



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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MEMORANDUM

Date: April 2, 2020
To: Research Steering Committee
From: Matthew Seeley, Staff
Subject: Potential re-development of the Mid-Atlantic research set-aside program

The Research Steering Committee (RSC) will meet via webinar on April 28, 2020, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., to discuss potential re-development of the research set-aside (RSA) program. The Committee's recommendations will be presented at a subsequent Council Meeting with the goal of hosting an RSA workshop in September 2020.

Background

The following briefing materials are enclosed for Committee consideration:

1. Agenda
2. Staff memo to the RSC dated April 2, 2020
3. Staff memo to the RSC – “Addressing the RSC Requests” dated July 22, 2019
4. Staff memo to Chris Moore – “RSA Program Issues” dated July 30, 2014
5. NEFMC RSA Review – Full report

The Council established the RSA program through Framework 1 to the Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP), Atlantic Mackerel, Squid and Butterfish FMP, Bluefish FMP, and Tilefish FMP. The RSA program enabled the Council to set-aside a portion of the total allowable landings (TAL) of selected species to support research and data collection activities.

The first RSA projects were funded in 2002 and continued until 2014. The RSA program funded over 41 different projects totaling over \$16 million¹. In the Mid-Atlantic, funding for research projects was generated through the sale of a portion of each species' quota, which can range from 0 to 3% of a fishery's TAL for a given year. This percentage was set through the annual

¹ Final reports are available for 39 of the projects and can be accessed here:
https://nefsc.noaa.gov/coopresearch/projects_search_setup.html.

specifications process. Successful RSA applicants were given a grant in the form of fish – the majority of which were sold at auction to fund the proposed research.

In 2014, the Council voted to suspend RSA (funds set to \$0) due to a variety of concerns with the program. One of the chief concerns about the RSA program was that its current design makes it vulnerable to abuse through under-reporting and non-reporting of catch². Two investigations in New York by NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement revealed that significant quantities of summer flounder were being taken illegally under the cover of quota acquired through the RSA program.

The Council also discussed whether the science produced through RSA-funded projects justifies the costs of the program. While some projects, such as the Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic Trawl survey conducted by the Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (NEAMAP), have provided data that were successfully incorporated into the management process, a number of other projects have failed scientific review after completion, raising concerns about the process for vetting proposals and overseeing project implementation.

Outcomes of August 2019 RSC Meeting

On August 13, 2019, the RSC met at the Council meeting and discussed many of the uncertainties surrounding RSA including program administration, priority setting, funding, review of results, utility in management, and communication of results. The RSC reported out to the Council and Board on August 15, 2019 detailing the following outcomes:

1. What should the role of the RSC be relative to the RSA program?
 - a. Review proposals submitted for contracts and recommend to the Council projects for approval.
 - b. Take the lead in identifying the need RSA would fill versus other collaborative research efforts.
 - c. Identify the design of a revised MAFMC RSA program.
2. Should the RSC review approved projects?
 - a. Project status/reports should be delivered to the full Council and should be presented at joint meetings for species that are jointly managed.
3. Should formal relationships be pursued with other research centric organizations?
 - a. No formal organization partnerships recommended.
 - b. Option to join the Science Center for Marine Fisheries (SCeMFiS) at a cost (\$25-50k annually)
 - c. Consider inviting organization(s) to an RSA design workshop based on their experience with collaborative research project design/approval/oversight.
4. Does the RSC recommend a restart of the RSA program?
 - a. The RSC supports the addition of a workshop to the 2020 Implementation Plan. The purpose of the workshop would be to:

² [RSA Criminal Investigation \(as of July 10, 2019\)](#) – See pages 5-6 of the PDF.

- i. Identify the need RSA would fill for the MAFMC vs the collaborative research efforts conducted since the suspension of RSA.
- ii. Identify the design of a revised MAFMC RSA program.

Topics/Questions for Discussion

For the upcoming April 28, 2020 webinar, please consider the following topics and questions as we discuss re-development of the Mid-Atlantic RSA program:

1. Need to ensure that the re-development of RSA actually fills a need related to what the Council wants to do with research (see outcome #4 above).
 - a. Do we need research in the Mid-Atlantic?
 - b. If so, what kind?
2. How will the RSA program be administered?
3. How will the RSC be involved in setting research priorities?
 - a. 5-year research plan
 - b. Advisory Panel, Monitoring Committee, Scientific and Statistical Committee
 - c. RSC meetings
4. Are funds available?
 - a. Would any changes to the previous funding model be necessary?
 - i. Overhead
 - ii. Mechanism
5. How will project results be reviewed?
6. Will project results be used in management?
7. How will project results be communicated to the Council and stakeholders?