



April 2023 Council Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council met April 4-6, 2023, in Durham, NC. Presentations, briefing materials, motions, and webinar recordings are available at <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/april-2023>.

HIGHLIGHTS

During this meeting, the Council:

- Reviewed *Illex* squid specifications for 2023 (no changes needed) and approved specifications for 2024-2025
- Initiated a framework action to consider a volumetric vessel hold baseline requirement and upgrade restriction for all *Illex* limited access permits
- Reviewed recent action by the ASMFC's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board and decided against asking NOAA Fisheries to reconsider the January 1-April 30 closure of the federal recreational scup fishery
- Reviewed the 2023 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem Report
- Discussed outcomes and next steps from the East Coast Scenario Planning Summit Meeting
- Reviewed preliminary results of a research project to develop and test a new and innovative modeling approach for short-term forecasts of climate-driven species distributions
- Reviewed the results of a pilot project to consider the feasibility of using video recordings to track fishing effort out of the Ocean City, MD inlet
- Received presentations on several relevant topics, including regional habitat activities, recreational data collection updates and priorities, and NOAA's National Seafood Strategy
- Appointed Dr. Andrew Scheld to the Scientific and Statistical Committee

Illex Squid 2023-2025 Specifications

The Council reviewed *Illex* squid specifications for 2023 and set specifications for 2024-2025. Last year, the Council set a preliminary acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 40,000 metric tons (MT) for 2023 with the plan to revisit this recommendation after updated analyses were available. During this meeting, the Council reviewed these analyses and agreed that no modifications to the 2023 ABC are warranted. Although the *Illex* stock status remains unknown, Council-sponsored research indicates that overfishing is unlikely to occur at an ABC of 40,000 MT. After deducting for estimated discards, this results in a 2023 quota of 38,192 MT (the same as 2022). For 2024-2025, the Council recommended maintaining the ABC at 40,000 MT with a quota of 38,631 MT (less discards will be deducted for 2024-2025 based on updated discard data).

Illex Permit Action Follow-Up

The Council continued its discussions regarding a possible follow-up action related to NMFS' disapproval of an amendment to further restrict permitting in the *Illex* fishery. After reviewing additional communications from NMFS, the Council voted to initiate and develop a framework action to consider a volumetric vessel hold baseline requirement and upgrade restriction for all *Illex* limited access permits. This action is intended to control future increases in capacity. Staff noted that a similar volumetric requirement is in place for the directed mackerel fishery, and most regional limited access programs have baselines to control increases in fishing power/capacity (generally horsepower and length). Staff will schedule Committee and Advisory Panel meetings to develop alternatives for initial review by the Council later this year (likely in June or August 2023).

Scup Federal Recreational Season

The Council discussed a recent recommendation made by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board (Board) regarding the federal recreational season for scup. The new Percent Change Approach requires a 10% reduction in recreational harvest of scup in 2023. In December 2022, the Council and Board jointly agreed to reduce the federal recreational possession limit from 50 to 40 fish and shorten the federal-waters season from a year-round open season to a May 1–December 31 open season. These measures did not achieve the full 10% reduction in harvest required, so the Council and Board also agreed that the states would further modify state measures through the Commission process.

On March 2, 2023, the Board met and reviewed proposed measures for state waters. After determining that the proposed state adjustments meet virtually the full 10% reduction in coastwide harvest, the Board agreed to recommend that NOAA Fisheries reconsider the scup federal waters closure (January 1–April 30).

During this meeting, the Council discussed the Board's recommendation and considered taking similar action prior to the publication of the final rule. The Council noted that due to the timing of federal rule making, the modified federal season would not go into effect until 2024, therefore having no impact on 2023 harvest. After much discussion, the Council agreed to revisit the discussion after the updated management track stock assessment is available later this year. The Regional Administrator indicated that if the forthcoming management track assessment indicates that a shortened season is no longer needed, NOAA Fisheries can publish a rule by the end of 2023 to modify the federal season for 2024.

2023 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem Report

Dr. Sarah Gaichas (NEFSC) presented the key results and findings of the 2023 Mid-Atlantic State of the Ecosystem report. The report is provided to the Council each April and gives an overview of ecosystem-level indicators that evaluate the status and trends of ecological, environmental, economic, and social components of the Mid-Atlantic ecosystem. These ecosystem-level indicators consider their performance relative to fishery management objectives and the potential risks they pose to meeting management goals and objectives. Some of the key findings of the 2023 report include:

- Commercial landings in the Mid-Atlantic are at the lowest point observed, driven by recent declines in species not managed by the Mid-Atlantic Council.
- Recreational harvest remains below the long-term average; while recreational effort was near average and recreational catch diversity remains above average.
- The oceanographic conditions in the Mid-Atlantic Bight continue to change with implications for habitat, fish productivity and condition, and stock distributions.
- The proposed development of 31 different offshore wind projects is anticipated to result in a range of economic, habitat, protected species, and science risks to meeting the Council's management objectives.

East Coast Climate Change Scenario Planning Update

Council staff provided a recap of the East Coast Scenario Planning Summit Meeting, which was held February 15-16, 2023, in Arlington, Virginia. Attended by over 50 representatives of East coast fishery management organizations, the summit served as a capstone to the East Coast Climate Change Scenario Planning Initiative. The goal of the summit was to develop a set of potential governance and management actions resulting from scenario-based exploration of the future. The final report is still under development and will be reviewed by the Northeast Region Coordination Council (NRCC) at its May 9-10 meeting, along with a draft "action plan" being developed by the core team. Later in 2023, the Council will review the final summit report and NRCC recommendations and consider how to incorporate potential actions from this process into their 2024 implementation plan and future strategic plans/implementation plans.

Short-Term Forecasts of Species Distributions for Fisheries Management Project

The Council received a presentation from Dr. Malin Pinsky (Rutgers University) and Dr. Alexa Fredston (University of California Santa Cruz) on the preliminary results of a research project to develop and test a new and innovative modeling approach for short-term forecasts of climate-driven species distributions. This collaborative research project with the Council seeks to understand the drivers and processes associated with short-term (e.g., over 1-10 years) distribution changes that more closely align with management timelines. The research team developed a suite of dynamic range models that include a temperature effect on population dynamic variables such as recruitment, growth, natural mortality, and adult movement. The model has been fully developed and tested for summer flounder and will also be built for spiny dogfish, *Illex* squid, and gray triggerfish.

Preliminary results indicate that 1) dynamic range models can forecast distribution changes with reasonable skill, 2) the interannual and short-term changes in distribution are highly variable, and 3) non-climate factors (e.g., fishing pressure and dispersal) have a substantial influence on short-term distribution changes. To date, models have been built and evaluated using a retrospective forecasting approach where data from the past is used to test if the models can predict distribution changes with known information. Further model development, including the development of oceanographic condition models, will be needed to create future distribution forecasts (i.e., 2024 onward).

The Council was supportive of the modeling efforts and research results and identified a range of potential opportunities to incorporate this information into different Council initiatives and actions. The Council also identified a number of recommendations for future model development and research considerations.

Ocean City Video Boat Count Project

The Council reviewed the results of a pilot project to consider the feasibility of using video recordings to track fishing effort out of the Ocean City, MD inlet. Various “lessons learned” were considered and discussed. Challenges with COVID-19 (the project started in 2020) and equipment limited the overlap with Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) 2-month “waves,” which made it difficult to draw comparative conclusions between the video-based counts and MRIP estimates – the MRIP estimates at this scale have very wide confidence intervals and overlapped the ranges produced via the video counting.

Updates and Presentations

Habitat Activities Update

The Council received a presentation from Kevin Madley, Jessie Murray, and Sue Tuxbury from the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division. Their presentation highlighted aquaculture, offshore wind, and coastal storm risk management projects underway in the region. They also highlighted NOAA’s activities associated with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and results of a scenario planning exercise on the Susquehanna River where state and federal agencies are seeking ways to balance the passage of anadromous fish over four dams with the prevention of the expansion of aquatic invasive species such as the northern snakehead. Following the meeting, the Council plans to post additional details on the Council’s aquaculture webpage on how to sign up directly for notices from aquaculture project developers.

Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)

Katherine Papacostas, MRIP Program Manager and Branch Chief, provided an update on 2023 MRIP priorities and two reports to Congress regarding National Academies of Sciences recommendations. 2023 MRIP priorities include:

- Support for regional priorities (see ACCSP item above)
- Data methods certifications
- Implementation of Survey and Data Standards
- Ongoing data collection research

The two reports are 1) an every-other-year progress report on improving recreational data and 2) a report on how MRIP meets the needs of in-season management (and how MRIP could be improved in that regard and/or management strategies might be modified to better meet those needs).

More information on these topics can be found at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/about-marine-recreational-information-program>.

Atlantic Recreational Data Implementation Plan

Geoff White, Director of the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP), gave a presentation on the MRIP Regional Implementation Plan for the Atlantic Coast. The plan will be used by ACCSP and NOAA Fisheries to guide data needs and funding priorities over the next five years. Priorities for 2023-2027 include:

- Improved precision and presentation of MRIP estimates
- Comprehensive for-hire data collection and monitoring
- Improved recreational fishery discard and release data
- Improved timeliness of MRIP recreational catch and harvest estimates
- Expanded biological sampling of recreational fisheries
- Improved in-season monitoring

Details may be found at <https://www.accsp.org/accsp-noaa-fisheries-release-plan-to-improve-atlantic-recreational-fisheries-data/>.

NOAA's National Seafood Strategy

Michael Rubino (NOAA Fisheries) presented an overview of NOAA's Draft National Seafood Strategy. The draft strategy, which was available for public comment from February 14 to March 31, describes NOAA Fisheries' approach to enhancing the resilience of the seafood sector in the face of climate change and other stressors.

Other Business

The Council appointed Dr. Andrew Scheld, an associate professor and fisheries economist with Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences, Dept. of Fisheries Science, to be a member of its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Dr. Scheld is filling the vacancy on the SSC due to the recent departure of Dr. Lee Anderson (professor emeritus, University of Delaware) and will begin serving a three-year term effective May 1, 2023.

Next Meeting

The next Council meeting will be held **June 6-8, 2023, in Virginia Beach, VA**. A complete list of upcoming meetings can be found at <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events>.