

2013 MAFMC Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

The Mid-Atlantic Council's Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met from 9 AM – 10:20 AM August 29, 2013 via webinar to develop a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for consideration during the upcoming bluefish specification cycle. After the meeting, the AP reviewed and approved the summary below as the FPR.

MAFMC Bluefish Advisers in attendance were: Fred Akers (NJ recreational), Noel Angelucci (NJ recreational), Arthur Brownell (NC recreational), Greg Hurley (VA recreational), and Arnold Leo (NY commercial). Also in attendance were ASMFC Bluefish Advisors George Geiger (FL recreational) and Don Swanson (NH recreational).

Recreational Fishery Issues

Based on their representation at the meeting, most of the comments were from recreational fishermen and reflected experience and observations from the current year as compared to past years. Many of the advisors stated that they had not seen many smaller (20-40 cm) bluefish this year. It was stated that in New Jersey, the fish are just starting to show up and that bluefish tournaments had been held where not a single bluefish was landed. Offshore, however, larger bluefish have been abundant often being caught in pursuit of tuna and other larger species. In New York, a similar pattern was observed, although more nearshore, where smaller fish were scarce but larger fish were relatively easy to catch. In the lower Chesapeake Bay, the fish appeared later than they usually do. When they did arrive, it was in very large quantities, but the fish appeared to be smaller than typical.

Market / Economic Issues

The cost of fuel was suggested as being a likely constraint on catches of fish that may be farther offshore.

Environmental Issues

Hurricane Sandy was suggested to have been a major contributor to lower commercial and recreational effort in 2012.

The Indian River Lagoon ecosystem, which was characterized as representing approximately one third of the seacoast of eastern Florida, was said to be collapsing. As a result, there are severely decreased numbers of forage fish, locally, as well as loss of seagrass habitat for juvenile bluefish. It was suggested that this will have coastwide implications given that juvenile fish from Florida are eventually targeted by the fisheries that occur to the north.

Many of the advisors agreed that in the NY through VA region, the abundance of bait fish, especially menhaden, is currently much higher than usual.

The late arrival or offshore distribution of bluefish this year was largely attributed to cooler than normal water temperatures.

It was suggested that the abundance of striped bass and bluefish tend to offset each other, and it that lower striped numbers that are being observed currently in the lower Chesapeake Bay will result in corresponding increases in bluefish.

Management Issues

The current 15 fish bag limit was considered to be excessive and the basis for it (attributed by one advisor to have been enacted to facilitate New York street sales of bluefish caught on headboats) to no longer be valid.

The retention of large numbers of bluefish, as allowed under the 15 fish bag limit, was stated to be in conflict with consumption advisories.