



Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

June 2022

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Bluefish Advisory Panels (AP) met via webinar on June 22, 2022 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the bluefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

MAFMC Advisory Panel members present: Victor Hartley (NJ), Phil Simon (NJ), William Mandulak (NC), Jim Kaczynski (RI), Michael Plaia (CT), Steve Heins (NC), Eric Burnley (DE)

ASMFC Advisory Panel members present: Peter Fallon (ME), John LaFountain (RI)

Others present: Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC Staff), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO Staff), Cynthia Jones (MAFMC SSC), Maureen Davidson (MAFMC), Joe Cimino (MAFMC), Chris Batsavage (MAFMC), Abby Tyrell (NMFS), and Karson Coutre (MAFMC Staff).

Trigger questions

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

Environmental Factors Influencing Catch

The bluefish recreational fishery is unusual because it is almost exclusively catch and release except for those fishing for snappers. When the regulations changed from a 15 fish bag limit to a 3 fish bag limit, there was not a big impact on angler behavior. The current regulations are not the primary factor impacting how many people fish and how often they fish for bluefish. Reduced bag limits are not going to limit fishing mortality and regulations are not going to help this stock. It looks like the spawning stock biomass has remained fairly steady over time, especially since the 1980s, based on the recent operational assessment graph.

Recreational catch has been relatively flat since the big drop off after 2017. Generally, anglers fishing from shore and beaches do not keep a lot of bluefish. Last November there were quite a

few bluefish and they were in the 3-5 pound range.

Bluefish are a pelagic fish, and the fish that move inshore are a spillover for bluefish that are looking for additional forage. In New Jersey, fishing mostly on party or charter boats, the bluefish showed up late this year, normally they come much earlier.

In Rhode Island, the commercial and recreational fishing started out very strong last year and then it fell off on the latter half of the year, especially gillnetting. Giant bluefin tuna moved inshore in the fall and scared off the smaller bluefish, which could have affected landings. This year bluefish seems like a strong stock. People are reaching their quotas quickly.

For the New Jersey for-hire sector, fishing out of Point Pleasant, bluefish is not a catch and release fishery. In this area we saw plenty of bluefish last year, while this year the bluefish came in a little late. Fall bluefish fishing is pretty good, and most boats switch to striped bass at this time, while bluefish become more of a secondary target. They may have come in late this year because menhaden came in late. The bluefish are definitely plentiful.

In Maine, bluefish were historically important for the for-hire trips, especially in August when other species' seasons close. Maine is the northern end of the range and as the population has decreased, there have been very few bluefish in Maine and New Hampshire for the past five years. In Massachusetts there were more bluefish in the fall last year, especially on the south side of the cape. North of Massachusetts it would be beneficial for us if the bluefish population would come back.

A bluefish dealer and smokehouse owner in Rhode Island purchases bluefish up and down the coast and used to see big bluefish prior to 2018. In North Carolina and New Jersey, they used to see bigger fish but now they are seeing much smaller fish, which has been true up and down the coast. The exception is this year, when up and down the coast they started getting really big fish. An environmental shift has likely caused big bluefish to go offshore and come up north more and that is reflected in the allocations. Northern states have been getting more fish. In the Rhode Island area, when the tuna moved in close to shore it affected the inshore gillnetters and it had been a while since that had been seen. Those fishing 10-11 miles south of Block Island were catching a ton of bluefish and were only restricted by the quota. They would limit out very quickly and the commercial coastwide quota was underharvested last year due to allocations not being updated yet. In the fall, bluefish were coming by RI offshore.

In the Delaware and Maryland area, we aren't seeing tiny snappers and jumbos, but we have a good supply of fish at 28 inches in Maryland. Bluefish have been in the surf, and even going up into estuaries. There is now a fishery that had not been there for the past few years. The local fishing pier had a good run with them as well.

Looking at the fishing literature, not necessarily the scientific literature, bluefish have been very cyclical. Given that, we should sit back and see what happens. In Long Island Sound there have been plenty of bluefish so maybe the population is on the upswing.

The state of Florida accounts for so much of the bluefish catch recreationally, their dead discard

estimate is more dead fish than we catch in New York and New Jersey. Do we know what is going on there? No advisors from Florida were present to comment on this.

One advisor commented that Connecticut's average weight for bluefish seems difficult to believe. Other AP members commented that the snapper fishery is very common in Connecticut and the high number of snappers can explain the low average weight per fish.

Market/Economic Conditions and Management Issues

The assumed discard mortality rate seems high, however in general treble hooks make it harder to release bluefish so choosing to fish with a single hook may increase survival.

No AP members from Florida were present, however, one advisor noted that they have heard anglers are upset about the minimum size limit in Florida.

One advisor asked how Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data was collected during COVID-19 and what the impact was on the intercept surveys. In response, staff discussed the use of imputed MRIP estimates for certain states/waves of 2020.

Another advisor asked about the implications of the 2021 recreational harvest estimate being over the recreational harvest limit (RHL). Staff discussed that the Monitoring Committee and Council and Board would consider that when setting 2023 recreational measures. However, staff also pointed out that the 2023 RHL is higher than in recent years, which may offset the effect of an overage payback.

Five AP members supported an increase in bag limit for the for-hire sector. Four specified that this could be supported with implementation of a minimum size for this sector. One advisor did not support different bag limits across modes. Additional context is included in the comments below:

The party boats are getting decimated in New Jersey. There used to be 3-4 in Barnegat Bay and now there is only one and it may be gone soon. The party boats should be supported if possible.

The for-hire fleet would like to see a bag limit of 7 fish with a minimum size.

The bag limit should be increased and a minimum size could be increased for the for-hire industry. They fish further offshore and their clients are looking at how much protein they can bring home. A bigger bag limit allows people to bring more home so they will want to take the trips.

In the Gulf of Mexico there is sector separation between private and for-hire modes with different regulations. The more robust for-hire reporting can allow for a better managed fishery and opportunities to have higher bag limits or different size limits informed by better data.

Regarding the recreational bag limit, everyone should have the same bag limit across modes. It is not fair or equal to have them different for the for-hire and private sectors.

Two advisors supported investigating a minimum size (regardless of bag limit) in order to help protect the stock. A small but reasonable size limit would allow kids to still catch fish but the stock would benefit from protecting younger year classes.

Research Priorities

More research is needed on release mortality and single hook lures should be promoted along with a circle hook requirement.

It would be beneficial to research the cyclical nature of bluefish, however that may take generations.

More research is needed on the impact of the snapper fishery on the stock. What is the impact of removing a lot of these small bluefish from the future population?

Email Comments

From: Capt. TJ Karbowski [mailto:tedkarbowski@yahoo.com]
Sent: Thursday, July 7, 2022 4:47 AM
To: Dustin C. Leaning <DLeaning@asmfc.org>
Subject: [External] Re: Bluefish Fishery Performance Report Draft

Good morning.

I read through quickly. In my opinion as a 6 pack charter vessel. not a party boat. The current bag is completely fine. We CATCH a ton of blues. We release about 90%.

Small baitfish such as sand eels and silversides you will find plenty of smaller blues.

When menhaden are around you will find the larger (alligator) bluefish. No big bunker= No big blues.

Thank you,
Capt. TJ Karbowski
Rock & Roll Charters
Clinton, CT
203.314.3765
<https://rockandrollcharters.com/>