

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

PRESS RELEASE



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Landings to be further reduced in 2007

During their meeting last week in Philadelphia to adopt 2007 fishery management measures, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass and Bluefish Boards (Board) heard concerns from Congressman Frank Pallone on behalf of himself, Congressman Jim Saxton and Senators Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez regarding the "possibility of a drastic cut in the summer flounder quota" and the resulting "impact to the local economy that would be devastating". Following his comments and those from numerous members of the public, for a second year in a row the Council and the Board recommended decreases in the total allowable landing levels (TAL) for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. Bluefish was the single bright spot as its quota was increased by nearly three million pounds.

The table below summarizes the recommended fishery management measures for 2007:

	Total Allowable Landings <i>(millions of pounds)</i>	Commercial Quota	Minimum Fish Size (TL)	Mesh Size	Recreational Harvest Limit	Research Set-Aside Quota <i>(in pounds)</i>
Summer Flounder*	19.90	11.94	14"	5.5"	7.96	up to 3%
Scup	16.00	12.30	9"	5.0"	3.70	up to 3%
Black Sea Bass	6.50	3.19	11"	4.5"	3.31	up to 3%
Bluefish	27.76	9.50	---	---	18.26	363,677

*The total allowable landings and associated quotas and harvest limits recommended for summer flounder reflect Council action only. The ASMFC will determine its summer flounder position during its annual meeting (October 22-26).

Based on the most recent National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Status of U.S. Fisheries Report, two of the above four stocks are classified as overfished (scup and black sea bass), but only one is experiencing overfishing (summer flounder).

When the Council took action last year for the 2006 fishing year it proposed reducing the 2005 TAL of 30.3 million pounds for summer flounder by 4.3 million pounds anticipating that the 14% reduction would allow for appropriate rebuilding. However, the ASFMC and NMFS adopted a TAL of 23.59 million pounds for 2006. Hence, if the Council's 19.9 million pound TAL recommendation is accepted by NMFS for 2007, it will effectively implement a reduction of over 34% in a two year period. Reductions of this magnitude are the reason for concern expressed by Congressman Pallone on behalf of himself and many members of Congress. The 19.9 million pounds does have a 50% likelihood of achieving the target fishing mortality.

For the scup fishery both the Council and the Board recommended a TAL of 16.00 million pounds. This is a slight reduction from the current year landing level of 16.27 million pounds. Discards in the directed scup fishery together with a lack of recent stock assessment information continue to create uncertainty. The lack of a current assessment led both management authorities to take a precautionary approach in establishing the 2007 TAL for scup. Although the stock is currently categorized as overfished, its overfishing status is unknown. The recommended TAL for scup is within the range of long-term potential catches associated with a stock at approximately $\frac{1}{2} B_{msy}$.

For black sea bass it was recommended that TAL be reduced from 8.0 million pounds in 2006 to 6.5 million pounds in 2007. In addition, beginning on January 1, 2007, circular vent size for black sea bass pots must be increased to 2-1/2", and 2 escape vents must be installed in the parlor portion of the trap. Given the uncertainty of the survey estimates and the June stock assessment review comments which questioned the current biological reference points and their soundness for management purposes, the Council and the Board established a TAL of 6.5 million pounds.

Based on a recent stock assessment update, the Council and Board adopted a TAL of 27.76 million pounds for bluefish of which 9.5 million would be allocated to the commercial fishery and 18.26 million pounds would be allocated to the recreational sector. Possession limits would not change in the recreational sector, i.e. the bag limit would remain at 15 fish. In recent years neither sector has landed its allocation, nor has either sector landed enough fish to achieve the 2007 recommended allocations.

The Council also addressed the unresolved *Loligo* trimester allocation it postponed from its June meeting. For the 2007 fishing year, it was recommended that *Loligo* be allocated as follows:

January - April	43%
May - August	17%
September - December	40%

In addition, during the May-August trimester, should 45% of this period's allocation be landed prior to June 30, then the directed fishery for *Loligo* would be closed until July 1 at which time it would be re-opened for the balance of the period with a 90% trigger. If no closure occurs during the first half of this period, then the directed fishery would remain open under the 90% trigger. In addition, should the directed fishery for *Loligo* be closed during August 2007, vessels possessing an *Illex* moratorium permit and fishing seaward of the 50 fathom contour may, for purposes of reducing regulatory discards, land up to 10,000 pounds of *Loligo* squid per trip provided they possess a minimum of 10,000 of *Illex* on board.

The Council and Commission also reviewed the proposed rebuilding plan for scup [Amendment 14 to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP)] and provided staff guidance for purposes of completing the public hearing document (PHD). It is anticipated that the PHD will be approved at the next Council meeting (October 10-12).

The Council and Commission likewise reviewed comments received during the scoping period for Amendment 15 to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass FMP. Twenty-eight potential issues were provided to the public during scoping and, based on feedback and written comments, the Council and Commission reduced the number of issues for further consideration to sixteen. Issues that warranted further consideration and action include: user allocations for summer flounder and scup; commercial allocations by state for all three species; review of biological reference points for all three species; for-hire management for all three species; management of the summer flounder and scup recreational fisheries; data collection requirements and protocols; rollover of unused quota; and, limitation on vessel replacement upgrades.

It was also moved and approved by the Council that letters be sent to Congress providing the Council's position regarding reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Letters are also to be sent to the NMFS requesting research be initiated to study the effectiveness of circle hooks in reducing bycatch mortality in summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, and tilefish; and, expressing support for the convening of a Northeast region workshop for recreational anglers to discuss the use of circle hooks and handling techniques to reduce bycatch mortality.