



Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

June 2021

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Bluefish Advisory Panels (AP) met via webinar on June 17, 2021 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the bluefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

MAFMC Advisory Panel members present: Victor Hartley III (NJ – For-Hire) Thomas Roller (NC– For-Hire), and Judith Weis (NY– Researcher).

ASMFC Advisory Panel members present: Paul Caruso (MA) and Rusty Hudson (FL – Comm.)

Others present: Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC Staff), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), Paul Rago (MAFMC SSC), Cynthia Jones (MAFMC SSC), Maureen Davidson (MAFMC), David Stormer (MAFMC), James Fletcher (UNFA), Mike Waine (ASA), and Matthew Seeley (MAFMC Staff).

Written comments submitted by: John LaFountain (NY – Fox Seafood), TJ Karbowski (CT – For-hire), Kevin Wark (NJ – Comm.), and Charlie Locke (NC – Comm.).

Trigger questions

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

Factors Influencing Catch

Recreational

Despite a decrease in Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) landings estimates from 2019 to 2020, AP members discussed an increase in bluefish abundance coastwide (despite some lower effort during the beginning and height of the COVID-19 pandemic). Advisors also continue to indicate that larger bluefish are often identified to be further offshore and not

available to anglers that typically target bluefish from shore or in state waters. Small fish (1-3 lbs) continue to be available early in the year while larger fish (5-10 lbs) were not present until later in the year and then more offshore quickly. AP members speculate that this may have to do with increasing water temperatures. Finally, AP members indicated that the 2021 fishing season seems to be following a similar distribution pattern with slightly more fish.

NJ – From Raritan Bay to Rockaway Inlet, we have had a phenomenal bluefish year with lots of bunker and other bait, ultimately leading to an abundance of bluefish. Often, anglers catch their 5-fish limit very early on in trips and need to shift effort away from bluefish. Typically, these anglers will transition to seabass or striper fishing.

NJ – We get a lot of people who enjoy catching and releasing bluefish. The more bunker we see, the more bluefish we see. We are also having a fantastic striper season due to the abundance of bait.

NC – In North Carolina, we do not catch as many big bluefish as up north. The big bluefish we catch are mainly 6-7 pounds and people either really want to harvest them or they do not at all. However, anglers do often keep the 1-2 pounders. Anecdotal evidence supports that many people are keeping the smaller fish as bait, in addition to personal consumption.

MA – Like in 2019, we had a slight uptick in bluefish abundance, however distribution patterns are very different than the last 30 years. The age 2-3 fish come in shore earlier and stay later, which may be consistent with local bait abundance. Similar to other states, the bigger fish often come later in the year. In 2020, we experienced more shore fishing due to COVID-19. Overall, I believe abundance is related to environmental conditions and do not think the bag limits are constraining harvest (maybe shore mode for snappers).

NC – Bluefish are a very common species in North Carolina, that even when numbers are down, you are still going to catch them. As a fulltime guide, it is hard to not notice that stock biomass has gone down. There are definitely less bluefish, especially when trolling for Spanish mackerel. We catch bluefish (around 1.5-3 pounds) in their core habitat, but there are fewer large schools and a lot less bigger fish. Now, many charter vessels from the Outer Banks are catching lots of ribbon fish because there are fewer bluefish and Spanish mackerel. They fish the same spots using the same gear, so there is definitely something going on. However, North Carolina is very different than other states because we still have a lot of room to grow. Carteret County continues to have increased population growth and fishing effort. In shore fisheries are often not in the best shape, so many people turn to bluefish, which are doing “okay”. Bait abundance seems fairly high yet seems to be correlated with salinity and precipitation. Often, bluefish are landed specifically for king mackerel and shark bait.

NC (public) – There are now a lot more fishermen. Only 641,000 saltwater licenses sold. Therefore, we must use barbless hooks and encourage anglers to keep what they catch because dead discards are very impactful - both commercial and recreational.

NJ – For the for-hire fleet, the Golden eagle, Queen Mary, Miss Belmar Princess, and Lady Flamingo all share the issue of catching bluefish limits by mid-morning. Would like to see a 7-

fish bag limit since they are putting pressure on other fisheries.

NY – In northern NJ (Hackensack), which is fairly contaminated, we studied snapper abundance. Snappers were not feeding well despite the abundance of food (killifish and menhaden). This was the result of a behavioral problem due to interactions with contaminants (mercury and PCBs). Therefore, snappers did not have much food in their stomachs and thus, were not growing well. According to other studies, most snappers often have 60-70% of their gut full of food. These snappers were often much smaller and in turn, showed that the contaminants were affecting feeding behaviors. These fish would then be outcompeted by fish that spent their early life history in a more suitable environments.

FL – recreational landings are typically around 1M+, so the larger numbers may be due to the MRIP recalibration.

Commercial

NC (public) – Commercial landings are down because inlets are sometimes not passable. There is often less than 4 feet of depth for vessels to pass in Hatteras and Oregon inlet. Commercial vessels that traditional fish with gill nets cannot get back into the inlets with a full catch because the weight prohibits this movement through the inlets, which has nothing to do with bluefish abundance. The Army Corp of Engineers and state do not maintain the channels as well as they should.

FL – Hurricane Dorian at the end of Aug 2019 led to poor fall and winter weather. Now, the spring had significant wind that kept people in, which extended the damage. Overall, there were few gill netters targeting bluefish. In Florida, we do not harvest as many fish when they are further offshore.

Market/Economic Conditions

NC (public) – Right now the price stays strong in the NY market, only below a certain amount. Over a certain amount the price drops significantly. Boston market has been pushed out of business due to price war with NY market. Bluefish ranging 2-4 pounds often bring in ~\$1.40/lb.

FL – Bluefish price has been fairly good in recent years, especially in the summer. When the weather is good, commercial fishermen do not have too much trouble getting a higher price for Spanish mackerel and bluefish. Prices varied from \$1.35 in September 2020 to \$2.01 in March 2021.

NC – For the for-hire fleet, COVID-19 caused business to fall off early in 2020. From June to the end of the year, I had more business than ever before. Most of Carteret County experienced this large uptick, specifically for smaller private companies, but we did not have many out of state tourists. The main difficulties we encountered were with the supply chains (e.g., tackle).

Management Issues

NJ – The for-hire fleet is not happy with the 5 fish bag limit and would like to see a 7-fish limit.

Public – Is there any evidence that the SSC reviews that could help understand the cyclical fluctuations often present in the bluefish fishery? Are there environmental factors that are reviewed by the SSC to better understand this cyclical nature?

Research Priorities

The AP reviewed all the research recommendations from the 2019 Operational Assessment and Council's Comprehensive 5-year Research Priorities (short-term). AP members agreed that the most important research focus moving forward is to more accurately characterize recreational discard lengths and weights.

NC – How can management validate release information that we collect? How do we know this data will be used? When you use software that is not required, it is hard to get individuals to actually report.

NJ – Any newly collected data reported by anglers may be more reliable than MRIP.

NC (public) – Can we look back at newspapers to reference the historical cycles? Also, can we set management measure that require the use of barbless hooks, which would support the catch-and-release fishery.

NC (public) – Researchers need to think about the NAO and shifts in environmental conditions. We need to relate overfishing/overfished statuses to the environmental conditions using lunar cycles and not specifically years.

Written Comments

-----Original Message-----

From: John LaFountain [<mailto:foxseafood@gmail.com>]

Sent: Thursday, June 17, 2021 8:58 AM

To: Dustin C. Leaning <DLeaning@asmfc.org>

Subject: [External] Bluefish meeting

Hi Dustin, I am not gonna be able to make it back for the meeting this morning. I'm actually waiting at the dock now for a boat to come in with bluefish. I'm short staffed like every other business out there right now. Very good sign of fish this year in New York and Rhode Island. Nice large bluefish. I've even seen quite a few guys catching them off the rocks in point Judith which I haven't seen in a while. I would like the fishery to remain as steady and consistent as possible. Good for everyone in the commercial fishery. My input would be to try to avoid any big decreases even if it means giving up some increases from year to year.

Regards,

I cannot attend. I will be on the water all day.

* Current observations for 2021. I have never seen so many bluefish this early in the season. Lots of forage around. Water temp has been fluctuating 58 - 61. If we didn't have those few years of lean

numbers you would think there were more bluefish around than ever. Various sizes represented.

Thank you,
Capt. TJ Karbowski
Rock & Roll Charters
Clinton, CT
203.314.3765
<https://rockandrollcharters.com/>

Hello all , I have a ROSA advisory committee call tomorrow so I will not be able to attend Bluefish AP but as for commercial this season so far amounted to some blue near shore in commercial quantities for just a few days in the spring mixed size they moved through quickly , as per the last several years Tilefish long liners are seeing Bluefish in 80 to 100 fathoms in the spring and they will not come into shore.

Regards Kevin Wark
F/V Dana Christine II

The Bluefish fishery in North Carolina is complicated right now with the reduced Commercial Quota we have. We still encounter plenty of bluefish in the inshore gill net fishery but have had to adapt how we fish due to a smaller trip limits. The Big blue fishery has been almost non existent due to the warmer water through the winter months offshore, it seems the Bigger fish are staying more North and offshore than previous years. Over all over the years i have seen this same cycle so at the moment the challenge is the reduced trip limit,so i think a new stock assessment is a priority for this species. As far as the reallocation to the Recreational sector,the commercial sector is tired of the shifting of our quota to the "Unaccountable Army" this new MRIP data that is affecting every aspect of the commercial fisheries up and down the coast is highly unfair to an industry that has to record every pound of harvest as well as all discards. The time has come to bring the recreational sector to the same standards as us as far as up to date landings accountability and discard interactions. until this happens any shift of quota to there side is HIGHLY unfair to us.

Thank You,
Charlie Locke (Bluefish AP member)
F/V Salvation
Wanchese, North Carolina