



**Current Species Separation Requirements in the
Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fisheries
Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) - Meeting Summary
November 2021**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog (SCOQ) Species Separation Requirements FMAT met via webinar on November 16, 2021, to review the draft document entitled, "Approaches to Address the Current Species Separation Requirements in the Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fisheries," (white paper) as well as meeting summaries from the Advisory Panel (AP) and Committee meeting summaries from meetings held in October 13 and 15, respectively, to incorporate input.

FMAT members present: Jessica Coakley (Council Staff - FMAT Chair), Brett Alger (NMFS OST), Daniel Hennen (NMFS NEFSC), José Montañez (Council Staff), Douglas Potts (NMFS GARFO - SFD), John Walden (NMFS NEFSC - SSB), John Sullivan (NMFS GARFO- APSD), and Sharon Benjamin (NMFS GARFO – NEPA)

Others present: David (no last name provided)

Staff reviewed the meeting agenda, objectives, and need for this action. The FMAT reviewed comments provided in the AP and Committee meeting summaries. No major edits were made to the documents the FMAT initially reviewed, except to the options table and appendices, which addressed much of the input from the AP and Committee. An exempted fishing permit (EFP) appendix was incorporated into the white paper because of the discussion from the Committee meeting. The timeline for future work was also discussed, as the Council will discuss this in December.

The FMAT discussed the spatial extent of the mixing issue. Have we thought of closing areas where this mixing is high - to avoid the issue mixing completely? Area-based approaches were discussed, where the areas could either be closed or have different sets of regulations within an area. The survey does provide some insight into the extent of the problem, although the data is limited - this data will be added to the white paper. The observer coverage is very limited. The mixing of both species in clam beds is a big problem - there are very few tows at this point that are just surfclam. Also, area-based closures could concentrate effort into weaker areas of the stock (like further north) and deplete those areas.

Based on the input received thus far, the fishing fleet generally does not seem to have a desire to separate the catch in a way that modifies their current operations. Some advisors indicated that there is some sorting done - they may not be able to get everything done but a good effort is going on to get rid of the non-targets (onboard or in processor - neither of which is presently being

recorded/documented). Other individuals have indicated that sorting is not possible. This may reflect difference in the size and specifics of each industry operation. Furthermore, the processors do not want to receive a mixed catch since most only process one species or run a single species processing line at a time to fulfill contracts. We need an upstream approach to address this issue - some of these solutions may be short-term (2-5 year) fixes, while others may be longer term. This should be an important consideration for the Council - given the trajectory of this issue and the potential for it to continue to change going forward, it may be better to focus on longer term solutions.

In the clam industry, there is a high level of vertical integration, and fishermen work for the processing plants to meet their demands for the desired species. They are generally going where the processors tell them to go. Haul level data would be very important to assess and monitor mixing in the catch. Trying to close areas where mixing occurs would probably make problem worse because mixing is not homogeneous (clam beds are very heterogeneous).

The FMAT discussed the options on the table and how to incorporate input from suggested options. For any of the solutions, there are specific details that need to be addressed - many of these options require changes to multiple aspects of the regulatory program. Also, there is a need to figure out how to address and classify discards. Presently, because mixing is occurring in the cages already and it is not being enforced or monitored/data collected on it, we already have a mixed clam catch issue in the cages and it can create issues for the stock assessment.

It was apparent to all the FMAT members that there wasn't one solution that could be identified with industry wide support - given the big differences in processor and vessel operations - and that any solution would require additional development and changes to operations either onboard vessels, in processors, or require new or enhanced monitoring which would incur additional costs. Therefore, the FMAT concluded that an approach focused on research and development, through an EFP would be beneficial to allow some of the "kinks" to be worked out to find an effective approach GARFO could consider implementing. The FMAT also did indicate that longer term solutions, like electronic monitoring (EM), that could also enhance future data collection while addressing this issue seemed appealing. However, implementing solutions like that would require development and industry support. EM development would require human review to develop artificial intelligence types of approaches - however development would be relatively quick for a binary issue like surfclam or quahog (i.e., just identifying species A or B; easier to train software). The FMAT recommends incentivizing cooperation by allowing vessels that apply for the EFP to do research and development while fishing mixed trips (e.g., in sorted cages, or within cages) if they are developing a monitoring system to effectively assess the catch composition at the same time (assessing the mixing level). GARFO can work through its EFP program with the industry directly (i.e., similar to option 1, Table 1 in the white paper). The FMAT noted that allowing mixed catches without catch monitoring is not advisable. An EFP could be done faster than an Amendment but would apply to the specific vessel(s) only. There are ways to link the dealer to the vessel, through the EFP, to link up the potential processor role in monitoring protocols. This would allow the feasibility of an approach to be evaluated without full implementation to the entire fleet.