



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

800 North State Street, Suite 201, Dover, DE 19901

Phone: 302-674-2331 | FAX: 302-674-5399 | www.mafmc.org

Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | P. Weston Townsend, Vice Chairman

Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

Bluefish Monitoring Committee Meeting Summary

Wednesday, July 27, 2022

Monitoring Committee Attendees: Amy Zimney (SC DNR), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), Eric Durell (MD DNR), Michael Celestino (NJ DFW), Karson Cisneros (Council staff), Jim Gartland (VIMS), Joshua McGilly (VMRC), Rich Wong (DNREC), Tony Wood (NEFSC), Rachel Sysak (NY DEC), Nicole Lengyel Costa (RI DMF), Sam Truesdell (MA DMF), Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC), David Behringer (NC DMF), Kurt Gottschall (CT BMF), Joseph Munyandorero (FL FWC)

Additional Attendees: Chris Batsavage (Council and Board member), Alan Bianchi (NC DMF), Brooke Lowman (VMRC), James Fletcher (United National Fisherman's Association), Julia Beaty (Council staff), Mike Waine (American Sportfishing Association), Nichola Meserve (Board member), Greg DiDomenico (Lund's Fisheries), Megan Ware (Board Member)

The Monitoring Committee (MC) met via webinar on Wednesday, July 27, to review the previously implemented bluefish catch and landings limits, commercial and recreational measures for 2023 and recommend any changes if needed. At the meeting, the MC reviewed the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommendation, staff memos, recent fishery performance, and the fishery information document to assist the MC in their deliberations. Briefing materials considered by the MC are available at: <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events/2022/bluefish-monitoring-committee-meeting>

Summary

Compliance and outreach

MC members discussed the benefits of increasing outreach and education efforts on best practices for fishing and handling of fish. For example, encouraging the use of circle hooks and educating anglers on the drawbacks of treble hooks could increase survival of released bluefish. Outreach could achieve voluntary improvements to bluefish survival without implementing any mandates. MC members also agreed that outreach could be useful in increasing compliance with current regulations. Based on 2021 Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data, some anglers are keeping more than the current bag limit, and staff discussed that this has occurred in the past under the 15 fish bag limit as well. A MC member suggested evaluating the rate of noncompliance with the bag limit before and after the bag limit was reduced. The MC agreed that this type of analysis could be helpful in the future to inform the Council and Board on the impacts of the bag limit change.

Discard mortality estimates

The MC discussed the discrepancy between the two approaches used to estimate discards in the recreational fishery; both methods assume a 15% mortality rate. The approach that the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) and the Council have used in recent years to monitor the recreational fishery uses the MRIP estimated mean weight (by year, state, and wave) of harvested fish (A+B1) times the number of released fish (MRIP-B2s by year, state, and wave; referred to as the 'GARFO method'). The second approach is used in the stock assessment and applies a length-weight

relationship to released fish size composition data from the MRIP, American Littoral Society tag releases, and volunteer angler surveys from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Jersey and is scaled by the MRIP B2 releases (referred to as the 'NEFSC method'). The MC discussed that this will be the last year that these two differing methodologies will be used. GARFO staff have indicated that moving forward, they will use the discard estimates resulting from the ongoing research track assessment, similar to what is done for other species. Through this assessment, recreational discard estimation is being improved upon through the addition of more data and by applying differing discard weights by region and will undergo peer review in early December. One MC member voiced some concerns over the science center methodology and felt that the MC may be the best group to decide between the different methods of calculating discards. The stock assessment scientist on the MC noted that the NEFSC method is currently the only peer reviewed method available, and the two estimates will be much more in line with each other with the improved regional data. In addition, the stock assessment scientist noted that the discard mortality rate is also being reevaluated. Upon hearing these updates, the MC member commented that they felt more confident in the recreational discard estimates coming out of the research track stock assessment which will be available next year.

Overall Management Uncertainty

The MC discussed management uncertainty for both sectors, and noted that through the recent bluefish amendment, management uncertainty can now be considered at the sector specific ACL/ACT level. They voiced some frustration that each year they discuss specific concerns and areas of uncertainty, however they struggle to quantify the amount of uncertainty to provide a buffer between the ACL and ACT. Given the desire to be better prepared to quantify management uncertainty that is applied as a buffer to the ACL, the MC felt it would be useful to have a specific meeting, potentially in spring 2023, to discuss quantitative approaches to applying uncertainty buffers. This meeting could also be used to update the MC on the December peer-review of the research track assessment.

Commercial Fishery

The commercial fishery has stayed within their coastwide quota in recent years and MC members did not voice concerns over the currently implemented quota. One MC member discussed that there is some uncertainty related to potentially increasing commercial discards but the best information we have now suggests that those are probably minor. Another MC member had concerns that in their state of Rhode Island, as the commercial sector has had reduced commercial quotas, there have been reports of an increase in commercial discards. They added that Rhode Island is looking to implement a state waters observer program, with the hope of starting a pilot program next year for the state waters gillnet fleet to get a better handle on the fishery. One MC member felt that there may be regional increases in discards, however, their sense was that commercial discards are still fairly low on a coastwide level.

Given these considerations, the MC recommended maintaining the previously implemented 2023 commercial ACT equal to the Commercial ACL with no buffer for management uncertainty and no changes to the commercial quota (Table 1).

Recreational Fishery

The MC discussed that recreational catch has not been constrained to the catch limits in recent years, leading to overages and pound for pound paybacks in 2020 and 2021 (applied to 2022 and the upcoming 2023 specifications). Given the information available, the discrepancy in estimating dead discards may be a contributing factor to these overages and GARFO may be using an underestimate, while the truth may be in between the GARFO and NEFSC methods. One mitigating factor against the

overages is that the ABC is increasing and if catch remains similar to 2021 in 2023, there may not be another overage.

Another cause for concern for some MC members was the noncompliance that is occurring with the current bag limits, potentially adding to management uncertainty related to constraining catch. Another MC member felt that because the noncompliant recreational harvest is captured in the MRIP estimates, it is not necessarily a big source of uncertainty (as it relates to quantifying catch) and has been accounted for in the harvest estimates and paybacks.

An additional concern discussed was that the last assessment used data through 2019 for projections through 2023 so we are further away from that terminal year of data with a track record of overages, leading to more uncertainty. For this reason, one MC member commented that it seemed there is more uncertainty this year than previous years.

Given all of these concerns, a MC member proposed an uncertainty buffer equal to 10% of the 2021 GARFO dead discard estimate of 6.64 million pounds, which would result in a buffer of 0.66 million pounds. This would be applied to the recreational ACL to derive a more precautionary ACT. This MC member discussed that, though imperfect, this addresses the source of uncertainty related to the GARFO estimate that is thought to be underestimating discards. Although it is hard to quantify, this number may be more appropriate than doing nothing to address the recreational uncertainty that has been discussed. They noted that doing nothing is particularly concerning given multiple years of overages. Another MC member agreed with this idea, noting that if no buffer is added, there appears to be potential for liberalization between recent harvest and the 2023 adjusted RHL, which may be a risky management decision and may decrease the chance for fishery stability in the future if more paybacks are needed. GARFO staff clarified that this calculation of 10% added to the GARFO discards could be applied as an uncertainty buffer, however it would not make sense to revise the 2021 discard estimate for catch accounting and paybacks since it is not a specific estimate derived from the data.

Multiple MC members voiced concerns over the justification for that specific percentage. One MC member added that they are not very concerned about the GARFO discard estimate and they were in favor of keeping the management measures status quo. Other MC members were in favor of the idea of an uncertainty buffer and felt it was a valid discussion, however, they did not feel that there was enough justification of a specific calculation to apply a buffer value at this meeting. One MC member also noted that this level of uncertainty may not be an issue next year due to the results of the new assessment, especially if the NEFSC and GARFO use the same discard estimate within the stock assessment and catch accounting moving forward.

Another MC member said they are supportive of status quo limits and measures at this meeting but supported developing an uncertainty metric in the future which uses RHL overages as a way to inform the level of management uncertainty. An MC member agreed with this and thought applying the percentage that results from the overage is an objective percentage and may be more justified than the 10% approach. Ultimately, the MC did not feel comfortable applying this method for the 2023 fishing year. The MC thought this method could have merit in the future with potentially more years of data under the same bag limits.

Although two MC members preferred an uncertainty buffer be applied, overall, the MC recommended keeping the previously implemented 2023 recreational ACT equal to the recreational ACL (Table 1).

Several MC members felt unable to recommend a specific uncertainty buffer, however they felt that recreational measures should remain status quo. This was partially due to uncertainty in the discard estimates, and some members felt this was maintaining a middle ground. One MC member observed that this is similar to implementing an uncertainty buffer and asked for clarification from those who did not support the uncertainty buffer but did support status quo measures. One MC member noted that they did not want to increase the chances of an ACT overage based on a more arbitrary number, though it was clarified that an ACT overage would not trigger a pound for pound payback as the accountability measure. Another member indicated that adding an uncertainty buffer of 10% of the 2021 GARFO discard estimate was not a precedent that they felt comfortable setting.

RHL and Recreational Management Measures

The MC agreed with the staff recommendation of using 2021 recreational harvest as expected 2023 harvest because it is the first full year of the 5 fish (for-hire) and 3 fish (private anglers) bag limits that are currently in place. They also agreed with the adjusted RHL calculated from the required pound for pound payback and the staff recommended 2021 GARFO discard value as a proxy for 2023 discards, resulting in an adjusted RHL of 14.11 million pounds (Table 1).

MC members commented that status quo recreational measures would contribute to management stability which may not be an option next year when setting measures for 2024 and beyond. It was discussed that because of the varying potential changes to data inputs and aspects of the bluefish assessment model that occur in a research track assessment, there may need to be management changes in 2024 in response to the best available information on the stock. Another MC member added that harvest can vary across years under the same bag limit so multiyear averages are helpful, and since we only have 2021 harvest under the current bag limits, more years of these measures can help us understand the overall impacts of the bag limit change from 15 fish to 5 and 3 fish.

Another MC member discussed that given the recent overages and uncertainty concerns related to 2023, they did not support the liberalizations that had been requested by some members of the for-hire sector. They also acknowledged the frustration of some in the private angler sector with the current measures being split by sector within the recreational fishery. There is currently a recreational sector separation amendment under consideration as part of the [recreational reform initiative](#) by the Council and Board which can evaluate challenges related to these different stakeholder groups and develop a more formal approach to divergent measures by sector.

Overall, the MC recommended status quo measures and no MC members voiced support for liberalizations or restrictions in recreational management measures for 2023 (Table 1).

Public Comments

One member of the public commented that uncertainty buffers have been put into place for fisheries where the commercial sector is dominant. For example, they have been used for butterfish and Atlantic mackerel so the methodologies used for these fisheries may be helpful to inform how to calculate management uncertainty.

Another member of the public asked what recreational bag, size and season the MC would consider after applying an uncertainty buffer and wondered how that plays out when management makes these

micromanaging adjustments. The member of the public asked if the MC retrospectively evaluates how management measure changes impact fishing mortality. They commented that they do not believe that there is enough certainty in the data to successfully implement changes to recreational measures to achieve a 10% reduction in harvest, for example.

A member of the public asked whether the MC had addressed that the bluefish population goes in cycles. They recommended that the MC members research their local newspapers over the past 30-40 years to understand these cycles. They added that this level of micromanagement isn't accomplishing anything for the bluefish stock. They also recommended mandatory hook sizes to catch less small fish.

Table 1: Original 2023 bluefish specifications (left) and adjustments (right) to the RHL based on the 2021 recreational ACL overage payback and Monitoring Committee recommended updated 2021 discard information. Measures are in millions of pounds.

Management Measure	Year		Basis
	2023 (original)	2023 (adjusted)	
OFL	45.17	45.17	Stock assessment projections
ABC	30.62	30.62	Derived by SSC; Follows the rebuilding plan through NEFSC projections
ACL	30.62	30.62	Defined in FMP as equal to ABC
Comm. ACL=ACT	4.29	4.29	ABC x 14% sector allocation, no adjustment for management uncertainty
Rec. ACL=ACT	26.34	26.34	ABC x 86% sector allocation, no adjustment for management uncertainty
Recreational AMs	0	5.59	2021 rec. ACL overage payback
Comm. Discards	0	0	Value used in assessment
Rec. Discards	4.19	6.64	MC recommend adjusting from 2020 GARFO estimate (original), to 2021 GARFO estimate (adjusted)
Commercial Quota	4.29	4.29	Comm. ACT minus discards
RHL	22.14	14.11	Rec. ACT minus discards and AM payback
Possession limit	3: private 5: for-hire	3: private 5: for-hire	2023 implemented, and 2023 MC rec.