Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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Research Set-Aside Program

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Managing fishery resources has been, and continues to be, a challenge owing to the uncertainty and lack of timely fishery data. Fishery stocks, and the economic and social aspects associated with them, are constantly in a state of flux and ceaselessly undergoing rapid changes. Fishery managers require more complete, timely, and accurate fisheries data to make better decisions for rebuilding or maintaining the resource. These data are used in stock assessments, fishery management regulations, and economic and statistical summaries to govern the conservation and exploitation of living marine resources.

Despite efforts of the National Marine Fisheries Service to provide the most reliable data, budget and personnel constraints create shortfalls in the quality, completeness, timeliness and accuracy of such data. Uncertainties in these data and the assessments upon which they are based have made it difficult for managers to balance the needs of fishermen and conservation of the resource simultaneously.

To address this problem, the Council initiated a formalized mechanism to foster cooperative research with the fishing public. In consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission), the Council designed a research program that integrates fishing industry activities with cooperating scientific partners to improve fishery management decisions. This program is known as the Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program. A set-aside quota (not to exceed 3 percent) is removed from the annual quota allocation recommended by the Council for those species which it manages. This set-aside amount is then available for award to applicants who successfully compete in the Council's RSA program, i.e., if a project proposal meets the Council's research priorities and other award conditions, then the successful applicant will receive an individual suballocation of the quota to conduct the approved research experiment/project. Whatever funds are generated from this individual suballocation are available to use in conducting the research activities.

Process

The Council and the Commission begin the annual Research Set-Aside (RSA) process by establishing research priorities for the ensuing fishing year. Based on the list of priorities, a Request for Proposal (RFP) is developed by the Council and submitted to NMFS for publication and distribution to the public. During the solicitation period, the Council's Research Set-Aside Committee is available to meet with potential applicants to discuss specific issues regarding their proposals. Proposals must be received by the date specified in the solicitation. Following submission of the proposals, a technical evaluation takes place. The Council's Research Set-Aside Committee and three or more appropriate private and public sector experts review and evaluate each of the proposals. Technical evaluation of the proposals is accomplished using specific evaluation criteria contained in the RFP.

After technical evaluation, NMFS establishes a review panel, including the Research Set-Aside Committee, to review, critique and comment on the technically scored proposals. Results from this review are provided to NMFS, and ultimately the NMFS Regional Administrator. The NMFS Regional Administrator communicates her recommendations to the NOAA Grants Officer who ultimately selects the successful proposals prior to the June Council meeting.

The Council and the Commission (where appropriate) establish the level of quota set-aside for the ensuing fishing year during the annual quota specification process. Specifications for *Loligo* squid, *Illex* squid, mackerel, and butterfish are set during the June Council meeting while specification for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish are set at the August meeting. Tilefish specifications are set at the December meeting.

Funding

The federal government does not contribute funds for research under this program. However, the government does implement an exempted fishing permit for researchers selected for the program which allows for special fishing privileges. The federal government is not liable for any costs incurred during the collection of the set-aside species. Funds generated from the landings are to be used to cover the cost of the research, vessel costs for operation, and compensation to vessel owners. Funds may pay for gear modifications, monitoring equipment, salaries of research personnel, and any other legitimate associated costs (e.g., fuel, ice, food for scientists, etc.). Proceeds generated from the sale of catch in excess of a trip limit or seasonal quota are to be used by the researcher for the costs associated with the research activity.

RSA Quota Priorities

Council, Commission and NOAA will consider allocating RSA quota to proposals that focus on the following research priorities for 2004:

1. Bycatch and discard reduction concerning: (a) Distinctions between regulatory discards and bycatch attributed to gear, including mesh selectivity and/or overall gear design in the summer flounder fishery; (b) gear modifications in the *Loligo* s reduce scup and other species bycatch; (c) di studies in the *Loligo* and scup fisheries; (d) b estimates of recreational discards in the summer flounder, scup, black sea bass and bluefish fisheries; and (e) determine ways to decrease discards associated with increases in size limits;

2. Mesh and gear selectivity focusing on: (a) The examination of summer flounde catch composition in small-mesh net fisheri within the summer flounder small-mesh exe area; (b) summer flounder mesh selectivity st scup mesh selectivity; (d) squid mesh selectiv..., (e) black sea bass mesh selectivity; (f) the development of threshold triggers based on gear and fishery characteristics; (g) evaluation of various pot vent sizes and shapes for black sea bass and scup; (h) estimation of mortality of black sea bass left in pots during the closed season; (i) evaluation of fishery management actions, e.g., do closures have a net positive effect on fishing mortality by postponing such mortality, or do they simply allow for concentration of resources such that when the seasons open the consequent fishing effort offsets the mortality reductions that occurred during the closure; and (j) mesh retention studies of 2-1/2-inch (6.35 cm), 2-3/4-inch (6.985 cm), and 3-inch (7.63 cm) mesh for butterfish;

3. Fishing impacts on habitat pertaining to: (a) Mobile gear impacts on tilefish burrows; (b) scup spawning areas and scup larvae settlement areas in coastal/estuarine waters; (c) benthic habitat of juvenile and adult black sea bass, and scup offshore wintering areas; (d) mapping of spawning areas and egg mop areas for *Loligo*; and (e) further delineation of essential fish habitat (EFH) particularly in nursery areas for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass as well as the potential for possible gear impacts to this EFH.

4. Cooperative stock assessment surveys focusing on: (a) The use of alternative industry assessment methods to determine abundance of Atlantic mackerel; (b) the summer flounder fishery; (c) surveys for summer flounder in areas not traditionally sampled by the North East Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) gear; (d) side-by-side comparisons for summer flounder and scup of commercial and NEFSC survey gear; (e) better survey information for bluefish; (f) tagging studies of bluefish movements; and (g) DNA analysis for stock descriptions of Atlantic lantic mackerel;

d recreational fishery data focusing on: earch to enhance the overall knowledge the recreational fishery; (b) statistical models to evaluate the effectiveness of ecreational management measures and/or data collection process; (c) studies of bluefish, summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass hooking mortality by size fish and the potential compliance with regulations for these species; and (d) studies with break-away hooks for tilefish.

5. Other: (a) evaluation of redirection of fishing effort with area closures for black sea bass; (b) evaluation of whether artificial reefs increase the productivity of black sea bass or simply concentrate the resource; (c) evaluation of the mixing of *Illex* and *Loligo* in September and October; (d) increased and more representative sea sampling of the various fisheries in which summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass are caught is needed to adequately characterize the length composition of the discards; (e) better estimates of discard mortality for the recreational and commercial fisheries (by gear type) for each species of mid-Atlantic managed fish; (f) study of summer flounder fecundity and why recruitment is low as the resource is being rebuilt; (g) study to develop optimum sampling levels to estimate discards for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass; (h) increased and more representative port sampling of the various fisheries in which summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass are caught; (i) develop fishery independent surveys and expand existing surveys to capture all sizes and age classes of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass in order to develop independent catch-at-age and CPUE; (j) expand age sampling of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass from commercial and recreational catches, with special emphasis on collection of large specimens, and (k) quantify the percentage of commercial fishery trips that had discards but no landings, and evaluate how such trips contribute to the total commercial fishery discard estimate.

Evaluation Criteria

NOAA selects successful proposals based on the following program evaluation criteria:

1. A clear definition of the problem, need, issue or hypothesis to be addressed. The proposal should describe its relevance to RSA program priorities. If not directly related to priorities listed in this solicitation, provide justification why the proposed project should be considered (25 points);

2. Cost-effectiveness of the project. The request and value of the anticipated revenue from RSA should be commensurate with estimated project costs. Economic and budget projections must be quantified, to the extent possible. Where appropriate, use of existing equipment versus acquisition of new equipment (fishing gear) is preferred (25 points);

3. A clear definition of the approach to be used, including description of field work, theoretical studies, and laboratory analysis to support the proposed research, and the ability of the researchers to physically complete work during the 2003 calendar year. Activities that take place over a wider versus narrower geographical range, where appropriate, are preferred (25 points);

4. Demonstration of support, cooperation and/or collaboration with the fishing industry, and qualifications/ experience of project participants. Where appropriate, unified versus separate stand-alone proposals on related projects involving multiple principal investigators are preferred (15 points);

5. Identification of anticipated benefits, potential users, likelihood of success, and methods of disseminating results. Where appropriate, data format generated from the research must be consistent with NMFS' and Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistical Program's (ACCSP) databases (10 points). A copy of this format is available from NMFS.

November
Council provides RFP for research set-aside program to NMFS

December
NMFS publishes Federal Register Notice that calls for proposals to be submitted by mid-April

March-April
NMFS technical review period (establishment of review panel)

April
Review panel provides comments on technically scored proposals

May
Research Set-Aside Committee reviewes, critiques, and comments on the technically scored proposals

June
NMFS Regional Administrator announces award of successful research set-aside proposals

June
Council meeting to set specifications (determine quota set-aside for squid, mackerel, butterfish)

August
Council meeting to set specifications (set-aside for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish)

October
Council and Commission sets research priorities for the following year