

2018 Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report (FPR)

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Tilefish Panel met via Webinar on February 21, 2018 to review the fishery information document and develop the Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report (FPR) based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings patterns and other trends in this fishery. The following is the report from the Tilefish AP.

The Advisers in attendance were: David Arbeitman, Skip Feller, Jeffrey Gutman, and John Nolan III. They represent tilefish commercial fisherman (from New York) and recreational fishermen (private/head boats, bait and tackle business, from New Jersey and Virginia). Also in attendance were: Laurie Nolan - Council Members; Paul Nitschke - NEFSC; Yan Jiao (SSC member - Virginia Tech College of Natural Resources); Ec Newellman; Matt Seeley and José Montañez - Council Staff.

Market Issues

Prices continue to be stable in all market categories except the kitten category. In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of kitten size fish landed and they represent a large proportion of the total catch. The decrease in price (\$/pound) in the kitten category in recent years has impacted the overall average tilefish price. In 2017 there was an increase in both landings and ex-vessel revenues, while the overall average coastwide golden tilefish price decreased, due to the decrease in the price for the kitten size category. A major reason for the stable tilefish prices in recent years is due to the fact that the tilefish industry continues to coordinate times of landings to avoid market gluts and market floods 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, most 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 restaurant menus rather than an occasional "special." Local fish markets, as well as grocery stores like Whole Foods, carry tilefish. Businesses 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 2016), 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) 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. For example, the cost of squid used for bait has doubled since October 2017. *Illex* has gone from .50 to \$1.00/pound. While the domestic squid season/landings have been good, low foreign landings and high demand are expected to keep squid prices at the current high level or even higher.

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 two or three months in the winter. However, in the last seven years, dogfish presence is about eight 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 2013-2017 significantly affected the effectiveness of tilefish fishing operations/practices, resulting in longer fishing trips.

Recreational and commercial fishermen continue to see aggregations of fish in small areas in the spring/summer time around the Wilmington canyon (>80 to 90 fathoms).

Commercial fishermen indicated that they continue to see aggregations of large fish in all canyons in the Mid-Atlantic region. Overall landings are on the rise for the current fishing year (November 1, 2017 – October 31, 2018) when compared to the same time last year and the Kitten fish size category (2 to 3.5 pounds) continues to be a large percentage of their overall catch composition.

Two advisors representing the recreational fishery indicated that the amount of large fish aggregations in some southern mid-Atlantic canyons (e.g., Washington, Baltimore, Poor Man's, Wilmington, and Norfolk) have decreased in size. They also indicated that a higher percentage of their catch is comprised of smaller fish.

Industry members indicated that some lobster trap fishermen have caught small tilefish (~4-5) in 40/50 fathom range in statistical areas 613 (and perhaps 615 as well) through September. This is something that they have not seen before.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

The number of tilefish vessels participating in the fishery was steady since the onset of the IFQ management system. Currently, three vessels constitute the vast bulk of the landings (~ 70% of the landings/IFQ allocation). New Jersey currently holds 30% of the allocation.

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 several 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.

One advisory panel member indicated that changes in tilefish regulations in Virginia (from 7 fish any combination of golden/blueline tilefish per angler per trip to 7 blueline and 8 golden per angler per trip) could result in an increase in recreational golden tilefish effort.

Another advisor indicated that the current federal recreational blueline tilefish season/closures (not able to catch blueline from November 1 through April 30) will likely impact golden tilefish fishing effort as some anglers may stop fishing all together; as it is harder to sell golden tilefish only directed trips, especially in the winter fishery.

General Fishing Trends

AP members pointed out that for the last five winter seasons (January-March, 2013-2017) fishing practices have been impacted by severe weather resulting in longer fishing trips than on average. Panel members indicated that the slight increase in trip length is due to severe winter storm patterns. Severe winter conditions in the last four years 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.

Industry indicated that CPUE in 2017 increased and the percentage of kitten size category (2 to 3.5 pounds) in the catch is also increasing. The influx of kittens is all over the place.

Industry tries to fish as close to port as possible. Basically, fishing in the same areas to maintain low trip expenses. Increasing operating costs keep people from going further out and searching. Industry also indicated that due to recent Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National

Monument closures, they do not have access to fishing grounds in the Oceanographer, Gilbert, and Lydonia canyons.

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

- 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) 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 five or six headboats¹ directly fish for golden tilefish but not 100% or full time. 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 (and potential sale of fish recreationally caught).

-Another advisor indicated that while there are five 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 number 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 four boats have substantially less tilefish trips scheduled per year.

-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 be used 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.

-AP members are concerned about the fishermen targeting golden tilefish under the incidental limit rules. Some of the vessels engaging in this practice do not have the required permitting

¹ Two from New Jersey, one from New York, one from Ocean City, MD (direct tilefish but only a few times per year), and 1 from Rudee Inlet, VA.

requirements to sell fish and do not have the Coast Guard Safety requirements needed to be in compliance with Federal regulations as applicable to commercial vessels.

-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.

-Two AP members would like the Council to consider a differential trip limit (for hire vs private) and longer recreational trips. In addition, they suggested that the Council considers recreational management strategies (e.g., longer recreational trips), structured after the Gulf of Mexico regulations.

-Some AP members would like the Council to consider a recreational allocation.

-Some AP members indicated concerns about relaxing recreational regulations (as they could potentially lead to higher recreational landings) while the commercial quota could remain at status quo levels or potentially decrease in the future.

-A commercial AP member expressed concerns over increasing any effort, bag limit or quota in the fishery at this time. They felt it would be unfair to allow for an increase in effort/bag limit in the recreational sector while maintaining status quo for the commercial sector.

-Recreational AP members indicated that the for-hire fishery (more significantly the headboat fishery) seems to be losing trips due to weather conditions.

From: Jeff <jgutman28@comcast.net>
Sent: Tuesday, February 27, 2018 9:32:22 PM
To: Seeley, Matthew
Subject: Re: Tilefish Fishery Performance Reports

Matt and Jose,

I apologize for the late comment but I was out of town. I wanted to add that there are not hundreds of boats out everyday CANYON tuna fishing and then deep dropping for tilefish. I know this because I was out tuna fishing every fishable day in September and October. Tuna fishing was an absolute disaster in 2017 for the boats from Hyannis, Point Judith and Montauk through all of New Jersey and south to Virginia. Except for a few bluebird days, there was little effort by private boats. I was also out at the canyons, many different canyons throughout the summer and saw very few boats. There was some activity with tournaments but those guys rarely deep drop. I can't speak for summer time south of the Washington canyon but there was not much effort up where the goldens live.

Thanks,
Jeff Gutman
F/V Voyager