



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

PRESS RELEASE

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Scientific and Statistical Committee to Expand

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) met last week in Hampton, VA and approved changes to its Statement of Operating Practices and Procedures (SOPP) so as to expand membership on its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The Council decided to increase the maximum number of SSC members from 12 to "up to 20" members. The Council also incorporated new statutory language into the SOPP section dealing with its SSC regarding peer reviews and prevention of overfishing by having the SSC provide advice on acceptable biological catch (among other things). The advice, in the form of annual catch limits and accountability measures, may not be exceeded by the Council during its specification setting process.

The Council also selected by unanimous vote three new SSC members:

Brian J. Rothschild - Co-Director, Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Institute, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Rob Latour - Assistant Professor, Department of Fisheries Science, Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

Martin Smith - Assistant Professor of Environmental Economics, Division of Environmental Science and Policy, Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, Duke University.

Following the election of new members to the SSC, Council Chairman Pete Jensen appointed Dr. Rothschild the SSC Chairman. It is likely that the Council will continue to add more SSC members this year given that the Council approved up to eight new SSC slots at this meeting.

In June 2007 the Council recommended 2008 specifications and management measures for the Atlantic mackerel, squid and butterfish (MSB) fishery. In the National Marine Fishery Services' (NMFS) proposed rule of December 28, 2007 to implement the Council's recommendations, the agency included a provision to restrict incidental catch permit holders to 250 pounds of butterfish per trip (year round) and asked the Council to comment on this proposed change since the Council had not recommended any changes to the incidental permit holder possession limit. The lack of a Council recommendation regarding incidental catches had the effect of perpetuating the limit for incidental permit holders at 2,500 pounds per calendar day. In 2007 the 2,500 pound incidental trip limit was the same as the trip limit for all vessels once the directed fishery closed. In the 2008 proposed rule if the directed fishery were to close prior to October 1, then the possession limit for all vessels would be reduced to 250 pounds per day. If the fishery were to close on or after October 1, then a possession limit of 600 pounds would be in effect for the remainder of the fishing year for all vessels. In response to NMFS proposal, the Council passed a motion recommending that NMFS modify its current proposal so that a butterfish incidental trip limit of 600 pounds per day be established. In addition, in the event that the directed butterfish fishery closes prior to October 1, all permit holders, including incidental, would then be restricted to 250 pounds per day. If this recommendation is adopted by NMFS then the incidental trip limit would again mirror the trip limits imposed upon all vessels once the directed fishery closes. The basis for this recommendation is that: 1) it provides consistency with previous regulation of the fishery; 2) it would improve efficacy of enforcement; and, 3) it would reduce discards while limiting directed fishing by incidental permit holders.

During its regular business session, the Council received an outstanding presentation by Jim Gartland, Project Manager for the Northeast Area Monitoring Assessment Program (NEAMAP), regarding the fall 2007 NEAMAP survey with special emphasis on the survey's methodology and results.

Committee Actions

The Bycatch/Limited Access Privilege Program Committee met to discuss techniques that participants in recreational catch and release fisheries can put into practice to reduce recreational discard mortality. The primary focus of Committee's discussion was on the benefits of circle hooks. There was general agreement that angler education about how to use these hooks is more

appropriate than any regulatory action at this time. The Mid-Atlantic Council will be developing an information pamphlet for mass distribution in the near future and will also be providing angler educational material via its website.

The Research Set-Aside (RSA) Committee met and discussed potential policies regarding the review and communication of cooperative research results prior to their use in the management process. General agreement was reached on the need to have research findings undergo a technical or peer review prior to the information being presented to the Council or utilized in management. It is anticipated that such a policy will be finalized at the April Council meeting. The 2009 Federal Funding Opportunity (FFO) announcement for the Council's RSA program is expected to be published on February 8th. It will contain new language that allows for the possibility of RSA projects being conducted as cooperative agreements.

The Ecosystem Committee met and received a presentation from Barry Burgan of the US Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Oceans and Coastal Protection. Mr. Burgan discussed the National Coastal Condition Report II which identifies the Northeast US coastal waters as being in as bad a shape as any of our country's waters. Staff member Dr. Tom Hoff discussed the MSA Section 406 Ecosystem Workshop he attended in Seattle earlier in January and noted that the Agency does not expect any new funds for ecosystem efforts in the near future. As identified in the Council's 2006 report "MAFMC -- Evolution Towards an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries," the lack of dedicated money will restrict further dedicated ecosystem efforts of the Council.

The Protected Resources Committee met and reviewed the results of the recent meeting of the Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Team which was held in Philadelphia, PA December 17-19, 2007. This take reduction team was reconvened to consider modifications to the Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Plan which was originally implemented in 1999. While the plan was initially successful in reducing the take of harbor porpoise in gill net fisheries in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, recent mortality estimates indicate that the number of harbor porpoise mortalities in these fisheries has been increasing. In addition, the Committee also reviewed recent changes to the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan and the NMFS decision that the white marlin does not warrant listing as either a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. The Committee also received a report from Mr. David Hilton on his activities as NMFS Outreach Coordinator for marine mammal issues in the NMFS' southeast region.

The Executive Committee met and reviewed highlights and outcomes of the January Council Coordination Committee meeting held January 8 through 10 in Silver Spring, MD. The Committee also reviewed and discussed proposed changes to the Council's SOPP regarding its SSC.

The Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Committee met and decided to initiate Amendment 14. The Committee reduced a list of 11 possible issues that could have been addressed to the following four items for inclusion: cost recovery, excessive shares, data collection and reporting requirements, and an update of essential fish habitat. A new overfishing threshold for ocean quahogs may be considered if the NMFS' Northeast Fisheries Science Center is able to conduct the necessary additional modeling work. Additionally, an Ad Hoc Excessive Shares Committee was established to work with staff on determining what constitutes excessive shares in these fisheries. In the event that Allowable Catch Limits (ACL's) and Accountability Measures (AM's) cannot be addressed through an Omnibus action for Council plans, then they may be addressed in Amendment 14 if agency guidance is available.