



Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel Webinar

February 6, 2017

Council Advisory Panel members: Mark Hodges* (VA), Sam Martin (NJ), Joan Berko (NJ), Steve Witthuhn (NY), Brady Lybarger (NJ), Lisa Poyer (NY), Harvey Yenkinson (PA), James Fletcher (NC), Jeff Gutman (NJ), Jan McDowell (VA), Michael Plaia* (CT), Mary Fabrizio (VA), Monty Hawkins (MD), Greg Hueth (NJ)

Commission Advisory Panel members: Frank Blount (RI), Marc Hoffman (NY), Greg DiDomenico (NJ), Robert Busby (NY), James Tietje (MA), Jack Conway (CT), Joseph Huckemeyer (MA), Mark Hodges* (VA), Ken Neill (VA), Michael Hall (RI), Michael Plaia* (CT)

* Serves on both Council and Commission Advisory Panels

Others: EC Newellman (FisheryNation.com), Greg Power (GARFO), Kevin Chu (GARFO), Purcie Bennett-Nickerson (Pew Charitable Trusts), Katie Almeida (The Town Dock), Angel Willey (MD DNR), Steve Doctor (MD DNR; Monitoring Committee), "ST", Brandon Muffley (Council staff), Kiley Dancy (Council staff), Julia Beaty (Council staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC staff), Sean O'Neill, Mark Terceiro (NEFSC; Monitoring Committee), Wes Townsend (Council member)

Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panels (APs) met via webinar to discuss the 2016 benchmark stock assessment for black sea bass, review the 2017 – 2019 black sea bass specifications recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and Monitoring Committee, and 2017 recreational black sea bass measures. Advisor comments on each of these topics are summarized below.

2016 Black Sea Bass Benchmark Stock Assessment

Advisors did not provide many comments specific to the benchmark assessment, although were generally supportive of the assessment and the results regarding the status of the stock. One advisor expressed that he believed the information provided to the advisors regarding the stock, specifically the population abundance, was not accurate. A few advisors did have questions regarding the management of the north Atlantic stock, the management and fishery implications for the two sub-units that were modeled, and how the data from each sub-unit was used in the assessment.

2017 – 2019 Black Sea Bass Specifications

Three advisors recommended constant Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) specifications for 2017 – 2019, using the average of the three years, to allow for consistency and stability. These advisors expressed concerns regarding declining ABCs from 2017 – 2019 recommended by the SSC resulting from the declining stock biomass. A more consistent and precautionary approach should be considered to minimize the year-to-year changes in the ABC. If new information becomes available, then the specifications can be re-evaluated. Two advisors recommended the SSC reconsider the ABC for 2018 and 2019 at upcoming meeting. One advisor commented that implementing a management system based on fishing mortality instead of hard quotas would also allow for consistency.

One advisor noted that the science needs to look at and evaluate the tides and lunar cycles and their influence on the sea bass population. According to this advisor, these events drive recruitment and the population.

2017 Black Sea Bass Recreational Measures

Four advisors indicated that there should be no consideration of any cuts for 2017 and if anything should be proposed, it should be even higher quotas and much less restrictive measures. The assessment should set a new baseline as the information shows sea bass are abundant. Liberalizations such as 11” size limits and year round seasons were some options suggested. Two advisors noted that the management system is broken and constituents are losing faith in the process. Two advisors noted that, given that the stock assessment indicates that spawning stock biomass is 2.3 times the target, these measures are as good as its going to get and measures are only going to get worse as the stock is projected to decline in the future. Some advisors said that recreational management measures were better when the stock was in poor shape than when it is abundant.

Two advisors expressed concerns regarding the disconnect in determining the catch in numbers of fish but evaluating against a recreational harvest limit (RHL) or annual catch limit (ACL) in pounds. They commented that the recreational harvest could be the same or lower in 2017 but because the fish landed are getting larger (primarily driven by the 2011 year class), the landings in pounds will show the RHL will be exceeded again. An example from a few years ago was cited when the harvest in numbers was down by 13% but the recreational sector exceeded the RHL by 7% because the fish were larger. Two advisors noted the presence of significant numbers of small, 8” – 9”, fish that are being caught in the fishery in the last year.

Five advisors expressed that Wave 1 (January – February) should be re-opened to the recreational fishery. This time period was historically an important aspect of the fishery particularly for the for-hire industry. The Council could utilize the eVTRs (electronic Vessel Trip Reports) for the for-hire sector to manage and keep track of harvest during this opening. Three advisors noted the open season discrepancies between federal waters and the northern state (NY-MA) measures in the fall and potential for problems when the federal season is closed but the states are open – this is particularly problematic around Block Island.

Three advisors noted there needs to be more information provided on how each state's implemented measures achieved the desired reductions to achieve the harvest targets. Some argued that there needs to be greater accountability for states because states will continue to push the envelope with measures since any overages are applied across the region.

Three advisors commented the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) estimates are unreliable and highly inaccurate. They cited and expressed concern over the use and expansion of data generated from the low sample sizes into very high estimates. One advisor indicated that recreational anglers should be able use and report their catch through a mobile app. One advisor also commented that MRIP does not appropriately consider or evaluate one-time events such as cold winters or Superstorm Sandy.

One advisor commented that nothing is being done to address recreational discards and a total length with no minimum size should be implemented.