



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

July 13, 2020

To: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board
From: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee
RE: TC Review of North Carolina Proposal for 2020 Recreational Measures to Account for February Black Sea Bass Harvest

Technical Committee Members: Greg Wojcik (Chair, CT), Sam Truesdell (MA), Corinne Truesdale (RI), Rachel Sysak (NY), Peter Clarke (NJ), Richard Wong (DE), Steve Doctor (MD), Alexa Kretsch (VA), Lee Paramore (NC) Caitlin Starks (ASMFC), Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC), Julia Beaty (MAFMC), Kiley Dancy (MAFMC), Mark Terceiro (NEFSC)

The Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass Technical Committee (TC) received a proposal from North Carolina (NC) to adjust their 2020 black sea bass recreational season to account for harvest during the February 2020 recreational fishery. The proposal (attached) provides details on the harvest estimate resulting from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) sampling of the February 2020 fishery, and proposed options for season closures. The TC met twice via conference call to discuss the NC proposal and provide feedback and recommendations.

North Carolina February 2020 Harvest Estimate

The NC black sea bass recreational fishery was open from February 1-29, 2020 with a bag limit of 15 fish per day and a minimum size of 12.5". Per the Board-approved proposal, the NC season was closed for two additional days during wave 3 to account for a projected recreational harvest of 62 pounds. However, the preliminary MRIP harvest estimate north of Cape Hatteras (NoCH)¹ in February 2020 was 28,091 fish and 50,692 pounds (Table 1). MRIP staff collected 2 intercepts with black sea bass NoCH in February 2020. The intercepted trips included a total of 67 black sea bass harvested by 8 anglers. No MRIP intercepts with black sea bass were collected in 2018 and 2019. The MRIP estimate for boat trips in the ocean (≤ 3 miles) NoCH during wave 1 totaled 13,259 trips with private/rental mode trips much higher than party/charter mode trips; however, trip numbers for only the month of February 2020 were not available. GARFO staff received no for-hire Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs) from the NC for-hire fishery NoCH in February 2018-2020. Additional data and details can be found in the attached memo dated July 7, 2020.

North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) staff noted that the February black sea bass harvest estimate NoCH is very uncertain due to the low number of intercepts with black sea bass, the high catch rates from the intercepts (relative to recent years), and the estimated number of trips during wave 1 NoCH. The estimate suggests that more black sea bass were harvested during February 2020 than during any entire year since 2011. While anecdotal reports support that black sea bass harvest NoCH was higher than expected, NCDMF staff indicated it is unrealistic to believe over 50,000 pounds of fish were harvested given the low number of days that boats could have safely fished in the ocean out of

¹ The management unit and harvest for NC extend only to Cape Hatteras per the FMP.

Oregon Inlet in February. Based on analysis of weather data, NC estimates there were only nine days during February 2020 that would have allowed fishing for black sea bass.

Table 1. Summary of estimated North Carolina (north of Cape Hatteras) private angler black sea bass catch and harvest during February 2018-2020. All values are based on MRIP estimates.

Private anglers - North Carolina February 2018-2020					
Year	MRIP intercepts	Estimated total harvest (# fish)	Estimated total harvest (lb.)	Estimated total discards (#s fish)	Estimated total catch (#s fish)
2018	0	0	0	0	0
2019	0	0	0	0	0
2020	2	28,091	50,692	18,936	47,027

Additionally, with only two intercepts with black sea bass, the mode and area fished reported by anglers had a substantial influence on the harvest estimate. NCDMF staff explained that one of MRIP intercepts was reported as a private boat mode in state waters, which is unusual considering black sea bass fishing north of Cape Hatteras largely occurs in federal waters. If this single intercept had been reported as a party/charter mode trip, the harvest estimate produced from it would be approximately 30,000 pounds lower, and approximately 12,000 pounds lower if it had been reported as a private boat trip in federal waters. These calculations were provided to demonstrate how sensitive the harvest estimate is to mode and area fished (see attached memo).

North Carolina Proposal for 2020 Black Sea Bass Recreational Measures

Based on black sea bass harvest, fishing days, and effort analyses, North Carolina has proposed two options for season closures in wave 6 to account for black sea bass harvest in February 2020:

1. Closing from December 1-31, 2020 (31 additional closed days)
2. Closing from November 16-December 31, 2020 (46 additional closed days)

These options were developed with TC guidance after they had reviewed all pertinent available data, and concluded that the NC 2020 February black sea bass harvest estimate appears to be an outlier. The TC agreed that due to the magnitude of the 2020 estimate, and scarcity of additional wave 1 harvest estimates, there does not seem to be a technically sound way to quantitatively adjust or smooth the 2020 estimate, nor to calculate a season closure that would provide a pound for pound payback. Therefore the TC recommended NC investigate effort-based methods to account for their February 2020 harvest. The TC specifically recommended exploring closures in wave 6 and considering the relative catch rates of other waves compared to wave 1.

The resulting options are based on an approximate exchange of open fishing days and estimated fishing effort. Based on sparse and highly uncertain effort data for wave 1 and 6 during the past decade, there are fewer total ocean boat trips in wave 6 than in wave 1 on average, but the average total number of targeted black sea bass trips in wave 6 is higher than in wave 1. The additional closed days along with the two-day delay in reopening the 2020 season are designed to account for the significant uncertainty in the trip and effort data.

NCDMF staff examined potential harvest reductions under the proposed season closures based on 2017 wave 6 harvest and average wave 6 harvest over the time series. Based on 2017 daily harvest rates, a 31-day season closure in wave 6 would reduce black sea bass harvest by 1,360 pounds and a 46-day season closure would reduce harvest by 2,018 pounds. Based on average daily harvest rates for the full

time series, a 31-day season closure at the end of the year would reduce the black sea bass harvest by 777 pounds, and by 1,153 pounds with a 46-day season closure in wave 6.

Technical Committee Discussion and Recommendations

While not based on pound for pound calculations, the TC ultimately supported North Carolina's proposed closures of 31 or 46 additional days in wave 6 as reasonable alternatives to account for the February 2020 harvest.

In addition to discussing specific issues with the 2020 harvest estimate, the TC also discussed broader concerns with the methods that have been used to estimate and account for February recreational fishery harvest. First, the TC agreed that it is not appropriate to use MRIP for fine-scale harvest estimates and seasonal adjustments; there is too much uncertainty associated with these estimates at this scale and they were not intended for this purpose. Moving forward, the TC recommends that NC and other states participating in this program should be required to use more tailored methods to estimate February harvest, such as mandatory logbook reporting and a call- in program.

Lastly, a few TC members expressed concerns about the potential reaction of industry to additional restrictions in wave 6 based on the NC wave 1 harvest estimate when there is agreement among the TC that the estimate appears to be an outlier. There is some concern that this action could negatively impact industry buy-in and participation in MRIP surveys, when there is a need for anglers coastwide to participate in the survey to improve recreational data. Other TC members agreed that further education is needed to improve angler and industry understanding and participation with the program.