



## **Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report**

**February 2021**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 17, 2021 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the golden tilefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Advisory Panel members present: Fred Akers (Private), Gregory Hueth (Private/For-hire), Robert Bogan (For-hire), Douglas Zemeckis (Rutgers), Skip Feller (For-hire), and Michael Johnson (Commercial).

Others present: Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Dan Farnham (Council Member), Scott Lenox (Council Member), Sonny Gwin (Council member), Dewey Hemilright (Council Member), Joe Cimino (Council Member), Michelle Duval (Council Member), James Fletcher (UNFA), Laurie Nolan (Commercial), Doug Potts (GARFO), Paul Rago (SSC), Matthew Seeley (Council Staff), and José Montañez (Council Staff).

### **Trigger questions:**

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

### **Market/Economic Conditions**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a large reduction in the demand for golden tilefish with restaurant closures. As a consequence, there was a dramatic reduction in effort by all vessels. Full-time vessels in New York capped their trips at about 16,000 pounds and only one vessel landed each week. Barnegat Light (New Jersey), capped landings at about 8,000 to 10,000 pounds per week. Spreading landings helped stabilize prices.

Tilefish prices have remained stable because 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. Overall, prices have been

relatively stable in all market categories. However, due to COVID-19, large price reduction occurred, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

### **Environmental Conditions**

Commercial fishermen indicated that they continue to see aggregations of large fish in all canyons in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Overall, environmental conditions did not adversely impact catch in 2020.

### **Management Issues**

AP members noted appreciation in the positive way the Council and GARFO responded to the industry request of a one-time roll over of a 5% of unused IFQ 2020 quota allocation to the 2021 fishing year.

AP members also indicated support for the proposed Council work to initiate a golden tilefish multi-year specifications framework as listed under the 2021 Council proposed actions and deliverables. The AP members also support changing the current fishing year (November 1 – October 31) to January 1 – December 31. The industry feels ending the fishing year in December, rather than October, will create more stability in harvesting their full allocation. October can be a very stormy month with fish on the move.

### **General Fishing Trends**

Fishermen indicated a good mix of fish in 2020, perhaps better than in previous years. In addition, a larger amount of small or kittens (2 to 3.5 pounds) were present in 2020 compared to previous years. That is, a higher percentage of small or kitten fish were landed on a trip per trip basis (3,000 pounds per trip in 2020 versus 1,000 pounds per trip around 2018-2019). The number of small/kittens landed have continued to increase in 2021.

Industry members commented CPUE increased in 2020. More fish are being caught with the same trip effort than were caught in 2019.

### **Other Issues**

Another AP member indicated that while there are five headboats that fish for tilefish (both blue-line and golden) in the mid-Atlantic they have a limited number of dedicated tilefish trips throughout the season (summertime). 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 (i.e., taking 50 to 60% of scheduled trips) and in some instances not all of them are full. The other four boats have substantially less tilefish trips scheduled per year.

For-hire effort was reduced in 2020 due to COVID-19, and the industry is expecting the same for 2021. In addition, the industry experienced cancellations of overnight trips in 2020 due to the pandemic. Furthermore, in 2020, tuna fishing was better than average, which resulted in less

boats targeting golden tilefish. As a general rule, when tuna fishing is not good, anglers offset those trips by targeting tilefish.

AP members indicated that Captains and crew should be included in the comingled bag limit (recreational possession limit) for a trip. In other words, the Captain and Crew should also be allotted a bag limit.

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. Currently, there is no accurate information of catch/landings by private recreational anglers. However, it is expected that as the new private reporting continues, we will have better information on this sector of the fishery.

Some 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, multi-day bag limits), structured after the Gulf of Mexico regulations (would make filling trips easier). Multi-day bag limits are important because a hand full of boats target tilefish in January-February when the black sea bass season is closed and while they do not catch much tilefish, this management change could help their business sell more trips. These management changes could be considered when a quota liberalization is on the table (quota going up).

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.

Some AP members indicated that the number of golden tilefish reported under the private VTR data for the August – December 2020 period appears to be low. Council staff responded that the low landings associated with private anglers may be attributed to the short fishing season (as a result of when implementation occurred), this being the first-time recreational anglers are required to report, and the COVID-19 pandemic likely decreasing effort further offshore. Another AP member indicated that given that the private boat permit reporting was started late in the season, the low reported landings are not a good representation of the full year private boat catch.

Another AP member indicated that he disagreed that the private boat recreational effort was decreased by COVID-19. He saw more private recreational fishing boats everywhere in state and federal waters, and have read that recreational boat sales were very high in 2020.

## Research Priorities

A list of the comprehensive five year (2020-2024) research priorities (see below) was presented to the AP members to review the process on these priorities. Staff asked the AP members what priorities should stay, be removed, and/or added to the list. The text in *italics* after each research priority indicates current status.

1) Investigate stock structure utilizing otolith microchemistry and other genetic analyses for different Mid-Atlantic stocks (including golden tilefish).

*No recent progress. The work of Katz et al. (1983) used significant differences in allelic frequencies to identify distinct stocks between mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic tilefish. Those authors also felt that certain aspects of golden tilefish distribution, life history and ocean circulation patterns supported their two stock hypothesis for the United States Atlantic.*

*Furthermore, Jill Olin (Michigan Technology University) and her team are in the process of acquiring otolith microchemistry data from samples of golden tilefish collected during the 2017 pilot survey. They are exploring early life history questions (related to timing of settlement from pelagic) and differences in collection location (assess if Hudson individuals differ from Veatch individuals) among other research questions.*

2) Implement novel supplemental surveys to derive fishery independent indices of abundance.

*Work in progress. Results from the pilot tilefish fishery independent bottom longline survey in 2017 were used to design the longline golden tilefish survey conducted in July 2020. A presentation of the 2020 survey results will be made to the SSC in March 2021.*

3) Utilize fishery-independent information to assess whether the dome-shaped selectivity curve used in the assessment reflects fishery selectivity or availability, or both.

*Work in progress. Data from the two surveys using different hook sizes provide the information needed to track cohorts and to inform assessment model selectivity (e.g., dome-shaped selectivity). More analysis is needed to complete this task.*

4) Evaluate data collection methods to increase information on gear conflicts, species interactions (i.e., spiny dogfish), and bait type to understand their effects on the commercial CPUE index.

*No progress.*

5) Collect and analyze biological samples to improve life history, maturity, and distribution information.

*The two longline tilefish surveys collected new information on tilefish spatial distributions, life history, sex, and maturity. However, fishery dependent biological sampling has decreased in recent years (see discussion below).*

6) Develop sampling programs to increase information of recreational landings at size and age.

*No progress. However, to improve tilefish management and reporting, GARFO implemented mandatory private recreational permitting and reporting for tilefish anglers in August 2020. This action was approved in late 2017, but with delayed implementation. Outreach materials and webinars were provided by GARFO and the Council leading up to the final rule and will continue to be circulated as these regulations become commonplace. Under this rule, private recreational vessels (including for-hire operators using their vessels for non-charter, recreational trips) are required to obtain a federal vessel permit to target or retain golden or blueline tilefish north of the Virginia/North Carolina border. These vessel operators are also required to submit VTRs electronically within 24 hours of returning to port for trips where tilefish were targeted or retained.*

7) Assess the accuracy and reliability of aging techniques.

*No progress. However, comparison of survey age and length distributions to fishery dependent age and length distributions could inform the reliability of the age data.*

**Advisory panel members comments and overall discussion:**

Panel members indicated concern about the lack of biological sampling of landings on the dock.

Paul Nitschke (NEFSC) indicated that there has been a reduction in the funding of the fishery dependent shoreside biological sampling (length and age) program in recent years. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic may have also impacted sampling collection in early 2020.

Biosampling is particularly important for golden tilefish as the ASAP model (catch at age assessment model) requires adequate sampling of all market categories to characterize the catch at length and/or age and to estimate mean weights at age. There is no additional size and age information in the assessment due to the lack of a fishery independent survey time series. The 2020 sampling data will be assessed when the 2021 management track assessment update is conducted, at that point, we will know if there was sufficient sampling in 2020. Paul Rago (SSC) expressed concerns about the decrease in port sampling and how this will negatively impact future assessments and projections, particularly golden tilefish as it relies critically on cyclical recruitment.

Panel members indicated that they would like to have larger input in future golden tilefish survey design (e.g., selecting areas to be sample). In addition, they indicated that when conducting surveys, researchers should follow the vessels' captain input when deciding where to fish/sample. [Staff note: It is important to keep the survey as fishery independent]