

## **2016 Golden Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) Fishery Performance Report (FPR)**

The Tilefish AP met via Webinar on February 16, 2016 to develop the Golden Tilefish FPR. The charge to the Tilefish AP was to provide input on factors that have influenced catch levels over time. The following is the report from the Tilefish AP.

The Advisers in attendance were: David Arbeitman, Ron Callis, Skip Feller, Jan McDowell, and Michael Johnson. They represent tilefish commercial fisherman (from New Jersey); recreational fishermen (private/head boats, bait and tackle business, from New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia); and research/academia (VIMS). Also in attendance were Laurie Nolan and Robert O'Reilly, Council Members; Doug Potts - GARFO; Paul Nitschke and Barbara Rountree - NEFSC; Fred Akers; and José Montañez (Council Staff).

### **Market Issues**

Prices continue to increase and have been strong in recent years. A major reason for this is that the tilefish industry is able to coordinate times of landings to avoid market gluts and spread tilefish landings throughout the year. The ability to do this has improved since IFQs came into place.

Golden tilefish caught in the Mid-Atlantic region are sold as whole or gutted fish. Traditionally, the majority of the tilefish landings were sold to the Korean markets. Due to marketing efforts, tilefish has become a very well-known popular item. They are found as a "regular" on the menus rather than an occasional "special." Local fish markets, as well as grocery stores like Whole Foods, carry tilefish. Business like Sea to Table, a door-to-door seafood delivery service, have also helped spread the word on what a great eating fish tilefish are. Having a steady year round supply of tilefish has influenced the positive market development for this product.

Traditionally, large tilefish were worth up to \$1.00 more per pound than extra-large tilefish. Due to the head size of an extra-large tilefish, there is a lot of waste. Recently, price spread (\$/pound) between large and extra-large fish is decreasing. Industry has been getting specific requests for extra-large fish. Rather than discarding the head and the rack of an extra-large, soups and broth are being made and the waste is eliminated. Extra-large fish have been marketed as 25+ pound fish in both New York and New Jersey in past years. However, more recently (since around 2014), New Jersey has changed the extra-large to 20+ pounds fish. This may explain some of the small increase in extra-large market category landings that has been observed in the last few years. Industry and Council/NEFSC staff will work to improve coordination across tilefish ports to better define fish market size (weight) in order to maintain reporting consistency.

Fishing trip expenses continue to rise (e.g., gear, bait, ice, tackle, and food). Due to the high cost of operations, tilefish vessels fish as close to home port as possible.

### **Environmental Issues**

The industry has observed no tilefish aggregation changes due to changes in water temperatures, in contrast with what they observe with other fishes. The temperatures where Golden tilefish are

found seem stable due to extreme depth. (Note: tilefish are generally found in rough bottom, small burrows, and sheltered areas at bottom water temperatures ranging from 48.2°F to 57.2°F [9°C to 14°C], generally in depths between 328 and 984 ft [100 to 300 m]).

Dogfish interaction reduces tilefish catches and strongly affects where people fish. The dogfish are so thick now, when fishermen encounter them, they have no choice but to move to other fishing areas. The dogfish interaction used to be about 2 or 3 months in the winter. However, in the last 5 years, dogfish presence is about 8 months, and extends to June. Skate interaction also reduces tilefish catches; this is limited to the winter period. Skates can severely damage tilefish gear. When fishermen encounter skates they move to other fishing areas.

Adverse weather conditions (e.g., storms, rough seas, high winds, and tide) can impact fishing operations. Severe winter conditions experienced in the Northeast in 2013-2015 significantly affected the effectiveness of tilefish fishing operations/practices, resulting in longer fishing trips.

Recreational tilefish fishermen continue to observe aggregations of large fish in small areas in the spring/summer time around the Wilmington canyon (>80 to 90 fathoms). Not sure if they could be spawning events. Down East, tilefish concentrate in smaller amounts because of canyons and bottom structures. Advisors indicated that while this type of large fish aggregations have been observed in the past by commercial fishermen, they are now increasingly noticed by recreational fishermen as the popularity of tilefish increases. Factors such advertisement for tilefish fishing trips, tilefish availability, product taste, and the increasing regulations in other recreational fisheries have played a major role in the expansion of the recreational fishery.

Industry members indicated that that some lobster trap fishermen have caught small tilefish (~2 inches) in 40/50 fathom range in statistical areas 613 (and perhaps 615 as well). This is something that they have not seen before.

### **Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts**

The number of tilefish vessels participating in the fishery has been steady. Since the onset of the IFQ management system, there has been no change in the number of vessels (4) that constitute the vast bulk of the landings (they constitute about 80% of the landings/IFQ allocation). Industry reported that one boat that has about 11% of the overall IFQ allocation was not able to fish in 2015. While some of that inactive boat's allocation was leased is not known how much of it was actually used.

Tilefish landings are in alignment with the TAL specified for the fishery; observed differences in the data are small. It is believed that tilefish landings for 2015 FY (1.346 million pounds) were below the quota (1.755 million pounds) due to several reasons; including, inactive vessels (some IFQ allocations were not fished), some vessels that leased quota did not get a chance to fish, severe weather and wind conditions, and lower catch rates.

The implementation of the IFQ system has particularly benefited those in the former "part-time" and "tier 2" vessel categories of the old limited access program. These vessels can plan their fishing activities throughout the year, rather than being forced into a derby fishery on November

1 (start of the fishing year) if they plan to harvest tilefish in a given year. These vessels participate in a number of fisheries (e.g. monkfish, scallop, and swordfish) and the IFQ system allows them to "fill in" tile fishing when it works best for them. Under the IFQ system, the former "part-time, tier 2, and full-time" vessels are working closely with each other and dealers to avoid landing large quantities of tilefish at the same time and avoid drastic price reductions.

One panel member indicated that even smaller participants in the tilefish IFQ fishery (smaller in terms of IFQ allocation and/or boat size) have greatly benefited from the IFQ management system as they can better plan their fishing operations (fish when and where they need to) and the fact that tilefish prices are relatively good and stable, and in fact, a large proportion of their ex-vessel revenues come from tilefish.

### **General Fishing Trends**

While CPUE has decreased according to the data update, AP members wanted to point out that for the last three winter seasons (Jan-March, 2013-2015) fishing practices have been impacted by severe weather resulting in longer fishing trips than on average. In fact, this trend has continued in the early part of 2016. Panel members indicated that while the number of fishing days per trip (days absent from dock) have slightly increased from about 6.5 days per trip in 2012 to 8.2 days per trip in 2015, it is likely that this increase in would have been smaller if winter weather conditions would had been less severe. Severe winter conditions in the last three years (and in the early part of 2016) have made fishing less productive and longer trips than average as fishing operations are significantly impacted. While severe weather conditions affect all fishing boats, smaller boats are particularly susceptible to severe winter and wind conditions.

One advisor indicated that during bad weather the window of opportunity to get out fishing decreases for some vessels. One panel member indicated that since he has a lower allocation he spends a little bit of time exploring fishing grounds to harvest more valuable fish according to market demands. This in turn may also affect CPUE. Two boats indicated that they have a new captains and this may be affecting the catch rates for these vessels. In this small fishery small changes can result in large impacts.

In 2014 and 2015, an increase of extra small and kitten market size fish were landed compared to 2013. Observations indicate new incoming multiple-year classes; there is more of a size mix than before (healthy mix of ages). Commercial fishermen continue to catch a broad size distribution of fish.

Industry tries to fish as close to port as possible. Basically, fishing in same areas in order to maintain low trip expenses. Increasing operating costs keep people from going further out and searching.

Fishermen are not moving around much as they are finding a healthy mix of animals in traditional fishing grounds. However, there are areas that are thought to have more quantities of larger fish than smaller fish that could be targeted if needed.

The topography of the traditional fishing areas is well known and they have the advantage of little or no gear conflict, unlike some of the potential tile fishing areas which are used for other fisheries.

### **Other Issues**

-Sometimes, a vessel may underharvest its quota allocation due to fear of overharvesting. The AP would like to see carry-over of unused portions (with a small proportion of the cap) to the next fishing year such as it is done in the scallop fishery. It was also stated that having a carry-over of unused quota may benefit vessels that may not be able to land their entire allocation in one fishing years due to vessel repairs and maintenance.

-Reliance on fishery-dependent data to manage the fishery may be a drawback. Assessment is data poor. No survey information on size distribution.

- Extra-large fish have been marketed as 25+ pound fish in both New York and New Jersey in past years. However, more recently (since around 2014), New Jersey has change the extra-large to 20+ pounds fish. This may explain some of the small increase in extra-large market category landings that has been observed in the last few years. Industry and Council/NEFSC staff will work to improve coordination across tilefish ports to better define fish market size (weight) in order to maintain reporting consistency.

-Constant harvest strategy worked well in rebuilding the fishery. Industry would like to get back to a constant ACL in the future given healthy trends in the catch. Industry does not want to see different ACL every year.

-One headboat captain indicated that 5 or 6 headboats<sup>1</sup> directly fish for golden tilefish but not 100% or full time. In addition, headboats may catch golden tilefish while targeting tuna or swordfish (i.e., when the tuna limit has been reached, on the way out or on the way in from a tuna/swordfish fishing trip, or at any time when tuna/swordfish fishing is slow). During the winter period there are no tilefish party/charter boat trips as dogfish are just too abundant. Some AP members commented that while the headboat participation in the golden tilefish recreational fishery appears stable they have seen an increase in participation by recreational private boats (July through September) and that private golden tilefish recreational landings are not recorded.

-Another advisor indicated that while there are 5 headboats that fish for tilefish (both blueline and golden) in the mid-Atlantic they have a limited number of dedicated tilefish trips throughout the season (summer time). For example, the boat that has the largest amount of trips scheduled during the year (a boat Point Pleasant) has about 24 scheduled trips per year and not all trips are conducted. The other 4 boats have substantially less tilefish trips scheduled per year. A reporting system for recreational landings would enhance the management of the golden tilefish fishery [The advisor that made this comment was not able to speak during the webinar due to technical difficulties. Comments were provided by phone].

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<sup>1</sup> 2 from New Jersey, 1 from New York, 1 from Ocean City, MD (direct tilefish but only a few time per year), and 1 from Rudee Inlet, VA.

-Panel members raised concerns and questioned the tilefish catches reported in the NMFS recreational statistics database as they are inaccurate and unreliable. It was recommended that this type of data is not use for the management of this species. It was also stated that recreational values reported under the VTR data seems to be more realistic of tilefish catches.

-One headboat captain fishing out of Rudee Inlet indicated that while they do not run tilefish fishing trips they catch them sometimes (they target blueline tilefish and groupers). However, they have noticed that they are not seeing as many large golden tilefish (>25 pounds) as they used to. He also indicated that they are not seeing as many large blueline tilefish as before either. This could be an issue with fishing pressure he stated. The group discussed the fact that fish in the southern canyons (Norfolk, Washington) tend to aggregate in "smaller spots" of about 2 or 3 football fields in size and fishing pressure can be too much and need to wait several months before you go back there to fish again. The group discussed how this contrasts with the wide open areas where the commercial fishery operates in in the northern part of the range (e.g., statistical area 537 - Atlantis and Block Canyons; statistical area 616) where tilefish are found in wide open areas in contrast to "smaller spots" where some recreational fishing occurs in the south. Commercial fisherman indicated that the Montauk fleet has seen an increase in the amount of blueline tilefish caught (ranging from 0 to 100 pounds per trip in the last four years)<sup>2</sup> and that the recent decrease in the amount of large blueline tilefish found in the south (i.e., Rudee Inlet) may be due to warmer water temperature and changing migratory patterns. Blueline tilefish harvested by the Montauk fleet are shipped to the Fulton market.

-Advisors are concerned about directed trip in the incidental category by non-trawl vessels. The AP members are recommending that the Council reviews the management aspects of the incidental fishing category. More specifically, it was reported by several industry members that there may be individuals fishing for tilefish using incidental permits that are not actual commercial fishermen and that they are not reporting tilefish caught thru a dealer. The AP suggested that a qualifier for the incidental tilefish fishing permits be developed. For example, that a certain amount of Mid-Atlantic or New England managed species would have to be landed each trip that any incidentally caught tilefish was landed. Essentially, each trip would have to be a directed trip on other species, as that was the intent in the original FMP. AP members indicated that they understand that the Council has discussed this issue and it is being addressed under Framework 2. AP members indicated that they are encouraged that the Council is addressing this issue and support further work on it.

-The AP members indicated that the landings monitoring program of the IFQ system is very reliable. In all, there is good accountability mechanisms to track landings in the directed commercial fishery (IFQ vessel) and VTR data (commercial and recreational vessels). However, there is concern that directed incidental trips (non-otter trawl vessels) may be missing. In addition, there is no accurate information of catch/landings by private recreational anglers.

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<sup>2</sup> One industry member indicated that 1,500 pounds of blueline tilefish were landed during a directed golden tilefish trip once in a 35 year period.

## Montanez, Jose

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**From:** Montanez, Jose  
**Sent:** Thursday, February 18, 2016 9:13 AM  
**To:** Montanez, Jose  
**Subject:** RE: Tilefish AP comments

Comments provided by Captain Jeff Gutman via e-mail. Mr. Gutman is a Golden Tilefish Advisory Panel member that was not able to participate in the webinar on Tuesday, February the 16th.

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From: Jeff [mailto:jgutman28@comcast.net]  
Sent: Wednesday, February 17, 2016 8:13 PM  
To: Montanez, Jose <jmontanez@mafmc.org>  
Subject: Tilefish AP comments

Jose,

Attached are a few comments as we discussed earlier today.

Thanks,  
Jeff Gutman

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Jose,

Private boat anglers rarely target Golden Tilefish (GT) as their primary quarry. It is more often used as a fallback species on a slow tuna trip. This is not to say that all tuna boats fish for GT when fishing is slow but that a fraction of them do. To this end, just because you see a great number of boats at a canyon does not mean that they all deep drop. For those that do deep drop it is rare to catch a limit for the 5 or 6 guys in the boat as they are usually just seeking a few for dinner and they get bored and tired of reeling up the fish from such great depths.

While it may be advertised, Head boats are rarely able to combine, in any meaningful way, a tuna and GT trip. It is generally a different angler that fishes for each. Also, fishing for GT is quite time consuming and recreational limits are rare if/when species are combined. Some combined trips for Sea Bass and Blue Line Tile are more alluring to the public as there is more of a demographic overlap of fishermen.

The head boat fleet is small (5 boats) and frequently limited by weather. Trips are frequently cancelled or shortened due to unfishable conditions. Unlike the commercial fleet, rod and reel anglers can only fish with near pristine conditions as fishing generally occurs from 100 fathoms and deeper. Fast tides or high winds may create times when the weight required to keep a bait on the bottom becomes prohibitive.

Most of the boats I see fishing for GT while small, less than 50 ft., are usually commercial tuna trollers that fish for their commercial incidental catch of GT at times when tuna fishing is slow.

Regards,

Jeff