



New England Fishery Management Council

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 5, 2024

PRESS CONTACT: Janice Plante
(607) 592-4817, jplante@nefmc.org

Council Receives Update on Joint Action to Reduce Sturgeon Bycatch in Monkfish and Spiny Dogfish Gillnet Fisheries

The New England Fishery Management Council received a progress report during its [January 2024 meeting](#) on an action that's being developed to reduce the bycatch of Atlantic sturgeon in the large-mesh gillnet fisheries for monkfish and spiny dogfish.

The New England Council is working on the measures with the Mid-Atlantic Council because the two Councils jointly manage both fisheries. The Councils are expected to take final action during their respective April Council meetings.

The proposed alternatives focus on time/area closures and/or gear modifications, which include soak time limitations for dogfish gillnets and net modifications for monkfish gillnets. The measures would apply only to the commercial fishery. Here is the [draft document](#).

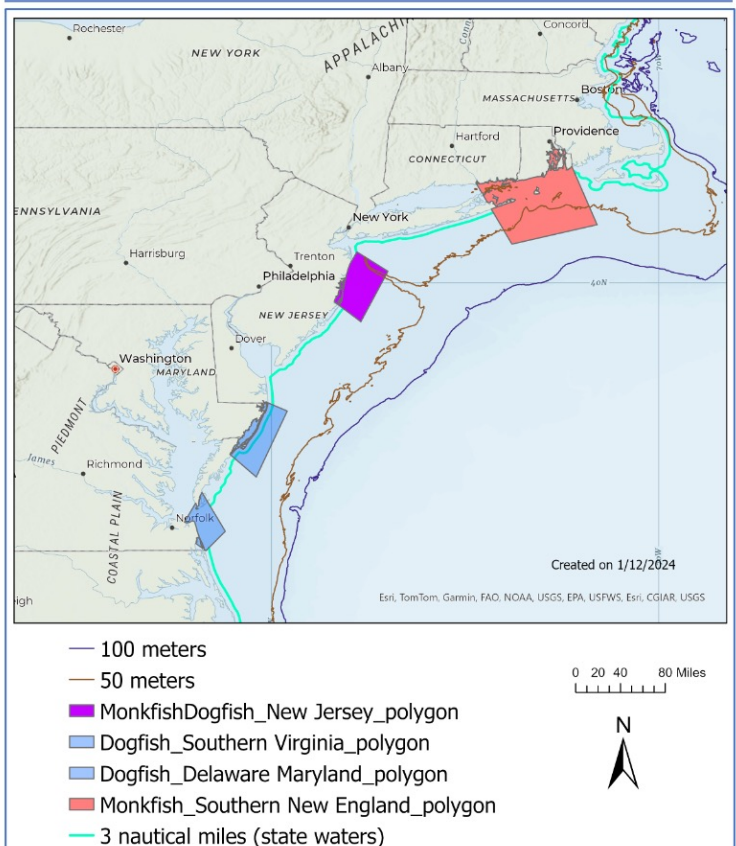
Once finalized by the Councils in April, the measures will be submitted to NOAA Fisheries for review and implementation as:

- Framework Adjustment 15 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan, which the New England Council has the lead for; and
- Framework Adjustment 6 to the Spiny Dogfish Fishery Management Plan, which the Mid-Atlantic Council has the lead for.

These frameworks are being developed to address recommendations in NOAA's [Action Plan to Reduce Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch in Federal Large-Mesh Gillnet Fisheries](#).

The work has taken on heightened urgency.

Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch Hotspot Polygons for Monkfish and Spiny Dogfish Fisheries



The colored polygons in the map above identify the locations where proposed management measures are being considered to reduce Atlantic sturgeon bycatch in the federal monkfish and spiny dogfish gillnet fisheries. — NEFMC graphic



New England Fishery Management Council

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires NOAA Fisheries to take steps to reduce the mortality and serious injury of protected resources such as whales and sturgeon. The agency develops biological opinions that contain specified numbers of “takes” of protected resources, which cannot be exceeded without triggering further corrective action.

The Councils began working on measures to reduce Atlantic sturgeon bycatch – or takes – using guidance contained in the [sturgeon action plan](#). This plan was developed based on a [2021 biological opinion](#), which includes a requirement to reduce sturgeon bycatch in large-mesh gillnet fisheries by 2024.



WHY THE URGENCY?



In June of 2023, NOAA Fisheries informed the Councils that incidental takes of sturgeon in the monkfish and dogfish gillnet fisheries had **increased** and exceeded the amount allowed under the 2021 biological opinion. The finding forced the agency to reinstate consultation on the biological opinion, which it did in September 2023. NOAA Fisheries is expected to release a revised biological opinion in January 2025. The opinion will determine whether Atlantic sturgeon are in “jeopardy” from the gillnet fisheries.

The reason the Councils are under a tight timeline to take final action in April 2024 is because: (1) the 2021 biological opinion requires action by 2024; and (2) NOAA Fisheries will use the proposed sturgeon bycatch reduction measures in the monkfish and dogfish frameworks as the baseline for evaluating whether Atlantic sturgeon are in jeopardy from these fisheries in the 2025 revised biological opinion.

The Councils’ joint sturgeon technical team narrowed down the [previous range of alternatives](#) to produce four refined packages of sturgeon bycatch reduction measures in addition to “no action.” No action could not be approved given the ESA mandates. The [revised packages](#) can be reasonably analyzed in time for final action in April. The time/area closures and gear restrictions in each of the bundles are contained within the polygons shown in the map on page 1. They range from high to low impacts as follows:

- **Alternative 1:** No action, not approvable;
- **Alternative 2:** High sturgeon impacts – all time/area closures and gear restrictions are included in this option;
- **Alternative 3:** Intermediate sturgeon impacts – a subset of time/area closures and gear restrictions are included;
- **Alternative 4:** Lower sturgeon impacts – the fewest closures and gear measures are included; and
- **Alternative 5:** Gear restrictions only.



– Atlantic Sturgeon, NOAA Fisheries photo

Questions? Contact Robin Frede at (978) 465-0492 extension 124, rfrede@nefmc.org, or Jenny Couture at (978) 465-0492 extension 111, jcouture@nefmc.org. January 2024 meeting materials for this action are [posted here](#). Visit the New England Council’s [monkfish webpage](#).