



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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

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

MEMORANDUM

Date: July 15, 2022
To: Chris Moore, Executive Director
From: Jason Didden, staff
Subject: 2023-2024 specifications for Atlantic butterfish

Executive Summary

Based on the 2022 Management Track Assessment, as of 2021, butterfish are neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing.

The current 2022 Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for butterfish is 17,854 MT. For 2023-2024, staff recommends using the 2/3 M value as a starting point for P* calculations, along with a 100% C.V. The resulting ABCs would be 17,267 MT for 2023 and 15,764 MT for 2024.

Additional information on fishery performance and past management measures can be found in the 2022 Butterfish Fishery Information Document created by staff and the 2022 Butterfish Fishery Performance Report developed by the Mackerel-Squid-Butterfish (MSB) Advisory Panel (AP).

The Council will meet in August 2022 to review the recommendations of the AP, the SSC, the MSB Monitoring Committee, as well as input from the public. The Council will then recommend catch and landings limits and other management measures for 2023-2024.

Current Measures and Review of Prior SSC Recommendations

The last setting of butterfish specifications occurred in 2020 and the SSC utilized a 100% C.V. when calculating an ABC. From the 17,854 MT ABC for 2022, a 5% management uncertainty buffer is set aside, potential discards are set aside, and the remaining catch constitutes the quota of 11,495 MT. Approximately 1/3 of the annual catch target is set aside for potential discards. A discard cap on the longfin squid fishery ensures that annual discards are unlikely to exceed what had been set aside.

The directed fishery operates under limited access, and open access/incidental permits are limited to 600 pounds per trip. Vessels fishing with otter trawl gear that possess 5,000 pounds or more of butterfish, must use nets that have a minimum codend mesh of 3 inches. The directed limited access fishery does not otherwise start with trip limits, but the fishery is slowed with a 5,000-pound trip limit for all limited access permits once landings approach 1,000 MT of the

quota. Once 100% of the quota is reached, all federally-permitted vessels are subject to a 600-pound trip limit.

Recent Catch and Landings

Since the resumption of directed fishing in 2013, catch has varied between about 1,500 MT and 5,000 MT, and since the substantial increase in quota in 2015, landings have been well below the quotas. See Figure 2 in the Butterfish Information Document. The Fishery Performance Report documents industry perspectives on why recent landings have been low.

Stock Status and Biological Reference Points

There are new research track and management track assessments for butterfish that indicate that, as of 2021, butterfish are neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. However, there was concern by the research track peer reviewers about the reference point developed through the research track working group. The peer review suggested that a fishing mortality (“F”) reference point equal to 2/3 of the assumed natural mortality (M) “may be more appropriate.” Taking 2/3 of $M = 0.85$ and would still be substantially higher than recent realized Fs.

Staff Recommendation

The 2/3 M approach appears to be reasonable recently given the assessment results. Staff recommends its continued use, along with a 100% C.V. While there is considerable variability with the butterfish stock from year to year and thus considerable uncertainty in projections, the stock’s apparent resiliency and lack of any negative long term trends suggests that a 100% C.V. is reasonable. Staff also notes the consistency in projected 2022/2023 ABCs across the previous and current assessments. The resulting ABCs would be 17,267 MT for 2023 and 15,764 MT for 2024.