



Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Advisory Panel Meeting Summary October 2021

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog (SCOQ) Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on October 13, 2021 to review the Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) draft document entitled, "Approaches to Address the Current Species Separation Requirements in the Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fisheries." A series of trigger questions were posed to the AP to generate discussion as the group discussed components of the document. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements; in those cases, the differences in opinions are noted.

Advisory Panel members present: Tom Dameron, Peter deFur, Peter Himchak, Samuel Martin, David O'Neill, Jeffrey Pike, Guy Simmons, Dave Wallace. Monte Rome was unable to enter webinar due to technical difficulties on Council end [provided verbal comments to staff and via email].

Others present: Peter Hughes (SCOQ Ctte. Chair), Jessica Coakley and José Montañez (Council staff), Doug Potts, Sharon Benjamin (GARFO), Brett Alger (NOAA Fisheries, Office of Science and Technology), Ron Larsen

Trigger questions:

Are there other "**Key Issues**" we missed or overlooked?

Did the FMAT capture relevant aspects of industry operations?

Other ideas or potential solutions to address mixing/monitoring/enforcement components of this issue? Advantages/disadvantages?

What else is important for the Council to know?

Advisor Input:

Advisors felt the sections on "*Cage Tagging Requirements, VMS, Logbook, and Dealer Reporting Requirements*" described the process accurately.

There was a discussion about whether having a mix of species in the cages is currently enforced or if there is a tiny amount of mixing allowed. It was noted by staff that the current regulations do not allow mixing. Trips are declared as either SC or OQ trip and there is no small take allowed either. It is not presently enforced as enforcement does not dump the cages. An advisor noted that this was not really an issue before for enforcement, because the catches were less mixed - but now surfclams are setting into areas where ocean quahog beds were previously fished out, and so it makes it difficult to access the surfclam without resulting in mixed catches. The industry will not be able to comply with these zero tolerances for mixing issue going forward.

Staff noted that need to look at a long-term solution to this problem - will become more challenging as climate change continues and dense beds of surfclam are depleted.

The advisors discussed "*Onboard Sorting*." It was noted that there is technology currently available that the industry could put on vessels - such as EM sorting/AI technology that could better separate surfclam and ocean quahog. They noted that the costs of the technology are high and they expressed concerns about the technologies ability to address clams with broken shells.

A question was asked about processor discards - it was noted that there are no discards of the non-target clams being reports and some advisors indicated that the quahogs are pulled out of the surfclam cages and treated like any other trash (rocks, etc.) and disposed of.

There was discussion of the current "*Biological Sampling*," which included surfclam minimum size sampling and observer coverage.

There was discussion and clarification that bycatch/discards for the stock assessment is estimated from the onboard observation (observer coverage). The biological sampling is for the clam minimum size. The observer sampling is not known if it happens in areas where mixing occurs.

The advisors discussed how enforcement of the surfclam minimum size was handled back in the 1990's (when it was last implemented). Enforcement would subsample 2-3 bushels of clams if it looked like there were many clams that were smaller than the minimum size. Dump a cage to count and measure clams, and then would confiscate the entire load - if one cage was illegal the whole load was illegal. There were never multiple cages dumped - it was noted that it was hard enough to shovel one cage back in.

It was noted that on the belt, could have many clams moving down the belt rapidly, which made it difficult to sort the small clams out. Suspending size limit reduced this need for sorting and dumping the cages.

Rollers or shakers can handle the width of the clams - so both SC and OQ are about the same width and are not separated. Having to manually pick through would be difficult. Advisors want to find a way to do this without enforcement people as it will be very labor intensive.

There was discussion about the "Key Issues" noted in the document.

There was discussion about the processor's tolerance for mixing. Is it 1 or 2%? Is it treated as trash? It was stated that at present it is probably a single digit percentage because captains are actively avoiding these areas, but that at some processors it is being treated as trash and disposed.

Others noted that they are pulling surfclam from quahog cages and setting them aside in a cooler, and then processing them at next opportunity.

Some facilities use inspection belt, and some may shift from surfclam to quahog shucking. Advisors noted that if paying for a surfclam trip, they don't want a lot of quahogs in there.

SCEMFIS is developing a report will highlight the percent mixes in some of the areas if they were targeted (report due in October; snapshot of overlaps).

Surfclam trips are more valuable than quahog trips, but it is becoming less feasible to avoid quahogs. Staff asked if processor pays captains on yield of trip - each processor handles differently so that is proprietary. Some may do that. It was noted that it may not be higher revenue for better trip, but may be less desirable/high yield trip.

The group discussed aspects of processing - quahogs are generally steam shuck, but surfclam may be steam shucked or hand shucked. It was noted that the time of year and vessel may affect the surfclam mortality - particularly for those vessels that don't have refrigeration. Winter is less problematic because it is cooler.

Advisors noted that in NE/SNE do not have a mixing issue at this point; the species sets are further apart. The issue is more in the southern area (Hudson south to VA) - more effect to processors in NJ, MD, etc. Some of the smaller vessel fisheries in NE are having less of an issue- may not need monitoring - and perhaps some vessels could stay with zero tolerance.

The group then moved into discussion "*Possible Options*" to address the issue.

It was stated that this is a complex issue and that there should be a consideration of that North South separation. It was suggested that there should be consideration to moving the tagging of the resource into the processing plant to get accurate accounting on what is being caught, rather than on the vessel. This can only be done in an area where separation is possible. This species separation is not possible on the boat. It was stated that separation in the plant and reporting at the processing facility should be considered.

It was suggested noted that onboard sorting is implemented but is often less successful - so you could consider X% with monitoring of the amount retained at the processing sites through some sort of intensive processor sampling.

Another advisor noted that they felt monitoring/enforcement at the plant did not make sense. The plants don't have the equipment to do it there. Video, electronic sampling at the boat or plant is

not possible because the belt goes too fast, there is not 100% separation. At the plant, the material is about 8 inches thick.

Given the number of clams processed at a given time, it is not possible to visually inspect and pick up something off the belt.

Since we do not have a good handle on the degree of commingling of landed clams, it was also noted that a higher intensity of port sampling for a year or two could help better assess the intensity or degree of commingling in landed cages.

Separating quahog from surfclam on deck and dumping animals off the boat probably causes high mortality rates.

It was asked if mix trips are allowed (i.e., land both species on the same trip or cage)? They are not. Furthermore, you cannot land animals without appropriate cage tagging. One option may be to explore allowing mixed trips. So, perhaps allow mix trips with separated cages on board that tagged for each species could be a solution. That is allow for a trip to be declared as surfclam, quahog, or mixed trip. This could potentially be explored through the Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) program to work out some of the details, logistics before applying to entire fleet.

A question was asked whether these kinds of changes would require a modification of the FMP - staff and GARFO noted that changes to those regulation likely would need to go through a Council process/Amendment.

An FMAT member asked what type of real-time information would you need to avoid areas where mixed catches are found? And what considerations (e.g., mixing ratios) would be important when assessing to move to along to another fishing location? Response, the captain can see if you have mix catch in a single haul (at a coarse level) and may or may not decide to move to another fishing location. However, there is no rule of thumb and captain experience plays a major role in fishing decisions. Technology may be useful to assess some mixing level (e.g., 10%) and this could be beneficial, but a zero tolerance level (as currently in the regs) is not a good thing.

Additional summarized input from advisor who missed the webinar:

Enforcement now is not the same as 25 years ago - the relationship is different, and the clams are plentiful. So, the approach should be different than back then as they are more trustworthy.

Important to account for these species of clams - right now surfclam tags are being overused and cages are being underfilled, because of the presence of quahogs.

Beds of quahogs [in the south] are depleted now, and there are surfclam sets on those beds.

As an approach, you could potentially use the survey data to assess the amount of ocean quahog in a specific surfclam area; say area A. Then, apply that factor to the catch (i.e., proportion), and to all landings coming from area A to derive the amount of mixing in cages and required tags from those areas.

Monitoring approach that requires observers are not desirable as the observer program is not adequately staffed and funded as is - it would require substantial resources to use a program like this to monitoring mixing on board.