

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council)
Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fishery Performance Report (FPR)
April 2014

The Council's Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Advisory Panel met on April 23, 2014 via webinar and in-person at the Council office to review 2014 data updates to the Surfclam and Ocean Quahog AP information documents and revise the 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, David Wallace

Staff and Scientific and Statistical Committee: John Boreman (SSC), Ed Houde (SSC), Jessica Coakley (Staff), José Montañez (Staff)

Public: Peter Himchak, Tom Hoff, Pete Jensen, Tony Kratowicz

Surfclam and Ocean Quahog

Critical Issues

- The most critical current challenge to the surfclam and ocean quahog fishery is the New England Council's Omnibus Habitat Amendment which has the potential to ban bottom tending mobile gear (including clam dredges) from high energy sand environments where the surfclam and ocean quahogs fishery is the only fishery being prosecuted. This action has the potential impact on the spatial distribution of the fishery, which will result in biological impacts as well as social and economic impacts. It also impacts the Mid-Atlantic Council's ability to manage its jurisdictional fishery for surfclam and ocean quahogs.

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, Hyannis, MA (surfclams only), and New Bedford, MA. Vessels have been moving North and shifting effort (Tables 2 a,b of Information Documents).

- 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 recently had permits coming due and closed because of the wastewater requirement and capital investments needed to meet permit limits.

- 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.

- 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 individual transferrable quota (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.

- 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 Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MAFAC) has recommended that NOAA Fisheries use their inspection service to develop sustainability certifications for US seafood similar to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and other independent groups.

- 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.

- 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 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 or into deeper waters. This movement is temperature driven. Historically, about half the quota for quahogs used to be taken in the area off the Southern area. The surfclams are increasing in these Southern 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 natural shift in the stocks distribution northwards has driven the movement of the fishery (Tables 2a,b of Information Documents).

- The issue of bottom tending mobile gear impacts on habitat will continue to be a concern. 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. Amendment 17 (Cost Recovery Amendment) will also review and update if needed any essential fish habitat (EFH) and fishery impacts for surfclams and ocean quahogs. The spatial area for the fishery is small and the gear impacts are considered to be minimal and temporary in nature, due to the high energy sand environments.

- Two positive aspects to support the sustainability of the surfclam and ocean quahog resources include, 1) the opening of Georges Bank has mitigated some of the prior concerns by providing access to more, larger clams and alleviating some of the fishing pressure from the Southern areas, 2) there are ongoing discussions and research projects examining how best to protect small clam areas and increase productivity of the surfclam and quahog stocks (Science Center for Marine Fisheries; SCeMFIS).

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 now has additional seats on the Habitat Committee to better engage with the New England Council on issues that affect surfclams and ocean quahogs. Advisors urge the Mid-Atlantic Council to appoint members from states that are most engaged and knowledgeable about these fisheries. 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 resulting in a smaller footprint from dredging activity on habitat (Tables 2a,b of Information Documents).

- 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 has taken pressure off some of the nearshore areas, and Southern areas.

- The landings per unit effort (LPUE) may not be indicative of abundance because it only reflects the fishing occurring in a few ten minute squares. The Stock Assessment Review Committee (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 Issues

- 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.
- The new SCeFiS is industry and National Science Foundation (NSF) supported and has several ongoing research projects: 1) shell breakage studies for surfclams and ocean quahogs to reduce survey uncertainty in abundance estimates, 2) modified selectivity dredge design work with tighter bar spacing to improve selectivity gear for surveys (and remove need to line with chicken wire), 3) targeted investigations of biological reference point development for black sea bass, surfclams, and ocean quahogs, and, 4) a management strategy evaluation (MSE) which examines spatial management approaches, including rotational and regional closures.
- Some advisors expressed concerns about the conclusions included in the ocean quahog assessment update provided by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) last year (Chute A., Hennen D, Russell R, Jacobson L. 2013. Stock Assessment Update for Ocean Quahogs (*Arctica islandica*) through 2011. NEFSC Ref Doc 13-17; 156 p. Available from: National Marine Fisheries Service, 166 Water Street, Woods Hole, MA 02543-1026, or online at <http://nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/>). Specifically, there were concerns about the statements that, "Based on assessment data, the ocean quahog population is an unproductive stock with infrequent recruitment, and thus vulnerable to overfishing. After three decades of fishing at a low F, the stock as a whole is being fished down.", and that, "Recruitment events appear to be localized and separated by decades, although survey length frequencies show that a low level of recruitment occurs on a continuous basis. The potential contribution of this recruitment to stock biomass and productivity is unknown." Although these statements were made, the stock has declined by about 15% over the last three decades showing little cause for concern from the industry perspective.