

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council)
Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Fishery Performance Report (FPR)
April 2015

The Council's Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Advisory Panel met on April 13, 2015 via webinar and in-person at the Council office to review 2015 data updates to the surfclam and ocean quahog fishery information documents and revise the fishery performance report based on advisor perspectives on these fisheries.

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Council Members: Lee Anderson

Public: Peter Himchak, Tom Hoff, Pete Jensen, Joe Myers

Staff and Scientific and Statistical Committee: John Boreman (SSC), Bonnie McCay (SSC), David Tomberlin (SSC), Doug Vaughan (SSC), Jessica Coakley (Staff), José Montañez (Staff), Doug Potts (GARFO Staff)

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. The industry needs the support of the Council and NMFS in addressing these concerns.

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 (See figures 7-11 in Surfclam Info. Document; figures 4-8 in Quahog Info. Document).

- 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 and prices 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. Fuel prices have declined giving some relief to industry participants. Commercial Fishing vessels have also been given a 3 year exemption to the Vessel Discharge Permit regulations.

- 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. New U.S.C.G. regulations soon to go into effect will: "(1) Require training, or demonstration of knowledge and competency, for all individuals in charge of commercial clam vessels operating in federal waters. (2) Require new commercial fishing vessels, built after July 1, 2013, that are 79 feet or greater in length to be assigned a load line. (3) Require new commercial fishing vessels, built after July 1, 2013, that are at least 50 feet overall in length and will operate in federal waters to meet survey and classification requirements. Commercial fishing vessels built to class requirements before July 1, 2013 must remain in class. (4) Require certain commercial fishing vessels that undergo a major conversion to comply with an "alternate safety compliance program" to be developed for both load line and construction standards requirements."

- 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 (See figures 7-11 in Surfclam Info. Document; figures 4-8 in Quahog Info. Document).
- 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. 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.
- Advisors ask MAFMC to provide BOEM all relevant data on SC/OQ habitat and highlight the devastating effect a BP like disaster would have on our fishery if oil and gas leases were given out in the waters to the south [in Mid-Atlantic] that are now under consideration.

General Fishing Trends

- Effort is moving northward because the catch rates are higher, resulting in a smaller footprint from dredging activity on habitat (See figures 10-11 in Surfclam Info. Document; figures 7-8 in Quahog Info. Document).

- 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:
 - The Science Center for Marine Fisheries (SCeMFis), with contributions from NMFS NEFSC, has completed research into data corrections for the breakage of clams in survey mode. This research was taken up because of the additional breakage since switching over to an industry vessel for surveys. If any size clam, large or small, experienced disproportionate breakage the age demographic of the population would not be accurately represented in the assessment. The draft report has been released to the SCeMFis Industry Advisory Board (IAB) and the final report will be publically available after a 60 day IAB review period.
 - SCeMFis has completed the fabrication of a dredge for the collection of juvenile (pre-recruit size) ocean quahog and surfclams. The new Dameron-Kubiak dredge, to be used for selectivity sampling typically conducted during survey operations, has been tested by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, NMFS, and found to improve selectivity experiments. The draft report has been released to the IAB and the final report will be publically available after a 60 day review period.
 - SCeMFis is evaluating an area management strategy for the surfclam fishery as one of its projects.
 - SCeMFis has funded Ocean Quahog recruitment and life history dynamics research. This is necessary research for the improvements of reference points and the reduction of uncertainty in the assessment of ocean quahogs. Large quahogs from four separate locations from New Jersey to Georges Bank are being collected and aged to gain

information on age structure and recruitment history in this older population of the demographic. The Dameron-Kubiak dredge was used to retain small quahogs in a selectivity study south of Long Island. These quahogs are being aged to describe the recent age frequency and recruitment history. Combining both recent (small clam) and extended historical (large clam) data sets will provide a more comprehensive recruitment history for the improvement of the federal management plan for this species.

- SCeMFiS has funded an Ocean Quahog assessment team made up of Drs. Daphne Monroe, Eric Powell and Roger Mann. The team will attend meetings of the Invertebrate Subcommittee, SAW and MAFMC SSC and support the academic commitment to the ocean quahog benchmark assessments. The team will provide new information through the Invertebrate Subcommittee process on historical and recent recruitment to address SSC concerns. The SCeMFiS team will interface with and provide support to the NMFS assessment team during the assessment process with the goal of reducing uncertainty in the assessment process.