

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council)
Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fishery Performance Report (FPR)
May 2013

The Council's Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Advisory Panel met on May 3, 2013 to review the Surfclam and Ocean Quahog AP information documents and develop a fishery performance report based on advisor perspectives on these fisheries.

Council advisors that attended the meeting: Thomas Alspach, Thomas Dameron, Joseph Lacotte, Michael LaVecchia, Samuel Martin, George Richardson, David Wallace
Staff and Scientific and Statistical Committee: Bonnie McCay (SSC), Jessica Coakley (Staff), José Montañez (Staff)
Public: Tom Hoff, Daphne Munroe

Surfclam and Ocean Quahog

Market Issues

- For surfclams and ocean quahogs, there are occasional landings in Ocean City, MD. It used to be significant but is no longer. Cape May and Wildwood, NJ are no longer significant. Most of the fleet is fishing out of Pt. Pleasant and Atlantic City, NJ, Oceanview, NY (surfclams only), and New Bedford, MA. Vessels have been moving North and shifting effort.
- For Maine quahogs, the quahogs have increased to sizes larger than the preferred small size for the market, which explains the decline in the catch rates for Maine quahogs.
- A major reason clam plants have been closed over the last 20 years has been wastewater. Two plants that recently closed or consolidated (and were grandfathered in before Clean Water Act) are Miles processing in Virginia and Blount processing in Rhode Island. Both had water permits coming due, and the capital investment to stay in business by implementing required wastewater regulations would have been too great. Miles consolidated with another entity, and Blount exited the shellstock processing sector. Neither facility is being used for clam shellstock processing; they are doing secondary processing such as Individual Quick Frozen (IQF) and other value added products.
- Another reason for recent consolidation has been the cost of fuel prices and the distance needed to travel to harvest clams - which cascades through the vessel, processors, ports, etc., and has put greater economy on scale and location. Vessel discharge permits will be additional costs, and will affect both vessels and docks. Vessels that have ballast tanks are required to have a vessel discard permit for those vessels greater than 79 ft. In 2014, new requirements are going to affect all vessels (not just those greater than 79 ft) to deal with management of ballast water, upgrade requirements, and paperwork.
- Increasing foreign imports and foreign competition puts a constraint on price, and the price cannot be increased to absorb all the additional costs and still be competitive in the market place.

- The cost of complying regulatory function has increased. Prior to 1990, there were already great regulatory costs (e.g., Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and other fisheries related regulations). Since the ITQ went into place to the present, the regulatory function has increased substantially (e.g., coast guard, habitat requirements, bycatch species (marine mammals), etc.) and the cost of staying up to date and following the regulatory requirements (complexity and number) is expanding. The National Shellfish Sanitation Program will eventually catch up (currently under some exemptions), which may end up requiring on board refrigeration, etc., that older boats or smaller boats will have difficulty complying.
- Vessels built after July 2013 will need to be "classed", and then subsequently kept in that class by inspections, which created significant cost considerations.
- The push to comply with global food safety requirements/initiatives and sustainability certification lead to additional costs. The global food safety ratings are being required by buyers, and if not satisfied could lead to buyers choosing not to use specific suppliers.
- The seafood imported into the US needs to be compliant with hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) but may not have to meet the third party audits, which makes the domestic seafood more expensive. During a recertification process, it becomes more stringent than the initial certification ("keep raising the bar"); the facility could be found not compliant.
- The limit in demand for clams in the market is driven by many market factors including foreign seafood competition, other products in the marketplace (chicken, etc.), shifting toward healthier market products (e.g., clam sushi, etc. versus a fried or cream based product), and competition with other ingredients, as clams typically are not a center of the plate product.

Environmental and Ecological Issues

- Many species (including surfclams and ocean quahogs) are moving toward the poles and into deeper waters. This movement is temperature driven.
- Historically, about half the quota for quahogs used to be taken in the area off of Ocean City, Maryland. The surfclams are increasing in these areas, possibly because of the faster growth rates for surfclams settling when compared to quahogs. Some of the Southern beds that used to be quahog beds now have surfclam recruitments.
- The areas of overlap between surfclams and ocean quahogs may be increasing, which has the potential to create additional work to separate mixed catches as it's labor intensive to go into an area that contains both. But if the catch rates are high enough for surfclams, it may be worthwhile to fish in those areas. In Northern areas, there appears to be a cleaner separation between surfclams and ocean quahogs. The 20 fathoms contour appears to be the depth boundary line for ocean quahogs for the Mid-Atlantic and Southern New England areas.
- The natural shift in the stocks distribution northwards has driven the movement of the fishery.

- Scallops are being caught in the quahog fishery. There is a concern by some industry participants that this may become a bycatch/mortality issue given the additional pressure on the scallop stock by the scallop fleet, and the recent interest in minimizing mortality for that stock. In particular, there is focus on the clam gear impacts on the scallop stock.

- The issue of bottom tending mobile gear impacts on habitat will continue to be an issue. The environmental community is focused on these issues and there has been a push for increased closures as a tool to reduce habitat impacts. Many of these approaches used are not always based on the best available information to describe impacts and possible approaches.

- There is some concern about whether the data on clam sizes fully reflects what is being observed by some industry participants, and there is a concern by some that smaller clams are being targeted. The harvesting of small surfclams (under 4 3/4 inch), may limit the number of times the clams are able to spawn. Allowing the clams to grow to larger sizes will fill cages with fewer clams.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

- The Mid-Atlantic Council needs to be more involved in habitat issues (and other issues) that are being proposed through the New England Council process. Many gear or fishery closures are being proposed for species such as groundfish, that will impact surfclam, ocean quahog, and other fisheries (e.g., Georges Bank, Great South Channel, and Nantucket Shoals, etc.). The Council has limited seats on the Groundfish and Habitat Committees, and is often not fully integrated or up to date on the actions that New England has proposed that affect Mid-Atlantic species. For industry, keeping up to date and being proactive about what is being proposed is an additional cost. Small fishermen are less able to afford to send people to meetings to stay engaged on the issues.

General Fishing Trends

- Effort is moving northward because the catch rates are higher.

- Surfclam inventories have come down in recent years and this has resulted in an increased need for production, which has come from smaller surfclam vessels in New England, due to efficiencies in smaller vessels. Those vessels are harvesting closer to shore (with fewer cages). A large boat may be not as efficient, as they have to travel further to fill the cages.

- The larger vessels will be accessing Georges Bank, because of the distances traveled and effects of weather. Nantucket Shoals is a smaller boat fishery.

- The larger surfclam vessels going to Georges Bank may take pressure off some of the nearshore areas, or southern areas such as NJ.

- The LPUE may not be indicative of abundance because it only reflects the fishing occurring in a few ten minute squares. The SARC panel recommended a more detailed analysis be undertaken on LPUE, and did not make definitive conclusions about the utility of LPUE as an index of

abundance. The advisors noted that the LPUE's in the 1970's and 1980's were lower, then increased, and then decreased again. The Advisors were concerned that some of the figures in the CRD13-04 did not include these longer time series showing those initial lower levels. These longer time series figures are in the final assessment report.

Other

- The group would like to see status quo quotas for the upcoming fishing years; the stability in the quota translates into stability in the fishery and market.