



## **Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Performance Reports September 2013**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission's) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panels on September 10, 2013 to review fishery information documents for all three species and develop Fishery Performance Reports (FPRs) based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings patterns and other trends in these fisheries.

**Council Advisory Panel members present:** Joan Berko (NJ), Carl Benson (NJ), Ross Pearsall (RI), Adam Nowalsky (NJ), Robert Allen (VA), Greg DiDomencio\* (NJ), Skip Feller\* (VA), Monty Hawkins (MD), Harry Doernte (VA), Jim Lovgren\* (NJ), James Fletcher (NC), Willy Hatch (MA), Joe O'Hara (MD)

**Commission Advisory Panel members present:** James Tietje (MA), Robert Busby (NY), John Conway (CT), Marc Hoffman (NY), Paul Risi (NY), Paul Forsberg (NY), Skip Feller\* (VA), Jim Lovgren\* (NJ), Victor Bunting (MD), Bill Shillingford (NJ), Bob Meimbresse (NJ), James Craddock (NC), Greg DiDomencio\* (NJ)

**Others present:** Michael Luisi (MAFMC/ASFMC), David Tomberlin (MAFMC SSC)

\*Serve on both Council and Commission Advisory Panels.

### **Summer Flounder**

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#### ***Market and Economic Issues***

Advisors are concerned about the proposed reduction in quota from 2013 to 2014 compared to what was expected when 2014 specifications were set last year. The advisors commented that a quota reduction of this magnitude will have devastating economic impacts. Due to economic losses sustained due to Hurricane Sandy, many marinas and tackle stores are relying on the summer flounder fishery to finance rebuilding and repair costs. Advisors noted that abundance and availability observed on the water is not what is reflected in the biomass estimates in the 2013 assessment. Catch per unit effort is not adequately taken into account and used to judge the health of the stock. Observations on the water indicate that the stock appears to be robust and availability is high. The advisors would like an explanation of what triggered a change in stock size estimates and changes in reference points in the assessment. The advisors would like the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to address these issues by exploring a potential elevation of the stock level designation of the 2013 stock assessment, and exploring the use of a Coefficient of Variation (CV) narrower than the 100% that has been used in the past.

The overall economy and increasing costs, such as the cost of fuel, continue to be a concern for the summer flounder fisheries.

### ***Environmental and Ecological Issues***

The effects of Hurricane Sandy continue to have negative impacts on the fisheries in New York and New Jersey. Advisors are concerned that this has not been reflected in any of the catch estimates.

Summer flounder biomass appears to be shifting increasingly to the northeast, which is not being picked up by the surveys, in part due to the elimination of the winter survey. The winter commercial fishery has observed a large shift in biomass of fish to the east and to deeper and colder waters, which is not being reflected in the Science Center surveys. These shifts in biomass could reflect a potential range expansion, given that the fishery in the south is still robust.

Sand sharks, dogfish, and skates are competing with summer flounder for prey, particularly for sand eels. The biomass of dogfish is high and having a negative impact on summer flounder via competition for prey. Ecosystem-based management is often discussed but has not been implemented, and advisors continue to be concerned about the use of single-species management. Additionally, scientists and managers should incorporate more information about potential effects of cyclical and long-term changes in environmental conditions.

### ***Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts***

Advisors are concerned that the high recreational size limits are resulting in an increase in the targeting of larger females, a trend that is harmful to the stock.

The advisors expressed concern that the transition from the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey (MRFSS) to the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) for recreational data was supposed to facilitate more timely and accurate estimates of recreational catch, but estimates are in fact coming out later. MRIP does not use the number of fishermen in each state, and effort estimates could be improved by using the angler registry.

The advisors are concerned that the change from MRFSS to MRIP is not resulting in improved estimates of effort. Effort for this year is expected to be down in New York and New Jersey due to loss of infrastructure as the result of Hurricane Sandy. The MRIP survey has not advanced to the point where it can adequately capture reductions in effort relative to any potential increase in success rates (catch per angler trip). This will result in estimated landings which could be inflated due to the inability of MRIP to reflect the reduction in effort. The advisors would like the SSC to consider how varying levels of harvest in 2013 could impact the 2014 Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) recommendation and beyond. The recreational landings have been under the recreational harvest limit for several years, yet the ABC recommendation for the subsequent year is made assuming that the full ABC will be taken.

Since the majority of the recreational fishery occurs in state waters, and given potential shifts in biomass, the issue of outdated state allocations needs to be addressed, or coastwide or regional measures should be considered.

## ***Other Issues***

Advisors perceive a lack of commitment to multi-year specifications given that multi-year specifications were set last year that now are being changed (due to the timing of the benchmark stock assessment).

## ***Research Recommendations***

In regards to the draft RSA research recommendation reading:

Evaluate the length, weight, and age compositions of landed and discarded fish in the summer flounder fisheries (recreational and commercial) by sex. Focus should be placed on age sampling of summer flounder 24 inches or larger in total length, using paired hard part samples (i.e., scales, and when possible, otoliths).

The advisors questioned the benefit of this recommendation to the recreational community from the mid-to-southern range of the management unit. Advisors commented that there are other priorities that would provide more benefit to the fisheries.

Additionally, advisors suggested adding research recommendations for:

- Performing a search of available data to determine whether summer flounder school by sex and area.
- Further promotion of the sex-specific modeling work introduced during the last assessment that was not fully utilized.
- An evaluation of the impacts of predation on summer flounder, particularly by spiny dogfish.

## ***Scup***

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### ***Market and Economic Issues***

Given the past reductions in quota, the commercial industry expects that the market and the demand for scup will increase. Concerns remain about the market share for scup being overtaken by tilapia.

The overall economy and increasing costs, such as the cost of fuel, continue to be a concern for the scup fishery. The cost of fishing trips has increased significantly due to rising fuel costs.

### ***Environmental and Ecological Issues***

The effects of Hurricane Sandy continue to have negative impacts on the fisheries in New York and New Jersey. Advisors are concerned that this has not been reflected in any of the catch estimates.

The advisors are concerned that the change from MRFSS to MRIP is not resulting in improved estimates of effort. Effort for this year is expected to be down in New York and New Jersey due to loss of infrastructure as the result of Hurricane Sandy. The advisors commented that the MRIP survey has not advanced to the point where it can adequately capture reductions in effort relative

to any potential increase in success rates (catch per angler trip). This will result in estimated landings which could be inflated due to the inability of MRIP to reflect the reduction in effort.

One advisor commented that black sea bass may be displacing scup from habitat in some areas near Cape Cod.

### ***Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts***

Advisors commented that a complete and thorough re-evaluation of the scup Gear Restricted Areas (GRAs) is needed. One of the main goals of the GRAs was to rebuild scup, and that has been successful. The GRAs are currently in locations that are not useful. This analysis should also include an evaluation of lost revenue for squid and whiting fisheries.

Advisors question the justification for the decrease in quotas from 2013-2015 despite high stock size and increasing biomass. The advisors commented that the decreasing trend in quota combined with an expected increasing trend in effort could eventually result in quota overages and fishery closures. The SSC should consider how varying levels of harvest in 2013 could impact the 2014 ABC recommendation and beyond. The commercial and recreational landings have been under the harvest limits and quotas for several years, yet the ABC recommendation for the subsequent year is made assuming that the full ABC will be taken.

The Winter II fishery possession limit is currently 8,000 lb, and has not changed despite significant increases in quota. The Monitoring Committee (MC) should analyze what an appropriate trip limit should be (one recommendation from an advisor is 30,000 lb and/or a weekly cumulative trip limit of 30,000 lb). An increase in the Winter II possession limit would reduce regulatory discards.

The MC should also re-evaluate the timing and duration of the Summer fishery, and explore a reduction in the duration of the Summer fishery to May to September (shifting October into the Winter II fishery).

Recreational effort has increased for scup in Long Island Sound, in part because of the increased availability of larger scup. Scup are abundant and heavily targeted by the recreational fishery, benefitting other fisheries (such as striped bass) by relieving pressure on those fisheries. In Massachusetts, effort has also shifted to scup as the result of more restrictive regulations in other fisheries such as black sea bass.

## **Black sea bass**

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### ***Market and Economic Issues***

For the pot and trap fishery, the prices of sink rope and buoys are increasing with increasing fuel prices. Sink ropes must be replaced after disturbances like Hurricane Sandy.

In the for-hire sector, the combination of higher size limits and shorter seasons has resulted in vessels having to fish farther offshore to find retainable fish in some states. Increasing fuel costs

and other costs have made black sea bass trips less economically beneficial to the for-hire sector than in past years.

### ***Environmental and Ecological Issues***

The effects of Hurricane Sandy have been numerous, including bottom disturbances, and spring southerly winds contributing to colder waters, causing black sea bass to show up later in the season for some fisheries.

One of the advisors noted that observed discard mortality due to barotrauma is increasing as the result of having to fish farther offshore in deeper water.

The advisors also noted that although there has been no contraction observed at the southern end of the black sea bass range, an expansion into more northern waters has been observed. Advisors are concerned that the fish now being observed north of Cape Cod are missed in the trawl surveys and are not taken into account in the stock assessment.

### ***Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts***

Advisors conveyed a lack of confidence in the recreational MRIP estimates provided for black sea bass. The large fluctuations in the estimates from year to year are a problem, as is the variability in the regulations. Some advisors expressed concern that the current regulations are suppressing opportunities to harvest a stock that they understand to be very abundant.

In the recreational fishery, the advisors commented that moving toward regional measures rather than state by state would be beneficial to the fishery. There is a desire to see the fishery open year-round, especially for the southern states. The southern states would benefit from a winter fishery, from November-February. In the north, the winter fishery has a relatively small overall impact on the stock, and it is good for business to keep the fishery going during that time.

Some advisors noted that management measures are impacting the ability to land the commercial quotas in some states. For example, in New Jersey, the trip limits are preventing full utilization of the quota by druggers.

One advisor noted that in the pot/trap fishery, fishing under lobster regulations causes complications when trap tags need to be changed. Decisions must be made in advance about how many tags are allocated to lobster vs. sea bass traps, so any changes in black sea bass regulations or quota result in a difficult and time-consuming process to change tags.

In some states such as Maryland and Delaware, black sea bass regulations are putting increased pressure on slow-growing Tautog stocks.

### ***Other Issues***

One advisor requested an examination of the effects of residual rocket fuel on black sea bass in the mid-Atlantic.

Advisors also commented that proceeds from black sea bass RSA should contribute more directly to black sea bass-related research.

### ***Research Recommendations***

The advisors discussed the list of RSA and other research recommendations and suggested:

- A study of the fish that being observed in increasing numbers at the northern end of the range. Advisors recommended that another coastwide tagging study be conducted, with a focus on migration and on the northern portion of the stock.
- Advisors expressed support for the existing research recommendation to explore a spatially-structured stock assessment model for black sea bass.
- An evaluation of the site fidelity of black sea bass.
- A review of potential fishery-induced modifications in the genetics of the black sea bass population, including changes in reproductive ability and growth rates.