a 20,000 pound whole skate possession limit for what is chiefly a Southern New England skate bait fishery, and a 1,900 pound skate wing (4,313 pounds whole) possession limit for vessels that target skates for commercial seafood. For both fisheries, the Council approved triggers that would automatically reduce the possession limits to an incidental limit of 500 pounds of skate wings (1,135 pounds whole) once landings reach 80-90% of the amount allocated to each fishery. Use of a Multispecies Category B day-at-sea to target skates will be prohibited.

The new measures are intended to reduce landings and the total catch of skate, and promote increases in biomass to rebuild smooth and thorny skates, which are overfished. They also address the concern that winter skate could become overfished if high catches continue. Discards will be controlled through measures in other fishery management plans that allocate days-at-sea, which all vessels must use when targeting skates.

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The amendment also would replace the existing baseline review process with a more comprehensive annual review, biennial Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report, and biennial specification process. During the annual review process, the Skate Plan Development Team will evaluate the most recent data available on skate stock status, fishing levels, landings, discards and new or pending regulations for other fisheries that may affect the catch of skates. The Council could, in the future, revise management measures in the skate or other plans as appropriate, based on the PDT's findings and recommendations.

The skate amendment is expected to be in place by January 2010. The Council recommended that the trip limits become effective when the amendment is implemented and the quotas and accountability measures take effect at the start of the fishing year on May 1, 2010.

Sea Scallops

Alternatives Added to Amendment 15/Framework 21 Moves Forward

The Council addressed a range of scallop-related issues at the April meeting. Its members approved the final range of alternatives to be analyzed in Amendment 15 to the Scallop Plan, initiated Framework Adjustment 21 and approved 2010 priorities for the scallop research set-aside (RSA) program.

The Council already approved a majority of the Amendment 15 alternatives at its February Council meeting, although several additional issues were addressed in Mystic. These included specifications for accountability measures (AMs), potential fishery spillover into other fisheries as a result of leasing scallop days-at-sea and/or access area trips and a limited access general category (LAGC) permit - splitting alternative. Members adopted several motions related to the AM alternatives for different components of the fishery, as well as several alternatives for a sub-annual catch of yellowtail flounder. Members also voted to omit alternatives that would limit fishing in other fisheries, but did leave in others that would allow a scallop vessel to transfer some or all quota to another LAGC vessel.

Framework 21 also was formally initiated. Scheduled to be implemented in March 2010, the action will include specifications for the 2010 scallop fishing year and comply with the first "reasonable and prudent measure" identified in the most recent Turtle Biological Opinion --- to limit scallop fishing effort in the Mid-Atlantic when turtles are expected to be present. Modifications to the observer program and adjustments to the access area program to reduce yellowtail flounder bycatch also may be addressed in Framework 21.

The Council reviewed the 2010 RSA priorities and supported elevating the bycatch and sea turtle research priorities as recommended by the Scallop Oversight Committee and Scallop Survey Advisory Panel. This year's RSA announcement is scheduled to be published in June 2009.

Herring

Higher Levels of Observer Coverage Called for on Herring Boats in Closed Area I

The Council received a brief update on the development of alternatives for inclusion in Amendment 4 to the Herring Fishery Management Plan, and, as scheduled, will review them in detail at the June 2009 Council meeting.
