

2015 MAFMC Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

The Mid-Atlantic Council's Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met from 9:00 AM – 11:45 AM June 25, 2015 via webinar to develop a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for consideration during the upcoming bluefish specification cycle. After the meeting, the AP reviewed and approved the summary below as the FPR.

Attendance

MAFMC Bluefish Advisers: Noel Angelucci (NJ recreational), Arnold Leo (NY commercial/East Hampton Baymen's Association), Kevin Wark (NJ commercial), Greg DiDomenico (VA commercial/Garden State Seafood Association), Steven Witthuhn (NY recreational for-hire & commercial), Thomas Roller (NC recreational for-hire).

ASMFC Bluefish Advisors: Kevin Wark (NJ commercial), Don Swanson (NH recreational).

MAFMC SSC members: John Boreman (Chair), Doug Vaughan.

Staff and Other Participants: José Montañez (MAFMC staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC staff), Chris Batsavage (NC Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources and MAFMC member)

Because of the localized nature of AP members' observations, remarks under each heading are attributed to the states represented on the AP.

Recreational Fishery Issues

NH – Bluefish are being targeted much more heavily. This is likely a consequence of the reduced abundance of groundfish.

NH – Availability to the recreational fishery appeared to be down at the start of the year in 2014 but as time went on, it turned out that the fish were being encountered in different than usual places and under different patterns. The abundance was high and a very broad range of sizes was caught, including very large fish.

NY – Charter boats in Montauk have reported an average season (typical season). They can easily catch 12 bluefish in a six-man charter boat trip. The bluefish has not become nuisance when fishing for stripers.

NJ – This year, party boats have fished for bluefish in the estuaries and bays (due to the unusually large amount of large fish in those areas) as opposed to their normal offshore spots where they typically fish. Party boats have not been doing well farther offshore as in the previous years because fish stayed inshore in large amounts and for a long period of time. Shark boats have reported large amounts of bluefish offshore (>30 miles) but party boats do not go

that far to fish for blues. In addition, large amounts of forage fish have also been reported near beach areas (menhaden and sand eels).

NC – Bluefish seemingly becoming a lot more important as a target species to the recreational and for-hire fisheries (due to lack of availability of state managed species). In the last few years it had seemed that bluefish schools were smaller and a little less available. While bluefish are on average smaller in North Carolina (compared to Northern states), they do typically see an early run of large fish in May and early June but this was not the case in the last couple of years. This year (2015) it seems that the schools look much better and larger.

NY/NC – Think that we need to be cautious even though abundance seems to be larger this year. Do not want to see bluefish targeted heavily now that bass or other species are down.

Commercial Fishery Issues

NY – The bluefish run has been normal by most reports from commercial fishermen, but two fishermen have reported high abundance of bluefish in areas of the Peconic Bay and near Montauk Point that they associate with huge runs of menhaden, which are extremely abundant this year.

NJ – Commercial fishermen have been carrying different net sizes because encountering different groupings of bluefish fish by size.

NJ – Shark boats have reported large amounts of bluefish offshore (>30 miles) but this is too far some smaller boats to go to target bluefish due to fuel cost and inability to use gear efficiently in deeper waters (deeper than 15 fathoms).

NY – In past several years, commercial landings have been above the allocation to that state and they had to get transfers when surplus quota exists in other states that do not land their entire bluefish quota.

NJ – There are factors that sometimes does not allow for commercial fishermen to land their entire bluefish quota. For example, when fuel prices started to increase it hampered the ability of commercial fishermen to travel long distances to search for bluefish. In addition, when stripers are close to shore and get mix with bluefish you do not venture to catch bluefish. Lastly, the amount of bluefish that you may catch also depends on what is happening in other fisheries and availability of other species and market needs. New Jersey (like NY) have had to request bluefish quota transfers in prior years to avoid early closures.

Market / Economic Issues

NJ – While the bluefish price on a costwide basis is about \$0.60/lb, it varies depending on where you are. Prices tend to fluctuate drastically depending on a variety of reasons such as amount landed, gear type used to land fish, and where they are caught. Sometimes avoid caching large quantities of fish to assure good product quality.

It was also reported that in MA they are getting good money for bluefish but no specific price (\$/lb) was available. The price for hook caught fish in MA has been reported to be good this season.

Shark boats participating in offshore tournaments (> 30 miles to the east) have reported large bluefish abundance. However, commercial bluefish fishermen do not venture that far due to fuel cost and inability to use gear efficiently in deeper waters (deeper than 15 fathoms). They used to be fairly dependable to the east of Barnegat, and less so to the south around Cape May. Currently, the fish are concentrated more to the east and offshore. When you get a large catch, the payoff can be good, but a lot depends on the market which is unpredictable due to highly variable demand. In the past the fish have come in in two pulses, but the second pulse of summer fish appears to be staying offshore and going north. Barnegat Light has become what Cape May used to be like in terms of availability of bluefish.

Typically you see smaller fish in the bays around May-June. But this year, a huge amount of large bluefish has been reported in various bays/estuaries throughout the state. It is unusual to see this many large big fish in the bays for an extended period of time and it is hard not to associate this with a major spawning event.

Some of the tackle shops had a good spring selling supplies to anglers that were targeting large bluefish in the bays and estuaries.

VA – At the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass demersal meeting it was reported that there has been an increase in bluefish importance to the bait & tackle/for-hire business in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions due to issues with the striped bass fishery. Bluefish has always been important but this year is becoming even more important due to issues in other recreational fisheries. Would not like to see changes to the bag limit due to the increasing importance of the fishery.

NY – This year (2015) the low price has so far been around \$0.25/lb (where as in 2014 the low price was around \$0.10/lb). In both, this season (so far) and in 2014, the average price was around \$0.60/lb.

NC – Recreationally, the for-hire sector have seen less large bluefish in the spring. On average they see smaller fish than in the Northeast. Bluefish is becoming increasingly important to the recreational fishery and especially for the for-hire sector due to the increase in management regulations/restrictions in other fisheries.

NY – Certain areas have good abundance of bluefish but maybe we should proceed with caution.

NJ – In the 1980s consumers demanded smaller bluefish (~4 lb) and that is what was targeted them. More recently, in the last 15 years, the market prefers larger fish (~8-12 lb). However, in the early 1980s it was difficult to find larger fish, smaller fish were more abundant. In the last 20 years or so, fisherman had to construct new nets as the size of bluefish seemed to get larger and stronger.

NJ – Currently, you get a good price regardless of fish size landed when few fish have entered the market. Sell to customers along the Northeast (e.g., Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York). Specializes in providing a good quality product to the market. Work along with other producers to avoid market gluts. Quota stability is important to maintain the infrastructure of fishing communities.

NY – The preferred bluefish is ~2 to 4 lb (east end of long island). The larger fish is regarded as too oily and unpalatable (so not as marketable).

Environmental Issues

NH – The distribution of forage may have shifted and pulled bluefish into areas where they are not typically caught.

VA – Over the last 10 years there has been no significant changes to the traditional spring migration. However, there appears to be another component of the stock that stays way off shore and does not appear to be the same fish that are found during the spring migration. It is not likely that this is due to forage issues (as availability is high) but likely a natural fluctuation that needs to be understood.

VA/NY – This year, it has been reported that an unusually large amount of large fish have stayed in the estuaries and bays for a larger than typical amount of time. If water temperature and salinity were appropriate this may have resulted in a large spawning event.

NJ – Typically, as water temperatures get too warm (~ high 70 °F), bluefish will move away. Not sure how this season will turnout (every season is different) but already seen water temperatures increasing (~74 °F), so it is likely that fish will move east.

Management Issues/Fishery Regulations

NY – Difficult to make comments on management without having benchmark stock assessment information available, because the information that comes out of the assessment will impact management. Nevertheless, in general terms the management system has been quite

successful. The stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring according to the last assessment update. The quotas seem to be adequate for both commercial and recreational fisheries. Management seems to be doing the right thing.

NH/NY/NC – The current 15 fish bag limit was considered to be excessive. Not too many recreational fishermen are likely to keep 10/15 fish. Would like to see a reduction in the recreational bag limit. On advisor specifically indicated that catch and landings frequencies tables shown during the meeting suggest minimal impact on anglers if the recreational bag limit were to be reduced to 10 fish and a reduced bag limit would be more in keeping with state-specified bag limits.

NJ – While the average angler may not want to land 15 bluefish, some ethnic groups fishing on party boats may not go fishing if they cannot land a good amount of bluefish (subsistence fishery).

NC – Recreational anglers do not keep a lot of bluefish. They throw back a mix of sizes depending on the individual. Need to protect the abundance in the fishery, this is very important for the viability of the recreational sector.

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

NY – Commercial discard rates are very low or near zero.

NY/NC – Discard issues in the recreational fishery could be improve by implementing educational programs to minimize post-release fish mortality, catch what you are going to eat, and stress single hook and circle hooks (e.g., inline) benefits.

Research Issues

- 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?

- Due to the recent phenomenon related to the large amounts of fish from the spring migration staying close to shore and in the bays/estuaries for a long period of time (during a time that we know they spawn), it would be important to understand if they have spawned this year and how this will impact future recruitments into the fishery.

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 migrates along the coast during the spring and summer there may be multiple spawning events. With a species as productive as bluefish, that matures early, and has the potential for multiple spawning events increases the possibility for recruitment and availability for this species.