



Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Monitoring Committee 2017 Recreational Measures Recommendations

Monitoring Committee Attendees: Greg Wojcik (CT DEEP), John Maniscalco (NY DEC; via webinar), Peter Clarke (NJ F&W), Rich Wong (DNREC), Steve Doctor (MD DNR), Katie May Laumann (VMRC), T.D. VanMiddlesworth (NC DMF), Kiley Dancy (MAFMC Staff), Julia Beaty (MAFMC Staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC Staff), Emily Gilbert (NMFS GARFO; via webinar), Mark Terceiro (NEFSC; via webinar), Jason McNamee (RI DEM; via webinar 11/9 only)

Other Attendees (all via webinar): Alex Aspinwall (VMRC, 11/9 only), Joe Cimino (VMRC, 11/10 only), Bonnie Brady (Long Island Commercial Fishermen's Association), Rob O'Reilly (VMRC, 11/9 only), Carl Benson (11/9 only)

The Monitoring Committee met on Wednesday, November 9 and Thursday, November 10, 2016 in Baltimore, MD to recommend 2017 recreational management measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass.

General Comments

The Monitoring Committee agreed that recent end-of-year adjustments to the MRIP data to account for low sample sizes are a source of uncertainty. This was done for the first time in August 2016 (for 2013-2015 data), and it is not known if or how such adjustments will impact the final 2016 estimates.

The Monitoring Committee agreed that if the recreational fishery for any of these three species is open during wave 1 (January 1 – February 28), there should be recreational data sampling in place to produce comparable MRIP estimates. It is important to document removals occurring from the fisheries, and wave 1 recreational catch (for states other than North Carolina) is currently not incorporated into final catch estimates or the stock assessments.

Summer Flounder

The Monitoring Committee agrees with the staff recommendation for conservation equivalency in 2017, and recommends continuing the regional approach. The Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board is developing an addendum to consider options for regional and state-by-state conservation equivalency in 2017. The Board has established a working group of Board and Technical Committee members to develop and refine addendum options, which will be presented at the December 2016 joint Council/Board meeting.

Given the required 40% coastwide reduction¹ in recreational landings, the Monitoring Committee recommends that the burden of this reduction be dispersed across all regions (though not necessarily equally). This applies the true nature of the regional approach to summer flounder management and conservation equivalency. The Committee recommends that options pursued through the addendum process minimize dramatic differences in measures between neighboring regions or states.

Conservation equivalency requires the specification of a set of non-preferred coastwide measures, as well as a set of precautionary default measures.² The Committee agrees with the staff recommendation that these measures be modified for 2017 given the substantial decrease in the harvest limit. The Committee agrees with the staff-recommended non-preferred coastwide measures for 2017, including a 19-inch minimum size, 3 fish possession limit, and an open season of June 1-September 15. The Committee evaluated the potential coastwide reduction associated with these measures and agreed that they were appropriate for 2017. Compared to the non-preferred coastwide measures adopted for 2016, this recommendation represents a 1-inch increase in the size limit, a 1-fish decrease in the possession limit, and a 46-day decrease in the non-preferred coastwide season.

Similarly, the Committee recommends adjusting the previously used precautionary default measures, which are intended to be more conservative than any individual state or region might implement. The Committee recommends precautionary default measures that include a minimum size of 20 inches, a possession limit of 2 fish, and an open season of July 1-August 31.

Regarding the staff recommendation to analyze slot limits, the Monitoring Committee notes that it has explored such options in the past. In past analyses, the Committee has determined that a slot range that would adequately constrain landings would need to be very narrow to compensate for an expected increase in landings. This slot limit would also likely need to be combined with a very restrictive bag limit and season that would be unappealing to most anglers. The Committee anticipates similar challenges in developing slot limit options for 2017 given the historically low harvest limit of 3.77 million pounds.

While the Monitoring Committee shares concerns about high size limits and discard rates for summer flounder, the Committee has reservations about slot limits for 2017 given the overfishing status of the stock and the below-average recruitment of summer flounder observed for the past six years. A slot limit typically results in an increased number of total removals, increasing the fishing mortality rate. The Committee recognizes that it would be helpful to provide additional

¹ The currently projected reduction required on a coastwide basis; calculated by comparing the projected 2016 recreational landings (6.28 million lb) to the 2017 recreational harvest limit (3.77 million lb).

² As described in the staff memo, the non-preferred coastwide measures are a set of measures that would be expected to constrain harvest to the RHL if implemented on a coastwide basis. The combination of state or regional measures under conservation equivalency is designed to be “equivalent” to these coastwide measures. The non-preferred coastwide measures are included in the federal regulations but waived in favor of state- or region-specific measures. The precautionary default measures are a conservative set of measures that would only be implemented in any state or region that failed to develop measures consistent with the conservation equivalency guidelines.

information to the Council and Board, and could revisit previous analyses of slot limits (e.g., Wiedenmann et al. 2013³; Wong 2009⁴).

Scup

Due to high estimated 2016 wave 4 landings in New York compared to previous years, the Monitoring Committee agreed that the 2016 projections for New York should be modified based on the 2013-2015 proportion of landings by wave. This resulted in a revised coast-wide projected estimate of 6.44 million pounds of landings in 2016, requiring a 15% reduction to achieve the 2017 RHL of 5.50 million pounds.

Wave 5 has been an important component of annual scup landings in previous years. Preliminary wave 5 estimates have not yet been published. Given this uncertainty, it will be important to recalculate the reduction once wave 5 preliminary estimates are available. These estimates will not be available until after the December Council and Board meeting.

The Committee supports the ongoing regional approach for setting recreational scup measures in state waters. This approach provides flexibility for the states to accommodate the needs of the modes and areas for their individual states.

The vast majority of recreational scup landings come from state waters from New York through Massachusetts (about 98% in 2015); therefore, adjustments to the federal measures will have little impact (on the order of 2%) on coast-wide harvest.

The Monitoring Committee recommends that the federal waters bag limit decrease from 50 to 40 fish and that states also decrease their bag limits. For example, the Monitoring Committee recommends, as a starting point for discussion, a decrease from 30 to 25 fish for most seasons and modes and from 45 to 40 fish for the party/charter bonus seasons. The magnitude of these adjustments may change after preliminary wave 5 estimates are available.

The Monitoring Committee recommends no changes to the federal recreational season or size limit. Given that most harvest occurs in state waters in New York through Massachusetts, and given that those states have a higher size limit and shorter season than federal waters, an increase in the federal waters size limit or a decrease in the season would not achieve the needed reduction.

State regulations are complex by mode and wave. This makes it difficult to predict changes in harvest under different measures. Future efforts to simplify measures would be beneficial for evaluating regulations, especially in cases when changes are necessary. The Monitoring Committee recommends that the Board consider this when discussing 2017 state measures adjustments.

³ Wiedenmann, J.; Wilberg, M.; Bochenek, E; Boreman, J.; Freeman, B.; Morson, J; Powell, E.; Rothschild, B., and P. Sullivan. 2013. Report to the MAFMC: Evaluation of Management and Regulatory Options for the Summer Flounder Recreational Fishery. http://www.mafmc.org/s/Wiedenmann_et_al_Fluke_MSE_Report-t0ec.pdf.

⁴Wong, R. April 2009. White paper: Slot limit management for recreational summer flounder harvest. https://mafmc.squarespace.com/s/Slot_limit_guidance_Wong_2009-002.pdf.

Black Sea Bass

The Monitoring Committee agrees with the staff recommendation to postpone in-depth analysis of revisions to the recreational management measures until early 2017, once the assessment results become available and the Scientific and Statistical Committee revisits 2017 catch and landings limits. Accountability measures for black sea bass would also be addressed at that time.

The Committee notes that this delay will complicate timely implementation of recreational measures, and likely means that adjustments to the front end of the season in 2017 will not be feasible. Necessary seasonal adjustments would thus need to be made to the middle or end of the 2017 seasons.