



## **Bluefish Fishery Performance Report**

**June 2023**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission) Bluefish Advisory Panels (AP) met via webinar on June 22, 2023 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), Philip Simon (NJ), Willy Goldsmith (MA), James Kaczynski (RI), Thomas Roller (NC), Mike Waine (NC), Steve Heins (NC), Steve Witthuhn (NY).

**ASMFC Advisory Panel members present:** Peter Fallon (ME), Frank Blount (RI), Gordon Churchill (NC), Ray Jarvis (MA).

**Others present:** Karson Cisneros (MAFMC Staff), Chelsea Tuohy (ASMFC Staff), Cynthia Jones (MAFMC SSC), Maureen Davidson (MAFMC), Wes Townsend (MAFMC), Chris Batsavage (MAFMC), Mike Celestino (NJ DEP), Alan Bianchi (NC DMF), Will Poston (ASGA), Haley Clinton, Andrew Scheld (MAFMC SSC), James Fletcher (UNFA), Greg DiDomenico (Lund's Fisheries), Jason Didden (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**

Advisors noted the variability in the average weight of fish landed by state, particularly the jump from 5 lbs in CT to 2 lbs in NY. One advisor did not feel this was realistic and wanted to compare this to an average weight of a commercially caught fish; however, commercial harvest data is not available in numbers of fish. Staff noted that this has been discussed in the past and lower average weights compared with what people are seeing out on the water may be due to the snapper fishery. Anglers will catch their bag limit of small fish from the dock with a very low

weight which is sampled by MRIP and brings down the average overall. Staff also noted that these state-by-state weights tend to fluctuate year to year.

Many advisors commented that there are much more bluefish this year than last year and noted an increasing trend in recent years. One advisor from NJ said that last year the bluefish were absent 10-15 miles offshore. Another advisor added that off of Montauk this year the bluefish fishing is phenomenal with a lot of large fish at sizes between 8-12 lbs. They added that they hoped these big fish will provide a good upcoming year class. Fishermen in RI and NC also observed that there have been a lot of bluefish this spring and summer.

An advisor in MA agreed that there have been a lot of really big fish in the area, more so in the past few years. They added that generally the big fish come in first to spawn and then move away but the size and number of fish are both impressive this year. In MA, there is a slot limit on striped bass, so the bluefish are filling a need where fish can be harvested. This advisor has a lot of clients that want to keep bluefish in recent years.

An advisor from NJ said that 2021 and 2022 were great bluefish years from Point Pleasant north into the southern end of New York. They added that the fish are about to 5-8 pounds. They are not seeing the little fish that are being accounted for by MRIP.

### **Market/Economic Conditions and Management Issues**

One advisor noticed that the bag limit change in 2020 corresponds with a decrease in the proportion of overall catch by the shore mode and an increase in private rental mode, while the for-hire mode stayed at the same level. He wondered if this was because of more anglers in the private rental mode. Staff added that we do not have data on number of anglers, however another factor that could influence harvest by mode is bluefish availability from shore which advisors have commented on in the past. Another advisor added that boats will switch over to black sea bass until it is closed and then switch back to bluefish.

An advisor added that from their perspective, people tend to hire charter captains for summer flounder, striped bass, and black sea bass. Most people go after bluefish for fun but not to take them home to eat. They added that they didn't understand why changing the bag limit from 15 fish to 3 fish would have an impact.

A for-hire operator in NC observed that over the last 5-6 years there has been an increased interest in harvesting and eating bluefish. This species is filling the need for customers who want to go out and catch fish for dinner when other species' regulations don't allow it. This advisor did not think that the bag limit had a negative impact because people only want to take home 2 or 3 fish.

For the NJ and NY party boats, bluefish is an important fishery that brings in a lot of money. The head boats in the region want to see an increase in the bag limit because this helps the passengers come and there is a lot of availability of bluefish right now. Another advisor felt that the differing bag limits between the for-hire and private angler modes was not thoroughly analyzed before being implemented and should be pursued through sector separation.

One advisor noted that there is a lot of targeting and interest in bluefish but it is often not considered a bluefish directed trip, so bluefish as a secondary target in MRIP would also be important to look at. Another advisor added that in MA, if you interviewed customers, they would not say they were targeting bluefish, but they catch bluefish on at least 50% of the trips and on some trips, a lot of bluefish are caught.

A member of the public commented that the people that can afford private boats and come back to private docks are not having their catch reported. They added that 80% of the people that are fishing come back to non-surveyed dock areas. They also felt that anglers fishing from shore should be allowed to keep more fish while those that can afford boats should have a lower limit because they are fishing for fun.

Another member of the public asked about the number of for-hire vessels in MA that target or fish for bluefish. Staff responded that they did not have the number of for-hire vessels broken down by state. An advisor added that there is a large percentage of for-hire vessels in MA that don't have federal permits.

Three advisors said they would like to see continued support for the conservation of bluefish and did not think there was a need to increase the bag limit too soon. One added that as a guide, bluefish are very valuable and you can always rely on them. They did not want to see a similar situation to what happened with striped bass in the early 2000s. They added that ensuring that there are still fish in 10-15 years is more important to them than taking home more fish.

## **Research Priorities and Data Issues**

Advisors discussed the discard mortality rate change in the research track assessment. One advisor asked whether the updated rate of 9.4% (previously 15%) was the result of a specific study and whether there is a difference between the discard mortality rate by fish size. Staff responded that the rate was updated based on an analysis of the literature and updated information since the benchmark assessment in 2015 when the 15% rate was used; however, the rate is not size specific.

Another advisor commented that people that work in the aquarium system in NC have noted that bluefish have a high mortality rate when they are handled so it would be valuable to have bluefish-specific discard studies, not studies based on other species. Another advisor agreed with the recommendation for a bluefish post release mortality study, and added that analyzing mortality on the early fish that are larger and later fish that are smaller would be helpful. Another advisor agreed with the need for a species-specific post-release mortality study and felt it was still a concern.

One advisor felt that since the research track stock assessment already evaluated the discard mortality rate, this should be a lower research priority compared with the need to get better data on the larger older bluefish that tend to be offshore. They are inshore now but we don't know where they came from or where they were in past years. Another advisor commented that they have known for years that there are bigger fish offshore just farther from where people want to fish from but we don't know why they are coming in now. They observed that there are a lot of

bunker and that the bluefish run with the striped bass.

An advisor commented that if the stock assessment isn't taking into account commercial bluefish discards in the NC shrimp trawl fishery then that should be another research recommendation. A member of the public disagreed and stated that there is no bycatch of bluefish in the shrimp trawl fishery because they are too fast for the trawl net.

Both an advisor and a member of the public asked about the updated bluefish reference points from the recent research track assessment. The advisor was surprised that there wasn't more discussion of the scaling down in biomass from the 2019 management track assessment to the 2022 research track assessment. The member of the public asked whether the SSC commented on this change in their May 2023 discussion on the research track assessment. Staff responded that they did discuss the changes and noted that the most recent reference points are similar to those from the 2015 benchmark assessment. The May SSC meeting summary can be found [here](#).

One advisor suggested bioeconomic models for bluefish similar to what has been done for summer flounder, scup and black sea bass.

### **Other issues**

Advisors discussed the timing of this meeting and a future AP meeting in late July or early August to recommend recreational management measures. One advisor noted that this time of year is challenging to meet and suggested the Fishery Performance Report meeting should be farther apart from the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass meeting, which was held the previous day. One advisor was grateful for the meeting start time of 4:00 pm and said the evening was helpful. Advisors generally preferred a second AP meeting in late July or early August rather than soliciting feedback on 2024-2025 measures via email or some other format. This discussion was raised due to the difficult time of year and advisors' busy schedules on the water.

### **Advisor Comments Received Via Phone or Email**

*Email: TJ Karboski*

From: Capt. TJ Karbowski <tedkarbowski@yahoo.com>

Sent: Friday, June 16, 2023 4:34 AM

To: Cisneros, Karson <KCisneros@mafmc.org>

Subject: Re: June 22 Bluefish AP Meeting

Good morning. Unless there is a weather event I will be on the water fishing. I'm a charter boat Captain. 4:00 in the middle of the season is an unrealistic time for a meeting for people who work on the water. These meetings should be during the winter. That being said, the bluefish are thriving this year. Although the general public and charter customers typically don't keep them for the table, the amount of fish around is (old school) and the fishing is as good as it gets. And, the fish range in sizes from little harbor size all the way up to true "alligators". Many year classes have succeeded.

Thank you, Capt. TJ Karbowski

*Phone Call: Steve Witthuhn*

- The 2 lb average weight for NY is because snappers are diluting the average weights and snappers should be considered as a completely different category. Otherwise, it is misrepresenting the fishery. The average weight jumps around with neighboring states. These values are not reasonable.
- Fish are now 9-12 lbs off of Montauk and are up to 7 lbs in MA
- Where were these large fish hiding in past years, were these the fish from a strong year class several years ago? We are inundated with bluefish. Do we know how big a 10 year old fish is?
- CT and the north shore of Long Island should be its own region where the bag/size/season regulations need to stay the same for all recreational species.
- Next year we should see a good snapper year with all of these larger fish spawning
- Bluefish school together by size, you don't see small fish in a school with the larger fish
- Bluefish are feeding like crazy on the sand eels to the point that they are not paying attention to a hooked porgy, when they used to attack those.

*Phone Call: Bill Mandulak*

- Bluefish haven't been around in the Outer Banks area where in the past you'd catch a lot of them. Specifically in areas such as Hatteras and Cape Point. They seem to be patchy, we do hear reports of them but in my experience this year and last May, even the small ones weren't there.
- The MRIP landings in NC from last year are substantial which is surprising and doesn't jive with what we are seeing.