



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Monkfish Committee

Webinar

September 13, 2023

The Monkfish Committee met on September 13, 2023, via webinar at 9:00 AM to 1) receive Advisory Panel comments on recent fishery performance and outlook for the remainder of fishing year (FY) 2023; 2) review the outcomes and recommendations of the Monkfish Research-Set-Aside (RSA) Working Group and make recommendations to the Council on next steps with the RSA program; and 3) make recommendations to the Council for monkfish-related work in 2024.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Mr. Matt Gates (Monkfish Interim Chair), Mr. Peter Hughes (Vice-Chair), Mr. Dan Farnham, Mr. Eric Hansen, Mr. Scott Olszewski, Mr. John Pappalardo, Mr. Alan Tracy, Mr. Paul Risi, Mr. Robert Ruhle, and Ms. Kelly Whitmore; Dr. Rachel Feeney (Plan Development Team (PDT) Chair), Ms. Jenny Couture, and Ms. Janice Plante (Council staff); Mr. Ryan Silva (NMFS GARFO staff); Ms. Jackie Odell (incoming NEFMC member); Mr. Ted Platz (Advisory Panel Chair). In addition, about three members of the public attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- On Monkfish RSA Working Group outcomes and recommendations, the Committee recommended:
 - That the Council develop an action in 2024 to improve the Monkfish RSA program, further considering the recommendations of the RSA Working Group.
 - That the Council send a letter to GARFO to encourage uptake of the communication improvements recommended by the RSA Working Group that are under the purview of NOAA Fisheries.
- Regarding recommendations to the Council for 2024 monkfish-related work, the Committee recommended the ideas generated by the PDT and the AP should be forwarded for consideration.

INTRODUCTIONS, APPROVAL OF AGENDA, AND OTHER UPDATES:

The Chair introduced the Committee, welcomed attendees, and sought approval of the agenda. New Committee member Robert Ruhle was welcomed. There were no agenda changes. The timeline for 2023 monkfish work was reviewed. Staff provided an update on year-end annual catch limit (ACL) accounting for FY 2022, Framework Adjustment 13 implementation, and FY 2023 in-season quota monitoring.

A Committee member asked for clarification on the fishery performance data and how the reduction in the ACL relates to the last stock assessment. Staff explained that the monkfish stock assessment was completed last year using the Ismooth approach and a modification was used to set the specifications. The next management track assessment is scheduled for 2025 and there are two current monkfish RSA projects that plan to develop an industry-based catch per unit effort (CPUE) index to

help inform future assessments. The Committee member noted that the monkfish fishery in the Portland, Maine area is growing, and he is receiving questions on the status of the fishery.

AGENDA ITEM #1: MONKFISH ADVISORY PANEL REPORT

Advisory Panel (AP) Chair Mr. Ted Platz provided AP input on how the monkfish fishery is performing, focusing on FY 2022 and how FY 2023 is progressing, noting challenges related to the closing of Blue Harvest Fisheries impacting fishermen incidentally catching monkfish in the northern management area, skate abundance limiting ability to catch monkfish in the southern management area, decreasing price for monkfish, and increasing shipping cost. AP members supported efforts to improve the RSA program, and the Chair noted specific areas of input and suggested clarifications for the report. The Chair reported the AP's recommendations for 2024 work priorities: an action to define and reduce latent effort and an action to consider managing monkfish and skates under the same management plan.

A new Council member asked if staff included any data on latent fishing effort in the meeting materials given the recurring concern of latent effort in the southern management area. Staff did not as this topic was not on the agenda, but noted that data are in Framework 13, Section 5.1. The AP Chair suggested looking at how many permits are within permit banks as an estimate of the number of permits that would not be activated to allay concerns. A Committee member asked whether moving to a quota-based management system versus the current day-at-sea (DAS) system would alleviate the problem where one species is inhibiting the harvest of another species (e.g., skates and monkfish, respectively). The AP Chair thought that managing skates and monkfish together would help improve overall efficiency and help address latent effort. Lastly, the Committee briefly discussed how the Chapter 7 declaration of Blue Harvest Fisheries is likely going to impact fishing in New England. There was a question regarding what would happen to those permits and quota, especially those within the groundfish sector. GARFO staff noted that those permits would remain with the vessels, like any limited access permit, and that the permits would go into confirmation of permit history if the vessels were no longer operational. He suggested following up with Pete Christopher from GARFO.

AGENDA ITEM #2: MONKFISH RESEARCH-SET-ASIDE WORKING GROUP

Staff reviewed the Monkfish RSA Working Group outcomes and recommendations which were developed to improve the Monkfish RSA Program's effectiveness. The working group met three times over the summer and recently developed final recommendations. The Committee can make recommendations to the Council on next steps for improving the program. These steps can be related to improving communication, actions that NOAA Fisheries could take to improve program administration, or actions that the Councils would need to take to revise fishery regulations related to the RSA program. The Council will receive the Committee input including any recommendations during its September meeting.

The Committee spoke at length about the mismatch between how RSA DAS and pounds are calculated and any handshake agreements between researchers and the fishing industry participants. Staff clarified that each project has an overall DAS cap and poundage cap, calculated by setting each RSA DAS to be equal to double the possession limit for vessels with permit categories A and C fishing in the Southern Fishery Management Area (4,074 lb whole weight per RSA DAS). The project recipients receive the number of RSA DAS based on their research budget, which is based on the value of the RSA DAS. Exempted Fishing Permits (EFPs) do not specify how much a vessel is allowed to harvest as that is established between the researcher and an individual vessel. The RSA program office is not involved in these interactions and the EFP is likely not a legal instrument to stipulate that fishermen should pay for the equivalent amount of RSA DAS based on how many pounds are landed. The researcher is responsible for any written contracts to ensure the project budget is met. GARFO RSA staff noted that if vessels are not actually paying for the equivalent amount of

RSA DAS based on their landings, then the research won't be able to be done and that adjustments to the program should be made. He suggested the RSA program could improve its communication with the research industry on expectations and requirements of researchers and could consider providing sample contracts for researchers to use to have a more binding agreement with the fishing industry.

A Committee member asked whether fishermen are allowed to use their RSA landings on another trip if they do not harvest the full 4,074 lb on one Monkfish RSA DAS, like what is done in the scallop fishery. Staff clarified that no, that is not currently allowed and that is the impetus for recommending flexibility to flip to a Monkfish RSA DAS while at sea. There is inherent risk in buying a Monkfish RSA DAS before leaving the dock. The member was interested in whether allocating RSA quota in pounds versus DAS would help.

Another Committee member asked how the RSA program results are used in stock assessments. He was frustrated with the bottom trawl survey results and the overall assessment process. Staff noted how the scallop dredge discard mortality rate was used in last year's monkfish assessment and that she agreed there needs to be better communication between the RSA program and the NEFSC assessment scientists to help ensure RSA reports are incorporated accordingly into stock assessments.

A Committee member emphasized the importance of standardized formats for RSA final reports to help with ease of reading the reports across projects. GARFO staff noted that NOAA cannot legally require a specific format for final reports and that most projects already follow a similar format with additional narrative information, which differs across projects. If the Committee is interested in adding additional information or clarifying anything within the final reports, this can be done through work with the RSA program office. The new Council member reiterated the importance of RSA research and the need to improve the monkfish assessment approach including gathering additional data and conducting additional research, especially before the next stock assessment taking place in a few years. A Committee member suggested a memo that could be provided to the fishing industry on how information flows from the RSA final reports into the assessment process to help incentivize more industry participation. The AP Chair noted that the Monkfish RSA program has shifted priorities more recently towards improving the monkfish stock assessment; previously the program focused on stock movement, growth, diet, and ageing.¹

Lastly, a Committee member made a couple of minor corrections to the slide to improve consistency.

1. MOTION: HUGHES/PAPPALARDO

The Committee recommends to the Council an action in 2024 to improve the Monkfish RSA Program, further considering the recommendations of the RSA Working Group. For example, consider streamlining the Exempted Fishing Permit process, allocating pounds versus DAS, allowing vessels to flip to an RSA DAS while at sea, etc.

Rationale: The Committee does not want to lose the momentum on the Monkfish RSA Working Group's discussion. The Committee would like to further discuss the many ideas generated, including those identified as higher and lower priorities by the working group.

Discussion on the motion: The Committee thought the Working Group had several strong recommendations and wanted to continue making progress on improving the Monkfish RSA program. The Committee briefly discussed a few items that likely do not need a Council action including publishing the request for proposals earlier. Streamlining the EFP process may not require Council action depending on the specifics. The group wanted to explore the possibility of converting to a weight-based RSA quota system rather than the DAS system currently in place. The AP Chair asked the Committee to describe how this change would impact other species given both effort controls were established for a reason. The Committee briefly spoke to this, noting that their intention

¹ Staff note that these earlier priorities supported assessment needs at the time.

was not to incentivize fishing on other species but that more discussion and public meetings will be held next year if this action is prioritized by the Council.

MOTION #1 ADOPTED BY CONSENSUS.

2. MOTION: WHITMORE/HUGHES

The Committee recommends that the Council send a letter to GARFO to encourage uptake of the communication improvements recommended by the Monkfish RSA Working Group that are under the purview of NOAA Fisheries.

Rationale: Many improvements to the program can be made outside of what would require Council action and the Committee would like to see forward progress on them.

Discussion on the motion: GARFO staff was uncertain whether certain communication improvements would be within the sole purview of NOAA versus in collaboration with the Council, namely the RSA Share Day recommendation.

MOTION #2 ADOPTED BY CONSENSUS.

AGENDA ITEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MONKFISH-RELATED WORK IN 2024

Staff presented the Monkfish PDT memo outlining recent Council work priorities and proposed potential priorities for 2024. Staff also presented input received from the AP. The Committee can develop recommendations for the Council to consider for 2024 monkfish related work priorities during its late September meeting. The NEFMC will receive work priority recommendations from all committees and undergo a ranking exercise over the fall. The MAFMC will receive an update and have an opportunity to discuss it during its October meeting. The NEFMC will make final decisions in December.

A Committee member asked whether the PDT recommendations regarding a review of the effectiveness of the monkfish and skate fishery management plans (FMP) encompassed ideas from the AP. Staff answered that the AP was interested in initiating an action to combine FMPs while the PDT was interested in first reviewing whether and how those two fisheries could be managed more efficiently before initiating an action.

Another Committee member asked how latent fishing is defined and whether the AP was interested in addressing latent fishing in the directed monkfish fishery and/or the incidental fishery. Staff and the AP Chair thought the intention was on the directed monkfish fishery. One idea to address latent effort included looking at how many permits are held within permit banks and the number of limited access permits on trawlers and longline vessels in the Mid-Atlantic region that are being constrained to incidental fishing given most of the directed fishing occurs on gillnet gear.

3. MOTION: PAPPALARDO/HUGHES: The Committee recommends that ideas generated by the PDT and AP should be forwarded for consideration for 2024 priorities. The Committee forwards these without any ranking of priorities.

- Required: Complete joint NEFMC-MAFMC Sturgeon Action (Monkfish FW15).
- Required: Annual PDT review of monkfish fishery.
- An action in 2024 to improve the Monkfish RSA Program, further considering the recommendations of the RSA Working Group. For example, consider streamlining the Exempted Fishing Permit process, allocating pounds versus DAS, allowing vessels to flip to an RSA DAS while at sea, etc. Support other improvements that do not require a Council action to implement.

- Review the effectiveness of the monkfish and skate management programs to identify if there are ways to manage these fisheries more efficiently.
- An action to consider managing monkfish and skates under the same fishery management plan to:
 - Better facilitate vessels catching monkfish in a way that allows skate limits to adjust seasonally to not limit monkfish catch,
 - More effectively address incidental take concerns for protected resources and to reduce bycatch in both fisheries, and
 - Help streamline management since skate and monkfish are harvested simultaneously by many vessels.
- An action to define and reduce latency of monkfish permits. This action would likely need an updated control date from the date set through Amendment 6 (May 12, 2012).

Discussion on the motion: The Committee incorporated Motion #1 into Motion #3. The Committee did not want to rank these priorities given the Council will have a ranking exercise. A Committee member wanted additional input from the Monkfish AP and the broader fishing industry on which priorities should move forward.

MOTION #2 ADOPTED BY CONCENSUS.

AGENDA ITEM #4: OTHER BUSINESS

The Committee had no other business to discuss.

The Monkfish Committee meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m.