



**Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Focus Group:
Engaging the Recreational Community in the Council Management Process**

**Final Focus Group Summary
January 2012**

Executive Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council ("Council") held a focus group December 2-3, 2011 to elicit feedback from stakeholders on engaging the recreational fishing community in the Council management process. The focus group was attended by 27 members of the recreational community from North Carolina to Massachusetts, representing private boat and shore-based anglers, party and charter boat owners and operators, regional advocacy groups, retailers, and media. The focus group also included Council Chair Rick Robins, Executive Director Dr. Christopher Moore, and members of the Council's Demersal Committee.

The focus group addressed four topics: (1) stakeholder engagement in the Council process; (2) Council communications; (3) the Council's Visioning Project; and (4) the annual specifications process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. Participants' recommendations and key themes of discussion are summarized below.

Stakeholder engagement in the Council Process

- Informed public participation requires access to information, an understanding of the Council process, and two-way (interactive) communication with the Council. The Council's acknowledgement and response to public input is an important component of meaningful participation.
- The Council can provide additional information products that would enhance public understanding of the management process and support informed participation.

Council communications

- The Council can employ a portfolio of communication strategies (print, email, online, and in-person) to reach a broader cross-section of the recreational community.
- The Council should not expect to reach all recreational stakeholders directly but can disseminate Council information more widely through existing communication networks and channels utilized by the recreational community.

The Visioning Project

- The recreational community values availability of fishing opportunities, and a vision for Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries should recognize that definitions of opportunity vary by fishery, mode (shoreside, private boat, and party/charter boat), state or region, and point of view. The recreational community also values stability, consistency, and the opportunity to keep fish.

- Participants' goals for Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries include long-term sustainability and future opportunities, improved recreational data, regulations that promote better utilization of the resource (e.g. fewer regulatory discards), and consideration of ecosystem factors, human dimensions and interactions between fisheries.
- Anglers want to share in the benefits accrued from the rebuilding of fish stocks.

The annual specifications process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass

- There is no "one size fits all" approach. Members of the recreational community may have different size limit, bag limit, and season preferences by fishing mode as well as by state or region, target fishery, and point of view. The recreational community wants fishing opportunities that accommodate these differences.

Focus Group Overview

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council sponsored a recreational fishing focus group December 2-3, 2011 in Baltimore, MD. The purpose of this focus group was to provide recreational stakeholders with an understanding of Council processes, introduce the Council's Visioning project, elicit feedback to help the Council improve communications, and support the recreational community's participation in the annual specifications process and in the Visioning project. Focus group discussions were designed to provide the Council with additional insight into the values and perspectives held by the recreational fishing community, and not to achieve consensus.

The focus group agenda (Appendix 1) was developed largely by a Guidance Team of individuals (Appendix 2) representing a range of perspectives and organizations within the recreational fishing community. In addition to providing input on the focus group agenda, the Guidance Team nominated a representative cross-section of participants to attend the workshop. The Council provided travel and accommodations to invited participants. The Council engaged the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum ("Fisheries Forum") and Loftus Consulting to coordinate and facilitate focus group discussions. An Oversight Committee (Appendix 3), which included Council leadership and staff, was responsible for confirming nomination and approving the focus group agenda. Prior to the meeting, Guidance Team members and invited participants completed a short survey to share their initial thoughts on the learning objectives and desired outcomes from the focus group. The results of this survey were used to guide focus group discussions, and were shared with participants at the event.

Focus Group Objectives

- To enhance the recreational community's understanding of the regulatory process, focusing on the recreational summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries;
- To gather perspectives from the recreational community on their engagement in the Council process, including clear steps that the Council can take to improve communication;
- To increase awareness of the Council's Visioning Process, and support the recreational community's participation in creating a vision for the future of Mid-Atlantic fisheries; and
- To identify and communicate different perspectives on the regulatory options and tradeoffs for managing the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass recreational fisheries.

The focus group was attended by 27 members of the recreational community from North Carolina to Massachusetts, representing private boat and shore-based anglers, party and charter boat owners and operators, regional advocacy groups, retailers, and media (Appendix 4). The focus group also included Council Chair Rick Robins, Executive Director Dr. Christopher Moore, and members of the Council's Demersal Committee. Additional materials from this focus group, including the final agenda, Powerpoint presentations, and results from the pre-focus group survey, are available on the [Mid-Atlantic Council's website](#).

Introductory Presentations and Discussion

Council Chair Rick Robins and Executive Director Dr. Christopher Moore welcomed participants to the focus group and provided opening remarks. Following introductions, Mr. Robins reviewed the focus group purpose and objectives, asserting the Council's desire to better engage the recreational community. Mr. Robins recognized that while the Council has rebuilt key Mid-Atlantic stocks, this process has strained relationships with the recreational community. Mr. Robins introduced the Council's Visioning Project, emphasizing the importance of the recreational community's participation in shaping a vision for the future of Mid-Atlantic fisheries.

Dr. Moore then provided background on recent changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, including the requirement to improve the quality and accuracy of recreational catch and effort data through the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) and federal angler registry. He then provided an overview of the annual specifications process for setting annual recreational regulations, and outlined the process for developing fishery management plans and amendments. Both processes include multiple opportunities for the recreational community to provide input.

The remainder of the focus group was structured as a series of small group breakout sessions and full group discussions, supported by presentations from Council staff and leadership. Discussion questions for each breakout session and full group discussion are included in the focus group agenda. For the breakout sessions, participants were divided into two smaller groups, each including a range of affiliations and perspectives. Each breakout group also included several members of the Council's Demersal Committee. Fisheries Forum staff facilitated the breakout groups and led the full group discussions, and Council Chair Rick Robins provided closing remarks at the end of each discussion section.

The following summary attempts to capture the range of perspectives, ideas and opinions shared by focus group participants. This summary is neither intended to imply consensus between focus group participants, nor to convey the preferences of one recreational user group or the recreational community as a whole. Unless otherwise specified, the ideas below are attributed to focus group participants and do not represent the opinions of the Mid-Atlantic Council, the Fisheries Forum, or Loftus Consulting. For the purpose of this summary, similar ideas and themes are aggregated. Recurring themes and similar perspectives are noted where they occur.

Breakout Session 1 and Summary Discussion Perspectives on meaningful participation by the recreational community

Discussion Overview

In the first breakout session, participants discussed engagement by recreational stakeholders in the Council process. Key attributes of meaningful participation discussed by the groups include access to information, understanding of the Council process, and acknowledgement by the Council. The groups identified communication channels and information products the Council can utilize to provide support informed participation by the recreational community.

Discussion Themes

Meaningful participation begins with timely access to information about Council actions, an understanding of the Council process, awareness of opportunities to participate and comment, particularly early in the process; and the ability to interact with Council members and staff. Engagement in the Council process is a two-way relationship, which the Council can support by making the process and the information available and comprehensible to a general audience. Participants suggested several information products that would support informed participation by the recreational community, including:

- A flow chart of the regulatory process
- A “Fisheries 101” document and/or module describing basics of the Council management process and geared toward the recreational community¹
- Definitions of commonly used terms and acronyms
- Responses and explanations to frequently asked questions
- A mechanism for tracking the progress of Council actions
- Clarification of the joint management process and management jurisdictions

Participants identified acknowledgement and follow-up by the Council as the most important qualities of meaningful participation. The groups recognized that it can be difficult to separate the process of meaningful participation from the outcome of a Council decision. However, some form of feedback from the Council helps reinforce that public input was heard and considered, regardless of the outcome of a decision. Suggestions for responding to and communicating about public input included:

- An explanation of how the Council reached a decision and how public input factored into the outcome (for example, included in Council press releases)
- A summary of comments received with responses to individual comments (Council staff noted that this information appears in the Federal Register version of the final rule of Council actions. Participants felt that the Council could also employ this approach.)
- Feedback from Council members or staff on whether comments are consistent with the law and the Council process

The recreational community is large, diffuse, and can be difficult to reach. Participants felt that the average angler simply wants to go fishing and may not have the interest or time to learn about and engage in the Council process. Many of those who do want to get involved are already

¹ A Council-published [“Guide to Navigating the Council Process”](#) is available online

active in the Council process or participate by way of membership in a group or organization. Other information gathering techniques such as surveys could be a tool for learning about the broader recreational stakeholder base.

The Council should not expect to reach and engage all anglers, but its website can serve as a clearinghouse for objective information about the Council process and current issues. Other suggestions for reaching the broader recreational community effectively and efficiently included:

- Network with organizations and businesses to develop a mailing list and share information
- Filter correspondence to focus on the issues that are most relevant to the recreational community
- Hire a dedicated outreach and communications Council staff member
- Maintain a presence at boat shows and other events
- Complement current outreach efforts with newsletters, news links, and/or social media
- Recognize that not all anglers speak English (one participant noted that 25% of customers do not speak English).

On a broader level, participants felt that it is important for the Council to communicate with the public about the goals and outcomes of rebuilding stocks. Participants also felt that the level of engagement by the recreational community is related to availability of fishing opportunities as well as confidence in the data used for decision-making.

Group Discussion

How does the recreational community currently communicate and receive information from the Council, and how can communications be improved in the future?

Discussion Overview

Two-way communication and information sharing are critical for supporting the recreational community's participation in the Council process and the Visioning project. In this discussion the group explored how the recreational community communicates both internally and with the Council, and discussed attributes of effective communication strategies. Throughout the discussion, the group suggested ways the Council might expand and diversify its outreach to the recreational community.

Participants felt that while the Council should not expect to reach all recreational stakeholders directly, it can employ a portfolio of communication strategies to reach a wider cross-section of the recreational community. The Council can also utilize existing communication networks by sharing information with leaders and organizations (e.g., fishing clubs, trade associations), who in turn share information with their own contacts online, in print, and in person. This informal "cascade effect" is an effective way to disseminate Council information across a diverse audience. Word-of-mouth communication (for example, between tackle shop owners and their customers) is a particularly powerful tool and can even overcome language and literacy barriers.

Communicating with a diverse audience

The recreational community includes stakeholders with a range of information needs and preferences. Participants shared their perspectives on how to reach a diverse audience, focusing on the following issues.

Technological proficiency: Electronic and social media can support frequent and timely communication, and allow a steady flow of information. Traditional print media (e.g. press releases) and mailings are less timely, but some stakeholders are more comfortable with this format. The Council can release information through multiple channels to bridge this technology divide.

Frequency of correspondence and level of detail: The recreational community wants to be informed of relevant issues without being overwhelmed. Correspondence should be concise and capture readers' attention. Readers want to know, "what does this mean to me?"

Target audience: Some Council information (e.g. information about current regulations) needs to reach a wide audience, while some information is important only to a subset of the recreational community. The Council should continue to build a database of contacts for general correspondence, and use features such as opt-in mailing lists to help stakeholders filter information by region, species, or fishing method of interest.

Expanding and diversifying Council communications

Improving Council communications involves identifying the target audience for information about the Council process, as well as what information to provide and how to provide it. Participants felt that the Council should continue to build a database of stakeholders who want to be informed and involved. The group suggested that the Council collaborate with state agencies and their outreach coordinators, as well as organizations and clubs, to build capacity and develop a network of contacts.

The recreational community communicates through formal channels (e.g. correspondence with members of organizations) and informal networks using a wide array of in-person, online, and print methods. It obtains information from the Council primarily via the Council website, press releases, and emails. Participants provided suggestions on how the Council might adapt and build on its communications strategies to engage stakeholders more effectively.

Public meetings: Participants felt that the formal public comment process can be intimidating, and suggested that the Council hold more informal meetings and establish a clear purpose to motivate participation. Another approach for making public testimony less intimidating would be to provide an option to video record comments in a private setting, with Council staff present to answer questions. The group also recommended that the Council consider the location of its August and December meetings (which occur at key points in the annual specifications process), recognizing that many recreational stakeholders live away from the coast.

Council website: The group recognized the Council website as an important source of primary information but did not focus on the website in this discussion. Recommendations for website improvements and information products came up primarily in the previous discussion.

Newsletters: A periodic newsletter in non-technical language would be a useful complement to issue-specific press releases, and could increase awareness of opportunities to participate. It could also serve as a platform for additional background information and explanations of key issues, and enable the Council to reach stakeholders on a more personal level (e.g. a letter from the Council chair). Newsletters published by state agencies and other Councils could serve as models.

Internet forums: Many high-traffic recreational fishing websites include interactive forums, which could enable the Council to reach a large audience with news and announcements, and to dispel misinformation. However, most participants felt that the Council should not participate in these forums, or limit its participation to information sharing only (i.e., answering questions but not engaging in debate). Other communication channels enable the Council to retain more control over content.

Emails and list serves: Email is fast, efficient, and easily distributed beyond the Council's own mailing list. Participants questioned whether the federal angler registry and/or state license databases could provide the starting point for a contact list. Opt-in (or opt-out) features would allow recipients to filter the correspondence they wish to receive from the Council. The group noted that list serves require upkeep to remain current.

In-person communication networks: Bait and tackle stores serve as the first point of contact with a majority of anglers, including those who do not speak English. The Council should emphasize developing a network of bait and tackle stores to use when communicating with anglers.

Other suggestions:

- A master calendar with important dates by subject or species
- In-person appearances by Council members or staff at fishing clubs, events and trade shows (however, it was mentioned that anglers may be too distracted by other display, so use this option selectively).
- Smart phone apps (e.g. for current regulations)
- Radio programs
- Facebook pages and groups for providing updates
- Relationship building with outdoor journalists and regional newspapers, particularly those that cover fisheries issues
- Use “factoids” (e.g., “Did you know....”) to get people’s attention.
- Posters and announcements in tackle shops
- Coordination with other state and federal agencies and offices (e.g. with Northeast Fisheries Science Center)

Breakout Session 2 and Summary Discussion

Eliciting priorities and values for the vision of Mid-Atlantic fisheries

Council staff member Mary Clark provided additional context for the second breakout sessions with an overview of the Council’s Visioning Project. Having rebuilt Mid-Atlantic stocks, the Council is reaching out to the public to develop a stakeholder-driven vision and strategic plan to guide the future management of Mid-Atlantic fisheries. Ms. Clark emphasized the critical importance of public input to the Visioning process, and highlighted opportunities for the recreational community to participate. Council Chair Rick Robins expressed the Council’s desire to understand how its constituents define “success” in the management process.

[Visioning Project website](#)

[Presentation by Mary Clark: Visioning and the Recreational Community](#)

Discussion Overview

The purpose of the second breakout discussion was to provide the Council with insight into the range of priorities and values held by the recreational community, and to discuss the meaning of successful management. **While the feedback from this breakout session was intended to provide additional perspectives for the Visioning project, these perspectives are not presumed to represent the entire recreational community.**

Participants discussed the meaning of a “vision” for Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries, and what the outcomes of the Visioning process could look like. Ideas included:

- A destination
- A definition of success
- A process for looking forward instead of backward
- A goal; something to aim for beyond preventing overfishing (e.g., considering non-fishing impacts, habitat, bycatch, etc.)
- An opportunity to hit the “reset” button (there are political challenges to implementing change)
- A way to achieve greater stability in the availability of fishing opportunities from year to year
- An opportunity for greater participation and involvement by recreational community

Themes of Discussion

Participants shared a wide range of values and priorities for Mid-Atlantic recreational fisheries, including areas of agreement as well as differences of opinion. The recreational community includes diverse points of view, and motivations vary across user groups, fisheries, and modes. At the same time, the recreational community has needs and values that distinguish it from the commercial sector. Participants expressed their support for a management approach that acknowledges and reflects these characteristics. The major themes of discussion, including values, priorities, and elements of successful management, are summarized below.

Availability of fishing opportunities and equity: Participants felt that while the entire recreational community identifies the availability of fishing opportunities as a priority,

individuals and groups define opportunity in terms of very different regulations (e.g. bag limits, number of opportunities to fish, etc.) and experiences. Current regulations impact anglers in different ways depending on where and how they fish. The way to recognize these different definitions is to balance fishing opportunity equitably across user groups and states, while maximizing opportunity for the recreational sector as a whole. Some felt that more equitable distribution of fishing opportunities could be achieved through establishing different regulations for different recreational user groups, while others felt that this approach would be unfair and difficult to enforce. Similarly, some participants felt that state-by-state flexibility is beneficial while others felt that it creates inequities.

Participants referenced National Standard 1² and the concept of optimum yield during this discussion. The recreational and commercial sectors may define opportunity and optimum yield differently; for example, the recreational sector values abundance in addition to yield. While the commercial industry benefits from efficiency, the recreational sector generally benefits from distributing catch over more rather than fewer fishing trips. Allocation is also a major component of opportunity and some felt that allocations between sectors should be more equitable and responsive to trends in the fishery.

Experience and yield: Anglers' motivations fall along a continuum, from those who primarily value the fishing experience to those who primarily value yield. Anglers' motivations also vary by fishery. Some fisheries are primarily catch and release, while others are valued as food fisheries. In the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries, the opportunity to catch and keep fish is an important part of the recreational fishing experience and exerts a strong influence on angler participation and behavior. The opportunity to keep fish also helps build positive perceptions of the fishing experience and draw new anglers to the sport. The recreational community is also eager to see benefits from the rebuilding process. Some felt that recreational fisheries need to be managed and communicated in numbers of fish, not pounds.

Conservation and sustainability: The recreational community wants to manage fisheries for long-term sustainability and to provide future opportunities. Many participants expressed their frustration with regulations that they perceive to be wasteful, particularly large minimum sizes, which result in regulatory discards and selectivity by sex and size class. Individuals expressed their support for the use of slot limits, circle hooks, and awareness of careful handling and release techniques.

Stability and simplicity: Frequent regulatory changes and differences between adjacent states present enforcement challenges, create regulatory complexity, and make it difficult for anglers and businesses to plan ahead. The specifications process is also a large time commitment on the part of fishermen who want to be engaged in the process. Participants felt that simplicity and year-to-year stability are important components to access and would benefit the recreational community. Council Chair Rick Robins noted that longer-

² National Standard 1 states "Conservation and management measures shall prevent overfishing while achieving, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fishery for the United States fishing industry." (16 U.S.C. 1851(a)) [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#)

term planning could result in short-term tradeoffs, and encouraged participants to give more thought to how they would value the tradeoffs between longer-term stability and short-term opportunity (i.e., maximizing the recreational harvest limit each year).

The bigger picture: The Visioning process could be the starting point for a more comprehensive view for Mid-Atlantic fisheries that includes increased consideration of ecosystem interactions, habitat, water quality, and human dimensions. Participants highlighted the importance of considering interactions between recreational fisheries, particularly in situations where regulations focus recreational fishing effort on a species or cause effort to spill over to other fisheries. Another priority is to improve understanding of the economic impact and value of recreational fishing.

Recreational data quality underlies many of the issues discussed during the visioning discussion, including the stability, accessibility, and flexibility of fishing opportunities. Some felt that recreational data has been extended beyond its original intent, and that the scales of data collection and management should be better aligned. Participants also shared their perspectives on the Council process. Some participants felt that the existing definition of success is not supported by the fishery management tools and data currently available to the Council. Others felt that while the management options available to the Council are not perfect, they can be improved; and added that it would be counterproductive to undo the progress that has been achieved toward managing sustainable fisheries.

Other ideas:

- Provide the recreational sector equal opportunity to utilize Research Set Aside quota
- Prioritize the rebuilding of recreationally valuable stocks
- Do/do not roll over unused quota to the commercial sector and vice versa
- Reconcile recreational and commercial size limits

Breakout Session 3 and Summary Discussion

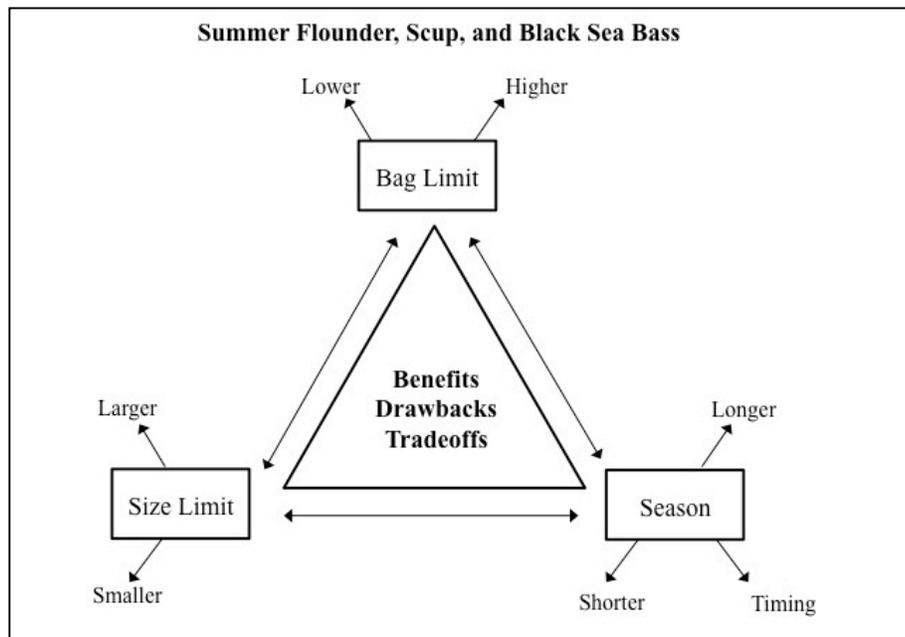
What are the recreational community's views on various regulatory strategies for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass?

Breakout Discussion Context and Facilitation Approach

Prior to this breakout session, Demersal Committee chair Jack Travelstead and Council staff member Jessica Coakley provided an overview of the annual specifications process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. Mr. Travelstead emphasized the overlap between the Council, ASMFC, and states in the processes for setting regulations and the opportunities for public input through each of those processes. Fisheries Forum staff led the groups in a structured discussion of tradeoffs between regulatory options, focusing on size limits, bag limits, and seasons. The diagram below (Figure 1) served as a visual reference for the discussion.

[Presentation by Jessica Coakley: The process for setting recreational regulations for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass](#)

Figure 1: Tradeoffs between recreational management measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass



Discussion Overview

Both breakout groups stated that the recreational fishing community is diverse, and that each component of the community has different needs and preferences, distinguished by region and by mode of fishing (private boat anglers, shoreside anglers, and party/charter boats). Similarly, there is no “one size fits all” regulatory approach that works across all three fisheries. Many participants expressed their desire to have more tools available to the Council for managing recreational fisheries, particularly in the category of size limits. Because all three fisheries are jointly managed with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, discussions were not limited to fishing activity in federal waters but spanned shoreside, nearshore and offshore fishing activity.

Over the course of discussion some participants provided ideas that were specific to a particular fishery, value or point of view; however many ideas had a broader focus. Participants also noted that the values and expectations of the recreational community could change over time. At the individual level, an angler’s identification with a particular mode of fishing or point of view can also change. While the groups acknowledged that it can be difficult to examine tradeoffs independently of each year’s specifications process and recreational harvest limit, the ideas shared in discussion focused primarily on the recreational community’s underlying goals, values, and motivations, rather than on specific options for 2012.

Main points of discussion

Both groups felt that it was important to create positive perceptions about the recreational fishing experience. From the perspective of a for-hire business marketing trips to prospective clients, a retail business selling tackle to customers, or individuals deciding whether to go fishing, positive perceptions keep people coming back and maintain participation over time. What constitutes a

positive fishing experience varies not only across, but also within components of the recreational community, and is closely tied to how different user groups define access to the fishery.

Within the recreational community, individuals may define access in terms of yield from a fishery, abundance, availability, number of fishing opportunities, and in a variety of other ways. Anglers may place more value on the yield from a fishing trip, or on the value of the experience itself. While there are different points of view, there are some preferences that may be broadly characteristic of different user groups. For example, many participants felt that party/charter businesses and their clientele value a high bag limit, and that shoreside and private boat anglers value a longer season and more opportunities to go fishing.

There also may be “threshold” levels of access that sell a trip or motivate an angler to go fishing. Some users may define thresholds in terms of a minimum number of fish, while others may view it in terms of the perceived likelihood of catching a legal-sized fish, or a season long enough to justify the expense of keeping a boat in the water. These thresholds can be different for each fishery, as well as for individuals and user groups.

Participants recognized that while it is not realistic to reconcile all definitions of access and opportunity, it’s important to strike a balance that acknowledges different modes of fishing, user groups, and points of view. Both groups felt that flexibility by mode, by state or region, and even flexibility of bag limits and minimum sizes within a season, can be valuable tools for meeting different goals of the recreational community. However, participants also discussed the value of consistent regulations from year to year and between states.

Both groups also expressed concern about the impacts of different regulatory options on the long-term sustainability and productivity of each fishery. Participants were particularly concerned about waste in the form of regulatory discards and discard mortality, and the potential for minimum size limits to select for sex or life history stage. There was concern that different combinations of regulatory options may achieve the same harvest limit but have different conservation benefits. Avoiding the perception of waste is also important to maintaining a positive image of angling as a sport.

Bag limits

The discussion of bag limits primarily focused on the positive perceptions associated with a higher bag limit, by party and charter boats and their customers as well as by individual anglers. Participants noted the bag limits are often not constraining and that the incremental value of a reduction in bag limits may only be evident at lower numbers, particularly for black sea bass and scup. Even though not every for-hire trip retains or even prioritizes achieving a full bag limit, the potential for a high bag limit is an important selling point for party and charter boat customers. Customers expect a full day of fishing regardless of the bag limit. Several participants felt that there is a bag limit below which it becomes difficult to attract customers, particularly for scup and black sea bass. Higher bag limits are sometimes perceived as more important for smaller fish, particularly scup. Bag limit preferences may also be correlated to the distance an angler travels to go fishing.

While there was less discussion about the tradeoffs of lower bag limits, the groups noted that lower bag limits can still be a way to limit overall catch and may be associated with other favorable outcomes such as a smaller minimum size limit. Participants emphasized that for all fisheries and for most user groups, the ability to keep some fish is an important part of the fishing experience. Different groups also have different bag limit needs; for example, some participants felt that bag limits are not usually constraining to shoreside anglers.

Size limits

The discussion of minimum size limits primarily focused on reducing regulatory discards and limiting waste in the form of discard mortality. The recreational community is conscious of the interaction between size limits, stock structure and spawning potential, and the life history traits of each species (particularly summer flounder and black sea bass). Many participants felt that it was important to structure size limits in a way that benefits the health of the resource.

Participants felt that a smaller minimum size limit (particularly for summer flounder) would be beneficial, especially to shoreside and nearshore anglers, and would reduce discards while still yielding a desirable sized fish. The groups acknowledged that a smaller minimum size might result in tradeoffs with regard to season and bag limit. Groups also noted the connection between higher minimum sizes and the average weight of a retained fish relative to the recreational harvest limit. The impacts of minimum size limits can be region-specific, and participants felt that in some regions the expectation of catching a legal fish is sufficiently low to discourage participation. Enforcement of minimum size limits was a concern.

Both breakout groups discussed slot limits as a way to reduce regulatory discards, while preserving the reproductive potential of larger fish. Potential downsides to slot limits include enforceability and loss of the opportunity to target larger fish. Participants suggested that other combinations, such as a slot/out of slot (higher and lower were both discussed) combination, could present enforcement challenges but provide some flexibility and create positive perceptions. However, a slot and slot/out of slot combination may introduce new tradeoffs with regard to flexibility.

Seasons

Participants felt that longer seasons are generally advantageous and provide opportunity and access for all groups, including private boat anglers, shoreside anglers and party/charter boats. In situations where a short season causes effort to shift to other fisheries, longer seasons can also reduce pressure on other species. The downside to a longer open season may be a higher minimum size limit. From a for-hire perspective, some participants felt that season length can be a balance between providing opportunity and creating demand for a species-specific trip.

The timing of open seasons is also important. Several participants felt that keeping seasons open on holiday weekends (for example, Memorial Day through Labor Day) should be a priority. While peak-season closures or split seasons can help achieve a longer season, several participants felt that seasons should be open during peak tourism seasons and during the times people are actually out on the water. Gaps between open seasons for different fisheries can be problematic. Finally, the timing of open seasons (e.g. summer vs. fall fisheries) can affect size and bag limit preferences.

Values and themes discussed by each group:

(Note: these are terms that were added to a flip chart over the course of discussion. Values and themes from both groups are combined.)

- Financial stability
- Business planning, marketing
- Perceptions
- Perception vs. conservation value
- Ability to take a fish home
- Access
- Enjoyment/experience
- Flexibility
- Targeted trips – what are people willing to pay to catch?
- Experience vs. yield, cost efficiency
- Resource, conservation ethic, waste, perception of sport
- Tourism
- Yield/utilization
- Enforceability
- Communication with public about current regulations
- Justify cost/effort of trip
- Flexibility vs. complexity
- Consistency/equity
- Optimism

Other ideas and suggestions

- Challenges of recreational data collection and the impacts of emergency closures
- Allow for some bycatch outside of set seasons
- Re-evaluate how recreational catch is converted to landings, i.e. average size of a fish and how this is converted to landings
- Manage for a mortality threshold (e.g., as for striped bass)
- Reduce discard mortality (circle hooks, education)
- Maximize access and yield from healthy fisheries, especially scup

Closing Remarks

Council Chair Rick Robins thanked the focus group members for their participation. He noted the recurring themes of stability and availability of fishing opportunities that emerged during the focus group, and the recreational community's desire to see rewards from the rebuilding process. Mr. Robins added that the issue of year-to-year stability is open for discussion and encouraged participants to continue to provide their input on this and other topics.

Within 6 months of the focus group, the Council will publish an update detailing steps that it has taken to address the focus group's suggestions. The Council's Executive Committee has also recommended that the Council overhaul its communications plan utilizing the feedback from this focus group. Mr. Robins concluded by encouraging participants to hold the Council accountable for communicating with the recreational community and following up on the focus group's feedback and suggestions.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Agenda

ENGAGING THE RECREATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE COUNCIL MANAGEMENT PROCESS

With a focus on Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass

Baltimore, MD
December 2-3, 2011

Focus Group Purpose:

To diversify the involvement of the recreational fishing community in the Council management process

Focus Group Objectives

- To enhance the recreational community's understanding of the regulatory process, focusing on the recreational summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries;
 - To gather perspectives from the recreational community on their engagement in the Council process, including clear steps that the Council can take to improve communication;
 - To increase awareness of the Council's Visioning Process, and support the recreational community's participation in creating a vision for the future of Mid-Atlantic fisheries; and
 - To identify and communicate different perspectives on the regulatory options and tradeoffs for managing the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass recreational fisheries.
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Friday, December 2: Building the future of recreational fisheries in the Mid-Atlantic

1:00 – 1:30 Welcome and Introductions

Andy Loftus & Gil Radonski, Loftus Consulting

- Rick Robins, MAFMC Chair
- Participant introductions

1:30 – 1:45 Workshop Process and Ground Rules

Katie Latanich and John Henderschedt, Fisheries Forum (FF)

1:45 – 3:00 Presentations and Group Discussion

Looking ahead: Engaging an active and informed recreational community
Rick Robins (20 minutes)

Key Changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act and key points and timeframes where the recreational community can weigh in on the establishment of regulations

Dr. Christopher Moore (20 minutes)

Group Discussion and Q&A (35 minutes)

FF Staff

Discussion questions:

- General questions
- Why has participation by the recreational community declined?
- What are some of the challenges to participation?

3:00 – 3:15 Introduction to Breakout Sessions

FF Staff

3:15 – 3:30 BREAK

3:30 – 4:45 Concurrent Breakout Sessions: Perspectives on Meaningful Participation by the Recreational Community

FF Staff

Discussion questions:

- What do participants view as elements of effective participation in the annual process for setting recreational regulations?
- What types of information do different components of the recreational community feel are important to support their informed participation and desired level of involvement in the Council process?
- What steps could the Council take to implement and support the recreational community's vision of effective participation, and address the challenges to participation identified by participants?

4:45-5:15 Summary Group Discussion: How Can the Council Support Meaningful Participation by All Facets of the Recreational Community?

FF Staff

Discussion questions:

- What elements of process, outcome, and/or follow-up are important to all facets of the recreational community, to demonstrate that the Council recognizes the recreational community's perspectives on an ongoing basis?
- What outcomes and follow-up from the Council will demonstrate a commitment to supporting participation by the recreational community?

5:15-5:30 Summary Remarks and Looking Ahead -Rick Robins

Saturday, December 3 – Supporting Engagement and Capacity Building in the Recreational Community

8:30 – 8:45 Introductory Remarks, Recap of Day 1, Overview of Day 2

Gil Radonski and Andy Loftus

8:45 – 10:00 Group discussion: How Does the Recreational Community Currently Communicate and Receive Information from the Council, and How Can Communications be Improved in The Future?

FF Staff

Discussion Questions:

- How does the recreational community communicate and share information?
- How does the recreational community obtain information from the Council?
- What would make it easier for people to participate in Council processes? How can the Council and the recreational community utilize existing networks and channels to facilitate information sharing?
- What are new ideas and strategies for communicating with and engaging the recreational community?

10:00 – 10:15 BREAK

10:15-10:30 The Council's Visioning Project

Mary Clark

10:30-11: 45 Concurrent Breakout Sessions: Eliciting Priorities and Values for the Vision Of the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries

FF Staff

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the priorities and values held by the recreational community (including anglers, for-hire, retail, manufacturing, media, etc.) for Mid Atlantic fisheries?
- What is important to communicate to the Council about the recreational community about their vision for Mid-Atlantic fisheries, including shared perspectives as well as differences of opinion?
- How does the recreational community define successful management of fully rebuilt stocks?

11:45 – 12:15 Summary Group Discussion - *FF Staff*

12:15-12:30 Visioning Project Next Steps and Additional Opportunities for Participation

Rick Robins

12:30 – 1:30 LUNCH (Note: Buffet in-house lunch provided)

1:30 – 1:50 Council, Commission, and State Interactions: Challenges, Trade-offs, and Opportunities

Jack Travelstead

1:50 – 2:30 Presentation and Discussion: The Process for Setting Recreational Regulations for Summer Flounder, Scup, And Black Sea Bass

Jessica Coakley

- Process, timeline, and information inputs for setting recreational regulations for each species
- Challenges, structure of regulations, and tradeoffs between regulatory options
 - Summer Flounder
 - Scup
 - Black Sea Bass

Discussion/Q&A

2:30 – 2:45 Breakout Group Instructions and Break

FF Staff

2:45 – 4:00 Concurrent Breakout Sessions: What Are The Recreational Community's Views On Various Regulatory Options For Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass?

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs associated with different regulatory options, including size limits, bag limits, and seasons?
 - By species (summer flounder, scup, black sea bass)
 - By component of the recreational community
 - By geographic region?

4:00 – 4:45 Summary Group Discussion: How Can the Recreational Community Communicate About Preferences and Tradeoffs Between Regulatory Options? - FF Staff

Discussion questions:

- How can the recreational community communicate with the Council about benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs of different regulatory options?
- What steps can the Council take to gather and integrate information about the recreational community's preferences into the development of annual regulations for each fishery?

4:45 – 5:00 Next Steps and Closing Remarks - Rick Robins

Appendix 2: Focus Group Guidance Team

Guidance Team Members:

Frank Blount, Rhode Island (NEFMC member)
Dick Brame, North Carolina
Mac Currin, North Carolina (SAFMC member)
Ken Haddad/Mike Leonard, American Sportfishing Association
Peter Haskell, New York
Adam Nowalsky, New Jersey
Brandon White, Maryland

Staff:

Mary Clark, MAFMC Assistant Plan Coordinator
Katie Latanich, Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum Program Manager
Andrew Loftus, Loftus Consulting
Gil Radonski, Loftus Consulting

Appendix 3: Focus Group Oversight Committee

Mary Clark, MAFMC Assistant Plan Coordinator
Jessica Coakley, MAFMC Fishery Management Plan Specialist
John Henderschedt, Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum Executive Director
Andrew Loftus, Loftus Consulting
Chris Moore, MAFMC Executive Director
Rick Robins, MAFMC Chair
Jack Travelstead, MAFMC Demersal and Coastal Migratory Committee Chair

Appendix 4: Focus Group Participants

Recreational Participants

Rick	Bellevance	Rhode Island Party and Charter Boat Association	RI
Frank	Blount		RI
Dick	Brame	Atlantic Coast Conservation Association	NC
Gary	Caputi		NJ
Nick	Cicero		NJ
Jack	Conway	CT DEEP Marine Advisory Group Chair	CT
Kyle	Douton	J & B Tackle & Charter Vessels	CT
Greg	Dubrulle	Black Hawk Fishing	CT
Amos	Evans	Old Inlet Bait and Tackle	DE
Skip	Feller	Rudee Inlet Charters	VA
Ed	Goldman		NJ
Paul	Haertel	JCAA	NJ
Peter	Haskell	Haskell's Bait and Tackle	NY

MAFMC Focus Group: Engaging the Recreational Community in the Council Management Process

Monty	Hawkins	Morning Star Charters	MD
Budd	Heime	Ocean City MSSA	MD
Joe	Huckmeyer		MA
Roman	Jesian	Coastal Bays Program and Coastal Fisheries Advisor	MD
Michael	Kraemer		CT
Bill	Mandulak		NC
Adam	Nowalsky		NJ
Joe	O'Hara		MD
John	Oswald		NJ
Dave	Smith		MD
Karen	Wall		NJ
Charlie	Witek		NY

MAFMC Members

Lee	Anderson	University of Delaware	DE
Peter	Himchak	NJ Bureau of Marine Fisheries	NJ
Howard	King		MD
Steve	Linhard		MD
John	McMurray		NY
Red	Munden	NC Department of Natural Resources	NC
Preston	Pate		NC
Jack	Travelstead	VA Marine Resources Commission	VA
Rick	Robins		VA
Chris	Zeman		NJ

MAFMC Staff

Mary	Clark	
Jessica	Coakley	
Chris	Moore	

Others

John	Henderschedt	Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum
Kim	Gordon	Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum
Meghan	Jeans	Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum
Katie	Latanich	Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum
Andrew	Loftus	Loftus Consulting
Theresa	Nishimoto	Touchstone Consulting Group (MAFMC Visioning Project)
Gil	Radonski	Loftus Consulting
Whitney	Tome	Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum
Matthew	Willse	Touchstone Consulting Group (MAFMC Visioning Project)