# Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

**August 2019**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on August 26, 2019 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 bluefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

**Advisory Panel members present:** Frank Blount (RI), Angelo Cannuli, Jr (MD), Victor Hartley III (NJ), Phil Langley, Jr (MD), Arnold Leo (NY), Kevin Wark (NJ), Judith Weis (NY).

**Others present:** Paul Eidman, Alan Bianchi (NCDMF), Chris Batsavage (NC), Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC Staff), Greg DiDomenico (GSSA), Mike Celestino (NJDFW), Paul Caruso, Rich King, Robert Lorenz, Rusty Hudson (FL), Steve Cannizzo (NY), Anthony Friedrich, Paul Caruso, John Boreman and Mark Holliday (MAFMC SSC), and Jose Montanez and Matt Seeley (MAFMC 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?

## Factors Influencing Catch

*Recreational*

There was consensus on the decrease in bluefish abundance coast wide. This was prevalent in northern states where bluefish were often identified to be further offshore and not available to anglers that typically target them (private anglers may not want to travel to where the bluefish are). In the southern states, bluefish abundance may have been slightly higher, yet still much lower than previous years (since bluefish have been offshore). Small fish (1-3 lbs) were available early in the year while larger fish (5-10 lbs) were not present for long periods of time. When available, large fish were present for no more than a week at a time.

**MA –** Age 1-2 bluefish are seasonally available near MA when they never were before. Larger

fish did not appear.

**NY –** Bluefish are not as ubiquitous as they once were. Off the East End of Long Island, the larger bluefish arrived in late May as usual, but thereafter there has been a very noticeable lack of smaller bluefish (1-3 lbs.) that typically are abundant in the bays.

**NY –** Often, the target species is sea bass, but when people run into bluefish, they harvest them regardless of the trip.

**NJ –** Charter fishermen noted that bluefish were abundant in 2017, yet the large fish did not show up at all in 2018. Little activity in the shallows that ended quickly. Surf casting was nonexistent. But, 10-18" bluefish are accessible inshore because anglers are targeting Spanish mackerel and bonito.

**NJ** – Shark boats have reported bluefish offshore (>30 miles) but party boats do not go that far to fish for bluefish. Thus, the fishery has shifted further offshore. People are not targeting local bluefish due to availability. The typical big bay run did not really happen, but some surf fishing has still proven successful. Often, bluefish have been reported offshore where anglers were targeting tuna (30-50 fathoms). Additionally, for-hire anglers typically observe smaller fish early on (1.5-2.5 lbs) and rarely see fish above 4-5 lbs. This may coincide with not targeting them offshore.

**MD** – Bluefish are targeted due to the striped bass northern migration in the Chesapeake Bay. Bluefish numbers have been down, and the mackerel numbers have been dominating the fishery. Role reversal compared to recent bluefish dominated years – 80% mackerel, 20% bluefish.

**MD** – 2017: huge influx of large fish, 2018: abundance went down, 2019: large fish coastal in state waters. Not targeted from the charter perspective. As people target Spanish mackerel, they encounter consistent 5-8 lb fish hanging around throughout the summer around the inlet on the nearshore shole.

**MD –** Party/Charter: 10 fish per angler has been adequate. Education – fresh bluefish is good to eat. Continue with outreach.

**NY/NC –** For-hire is slightly down in recent years due to restrictive bag limits for species like striped bass, which leads to lower directed trips. Since a bluefish trip is any trip where a bluefish is harvested, lower party/charter trips will result in less bluefish for-hire trips. Yet, not all states are experiencing a decrease in the for hire.

NC – 10 fish is enough

NY – need the 15 fish (the perception you can catch to the higher limit helps sell trips)

**NC –** Bluefish appear to have become more important as a target species to the recreational and for-hire fisheries in recent years, perhaps due to the lack of availability of state managed species. In the last few years, it seems that bluefish schools are smaller and a *little less* available. This year we never had the large fish. They often ranged from 1-3 lbs. Large fish were not targeted as much because we do not usually travel offshore for bluefish.

**NC –** Fish are consistently under 3 lbs. but are available in the surf throughout the winter. At times, people are using these schools of fish for crab bait even though bluefish have become more accepted as a culinary target.

**NC –** Lower bluefish availability leads to less interest in targeting them.

**NC –** In recent years, there have been some good year classes for nearshore species (e.g. Sea trout and red drum) in the fall. Typically, these species being available to fishermen results in less people targeting bluefish on party/charter vessels.

*Commercial*

**NY –** Have not seen such a poor showing of bluefish in a long time. Small run in the spring, but completely died off shortly after. Commercial report coincides with the available data. Bluefish in the Bay fishery on the east end of Long Island have been very scarce.

**NY –** Prefer status quo management from 2018 to 2019. Bluefish are no longer as ubiquitous as they once were. It is important to focus concerns on the young of the year. Fishing is not the problem, it is the availability which is driven by climate and water quality.

**NY/NJ –** Not likely that NY will exceed the commercial quota. Maintain the ability to transfer quota. Appreciate that quota transfers can happen but does not want to see fleets disabled due to loss of quota.

**NJ** – Strong and consistent recruitment events over the last few years. Will have a better estimate of abundance in late Fall because fish move out of the bays. Effort is down after a week and a half run of bigger fish (fish are staying offshore – environmental issues). Not many people are targeting them – landings down and recruitment constant.

**NC –** Proper care of bluefish is very important, and outreach should be conducted on how to handle bluefish from when they are landed until when they are consumed.

**Public Comment –** A member of the public from the southern region suggested creating another sector allocation that is subsistence fishing to support the anglers that are not commercially harvesting yet fishing "harder" in order to fill a freezer for the year. Responses by an AP member and other members of the public from the north wanted to make it clear that the for-hire industry does not want to see a reduction in the sector allocations for a subsistence fishery or see changes to the bag limits because many people appreciate being able to harvest the full limit and it offers incentive to go fishing.

**Market/Economic Conditions**

**NY** – Bluefish were available to sell for a very short period. They sold for $.70-.90/lb until fish were so scarce the gill netters stopped setting for them. For the second half of August, bluefish have been almost nonexistent in the local markets.

**NJ –** Point Pleasant will often catch and market bluefish successfully in November and December.

**NJ/VA –** Prices have been as high as $1.75/lb, which depends on volume. The small steady supply has been getting the money and we do our best to not oversaturate the market. People's perception on the market has changed and it has been hard to gauge due to the availability.

**NC –** Bluefish are becoming increasingly important to the recreational fishery, especially to the for-hire sector due to the decrease in abundance of other nearshore available species. Ultimately, if the large run of big fish occurs, it is a very good thing for the bluefish fishery.

**Management Issues**

**RI/NY/MD/NC –** There was contradiction between the northern and southern states related to the current 15 fish bag limit. An AP member stated that few recreational fishermen are likely to keep more than 10 fish and that they would like to see a reduction in the recreational bag limit. Furthermore, reducing the bag limit (to 10 fish) will likely have minimal impacts on anglers and would be more in line with state-specific bag limits. Other AP members do not want to see a change to the recreational bag limit because the higher limit creates incentive for the public in the for-hire fishery (even though they often do not "limit out").

**NY –** In the recreational fishery, bycatch/discard mortality may be higher than expected.

**NJ –** Very little commercial bluefish discards. Everything caught is brought to shore.

**MD** – Bag limit is not a constraining factor.

**NC –** Most recreational anglers do not keep a lot of bluefish. They throw back a mix of sizes depending on the individual. Need to protect abundance in the fishery. In North Carolina there is a citation program (not a ticket) which allows anglers to fill out a form at a weigh station for bluefish they release. They can receive a certificate for large bluefish in the "release" category. This promotes catch-and-release fishing.

**NC –** While the commercial discards are considered to be insignificant in the assessment, there is some localized bycatch in some commercial fisheries (beach seine, different trawls, and ocean drop net and estuarine flounder net fisheries) and not zero.

**Research Priorities**

Need to better understand the dynamics between the inshore and offshore populations. More specifically, during the spring migration, there is another component of the stock that stays way offshore and does not appear to be the same as the fish taking part of the spring migration. This offshore component of the stock seems to miss the Mid-Atlantic Bight during the migration up north (towards Montauk). It is important to investigate this migration event in order to better understand the dynamics of the stock. What are the differences between the offshore and inshore bluefish populations?

Future studies should look at the estuaries where juveniles live. The environmental conditions in the estuaries may be more important than that of the ocean for population success or decline. Researchers have found that snappers living in more polluted estuaries, eating more polluted menhaden and mummichogs, did not eat as much and did not grow as well as snappers in cleaner estuaries. The researchers did not trace them in the ocean, but suspect they are less likely to "make it" to become adults.

Research should be conducted to track down an estimate of what has caused a decline of this species. Identify the environmental factors leading to the change in stock status to better understand what environmental or non-environmental factors bluefish cue in on? What is causing more species like bluefish to move out? Dredges? Sand mining? Mobile gear? Water quality?

Conduct a post-release mortality study to identify the amount of fish released by recreational anglers that actually die. Additionally, identify how many fish are “released” dead.

Conduct environmental investigations to address shifting natural shorelines and habitat destruction.

Identify any cyclical patterns in abundance over the past 50 years. What causes these patterns (if any) and can we identify the factors that may be influencing them?

Investigate public stakeholder perception of the recreational bluefish fishery in order to identify how the public would like this fishery to look like in years to come. Bluefish is an important recreational fishery and it is important to ask the recreational fishing community to investigate how they perceive this fishery in the future. Use for-hire logbooks to see what kind of data we can capture. We want to use that data to better understand where the fish are and how to characterize the recreational fishery. This could emerge into a good educational and outreach opportunity.

**Other Issues**

Biological characteristics of bluefish life history need to be considered when developing catch and landings limits recommendations for this species. There is evidence that as bluefish migrate along the coast during the spring and summer there may be multiple spawning events. Recent observations are leading fishermen to believe what we think we know may be incorrect. Management should be tailor made for typical or atypical life histories, depending on the species under consideration.

The bluefish permit is open access and leads to a lot of unnecessary permits. This makes it more difficult to identity who is actually fishing, and often presents cases where what happens on the water does not equal up to who is permitted.

# Appendix A

## Bluefish Research Priorities

Below are the research priorities for bluefish that the Council identified in their Comprehensive Five Year (2016-2020) Research Plan. We are seeking feedback from the AP on these priorities (are they right, wrong, which are most important etc.) or other research priorities that you may have for the development of the next comprehensive research plan.

**Surveys:**

*Fishery-Dependent*

- Evaluate species associations with recreational angler trips targeting bluefish to potentially modify the bluefish recreational CPUE index used in the assessment.
- Initiate fishery-dependent sampling of offshore populations of bluefish.

*Fishery-Independent*

- Develop a fishery independent index that better captures older, larger fish (which would reduce reliance on MRIP sampling).

**Modelling/Quantitative:**

- Develop bluefish specific MSY reference points or proxies.
- Evaluate changes in selectivity of age-0 bluefish relative to water temperature.
- Evaluate methods for integrating disparate indices produced at multiple spatial and temporal scales into a stock-wide assessment model.

**Biology/Life History/Habitat:**

- Investigate how environmental variability may affect juvenile movements and distribution, which in turn, may affect availability.