



Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report

February 2020

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 20, 2020 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 blueline tilefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Advisory Panel members present: Fred Akers (Private), David Arbeitman (Bait and tackle), Ron Callis (Private), Dan Farnham (Commercial), Carl Forsberg (For-hire), Gregory Hueth (Private/For-hire), and Michael Johnson (Fisherman).

Others present: Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Laurie Nolan (Council Member), Doug Potts (GARFO), Paul Rago (SSC), John Boreman (SSC), Andy Loftus (Loftus Consulting), 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?

Factors Influencing Catch

AP members confirmed that no major changes have been observed for blueline tilefish in terms of catch rates/composition. Once blueline tilefish limits are met, recreational trips search for other targets (often golden tilefish). However, there is a sense from some AP members that the fishery restrictions are/will be benefiting recreational catch per unit effort.

When targeting other species, trip limits restrict commercial fishermen from targeting areas where blueline tilefish are present. The increase in trip limit to 500 pounds from 300 pounds was beneficial because the areas where advisors interact with blueline tilefish usually results in healthy interactions with other species. Some trips went over 300 pounds, but not regularly targeting blueline tilefish. Very localized in heavy concentrations especially in the Hudson Canyon. At times, it is hard to get away from the bluelines when targeting golden and it's nice to be able to not have to discard any bluelines especially when catching more goldens. Trip limits

do not seem to be causing discarding issues. The Council should consider implementing a trigger to keep more than 500 pounds of blueline tilefish when targeting large quantities of golden tilefish that result in high incidental landings of blueelines. However, do not create a situation where people are going to direct on them since the commercial quota is so low.

AP members indicated that the majority of the time they target blueline tilefish they land the recreational trip limits. They also indicated that the 3 fish limit is definitely limiting. Additionally, the seasonal closure at October 31 could potentially depress catch and effort, which may be beneficial to the stock. Often AP members try to target golden and find that blueline abundance is limiting.

Regulations are keeping harvest where they should be since we currently do not have an accepted stock assessment in the Mid-Atlantic. Advisors agreed that they want to see how the current specifications and management measures play out since this is still a newly managed fishery in the Mid-Atlantic.

Recreational effort decreased this year as it does not make economic sense to target blueline tilefish when tuna are not present. Moderate tuna availability in deeper water translates into the highest effort (enough tuna to create effort, but not so much as to occupy interest for a whole trip). Tuna fishing was good in the Hudson until about October, but AP members could not speak to locations much further south. When compared to 2018, tuna fishing (which leads to tilefish fishing) was better, but still not great.

Market/Economic Conditions

Advisors indicated that in New York (Hunts Point) they were receiving approximately \$2.85 per pound, and occasionally as high as \$3.00 per pound for larger fish. Advisors remain confident that there is continued demand for blueline tilefish, but this demand is driven by low and sporadic supply.

Management Issues

To avoid regulatory discarding, anglers often shift effort away from blueline tilefish once the limit is reached. Small amounts of discards do occur as incidental interactions when targeting golden tilefish. But multiple advisors indicated they often know where blueline tilefish are and they know how to avoid them. Thus, the trip limit did not really affect the incidental fishery.

AP members advocate to maintain the 3 (private), 5 (U.S. Coast Guard *uninspected* vessel), 7 (U.S. Coast Guard *inspected* vessel) bag limits in place since there is currently limited reporting for private anglers and we are still learning how the fishery responds to management in the Mid-Atlantic. Additionally, head boat captains indicated that if bag limits drop lower than **7 fish** the head boat community will have greater difficulty filling their trips. They confirmed that the larger bag limit is necessary to encourage anglers to come out.

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a higher trip limit for longer recreational trips, structured after Gulf of Mexico regulations (makes filling trips easier). Other AP members

were concerned about the impact of higher recreational limits on the overall fishery especially given low ABC and recreational catch uncertainty. Advisors want to avoid creating a directed fishery especially with the uncertainty of the overall stock.

Regarding the recreational measures in Amendment 6 to the Tilefish FMP: Advisors recommended multi-day considerations for head boat trips. Following this recommendation, one advisor recommended staying with the current system as it is very important to keep the recreational and commercial sector within the ABC.

For-hire advisors indicated they would like to see captain and crew included in the bag limits.

Hurricanes and shifts in climate conditions drastically reduced the number of days (effort) vessels were able to fish.

Research Priorities

Discussion focused on the need to improve the understanding of biological and life history traits. Specifically, age validation, maturity, post-release mortality, and movement. One advisor stated that a defined sampling program has the potential to hit on multiple priorities. For example, developing a tagging program (using applied and natural tags) offers insight into movement, age, maturity, and habitat preference. Additionally, no recommendations were provided on future fishery dependent or independent surveys. More blues now than 6 years ago. Blues are in places they have never been before in waters as shallow as 60-80 feet.

One AP member indicated that it was beneficial the Pilot Tilefish Survey was completed, so it could be compared to the results from the ongoing tilefish survey work being conducted by Coonamessett Fam Foundation (Developing a method for assessing tilefish stocks using a baited underwater video system).

The AP remained unanimous in their recommendation that permitting and reporting be developed for private recreational anglers. This information will offer insight into the impacts private anglers have on the recreational fishery for catch/landings and effort. Furthermore, the Council approved private permitting and reporting requirements for tilefish in 2017 through Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) (added blue line tilefish to the FMP) and are now awaiting implementation. One advisor suggested that NMFS target the HMS permit holders to identify the greater private recreational tilefish community.