



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Richard B. Robins, Jr., Chairman | Lee G. Anderson, Vice Chairman
Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

Date: April 1, 2015
To: Council
From: Jason Didden *JDD*
Subject: Potential Blueline Tilefish/Deepwater Complex FMP

The Council requested emergency action on blueline tilefish in a March 10, 2015 letter to John Bullard (attached). Given that emergency actions last for 180 days and can be extended for another 180 days, the Council needs to consider its longer-term strategy for blueline tilefish and/or other deep-water species.

Management approaches could potentially include adding blueline tilefish to the golden tilefish fishery management plan (FMP), or creating a new FMP for blueline tilefish and/or other deep-water species. A Mid-Atlantic deep-water complex could include species from the South Atlantic's deep-water complex, which currently consists of: yellowedge grouper, silk snapper, misty grouper, queen snapper, sand tilefish, black snapper, and blackfin snapper.

Council staff queried 2010-2014 dealer landings data from Virginia north for several relevant species.

2010-2014 Dealer Landings from VA and to the North		
Species	Dealer Records	Landings (live weight)
Blueline tilefish	1,231	270,101
sand tilefish	96	9,843
Grouper, NK	49	8,013
Black Belly Rosefish	68	3,215
Snowy Grouper	23	1,913
Wreckfish	12	144



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March 10, 2015

Mr. John Bullard
Regional Administrator
NMFS, NERO
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA

Dear Mr. Bullard:

During a webinar meeting on Wednesday February 25, 2015, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) voted to request that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) implement emergency rules to restrict commercial and recreational landings of blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic (<http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/2015/february-2014-blueline-tilefish-webinar-meeting>). The Council's recommendations include a 300 pound (whole weight) commercial trip limit and a seven fish per-person recreational trip limit. These measures are intended to reduce the risk of depletion of the blueline tilefish stock on an interim basis while the Council develops long-term management measures. The full motion is as follows:

I move to request that the US Secretary of Commerce implement emergency or interim rules, as appropriate under 305 (c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, to curtail the risk of depletion of the blueline tilefish stock within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council while the Council develops long term management measures for the species through the normal rulemaking process. For the commercial blueline tilefish fishery, the Council requests emergency or interim rules including a 300 pound possession limit (whole weight) in the Council's jurisdiction. For the recreational blueline tilefish fishery, the Council requests emergency or interim rules including a possession limit of 7 fish per person in the Council's jurisdiction.

Commercial landings of blueline tilefish have unexpectedly and rapidly increased in the Mid-Atlantic primarily due to landings in New Jersey. Landings from Virginia and farther north increased from approximately an 11,000 pound average (2005-2013) to about 217,000 pounds in 2014. Most of these fish were caught in statistical areas off the coast of Delmarva. Also, Northeast vessel trip reports (VTRs) for party/charter vessels indicate a recent unexpected increase from an average of about 2,400 fish per year (2002-2011) to between 10,000-16,000 fish per year in 2012-2014. Party/charter increases in the last two years were mostly from statistical area 622, which is accessible from Delaware and New Jersey – two states currently without regulations.

In fact, there are no federal regulations for blueline tilefish north of North Carolina. Two states, Virginia and Maryland, have enacted tilefish regulations that apply to vessels landing in their states, with both implementing 300 pound incidental commercial trip limits and a 7-fish tilefish species recreational possession limit. These measures were designed to proactively prevent a large directed commercial fishery and constrain fishing mortality in the recreational fishery for blueline tilefish that emerged in the early to mid-2000s. The Council recently expressed concern to the other Mid-Atlantic and southern New England states that the unmanaged loophole fishery for blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic poses a threat to the sustainability of this resource due to the recent unmanaged increases in landings.

Blueline tilefish are non-migratory and we believe that the request for emergency rulemaking should be considered in light of information specific to the Mid-Atlantic. From a fishery point of view, the number of fishery participants and history of fishing pressure is very different in the Mid-Atlantic compared to the South Atlantic. For example, while there are 1,020 snapper/grouper charter permits in the South-Atlantic, approximately 25 party/charter vessels reported any blueline tilefish on Northeast Region VTRs in 2014. As noted above, large-scale commercial catches are also a recent occurrence in the Mid-Atlantic.

Blueline tilefish likely have a high susceptibility to overfishing given their biology (long-lived and relatively sedentary) and have been characterized as a species facing high risk based on a 2009 productivity susceptibility analysis performed by MRAG. A recent report on the population dynamics of blueline tilefish and other deep-water species (Schmidtke et al. 2015, VMRC Grant F-132-R-2, available at <https://mafmc.squarespace.com/s/F132-Tilefish-Final-Report.pdf>) found that the growth rate of blueline tilefish off Virginia is “similar to that observed off the Carolinas during the 1970s, when the Atlantic stock was considered lightly exploited.” Growth in these Mid-Atlantic fish is also different from growth rates seen recently in more heavily-exploited South Atlantic fish. Age and reproductive data from this study indicate a locally spawning, resident population of blueline tilefish off the coast of Virginia with fishing mortality rates that are uncertain but substantially lower than the SEDAR 32 findings for overall blueline tilefish mortality. While the Schmidtke et al. study suggests a better population status for blueline tilefish off the Mid-Atlantic, the study also notes that “the slow growth of this population could leave it ill-equipped to sustainably support a sizeable fishery.”

We recognize that blueline tilefish is a data-limited stock and look forward to facilitating the advancement of the state of the science on this species (e.g., improved commercial and recreational catch information, and stock identification). We also question the applicability of SEDAR 32 to the Mid-Atlantic because several Mid-Atlantic data inputs were not used including catch per unit effort north of Cape Hatteras, NC and Northeast Region party/charter VTR data. There is also private vessel catch in the Mid-Atlantic that is not currently quantified due to the low occurrence of blueline tilefish in Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) dockside intercepts.

A continuation of a large scale, unmanaged fishery in 2015 likely poses both a biological risk to the resource and an economic risk for the existing, historical fisheries in the Mid-Atlantic. These include those fisheries that evolved under the proactive regulatory regimes of Virginia and Maryland. Given the uncertainty regarding the status and productivity of blueline tilefish in general and especially off the Mid-Atlantic, the Council determined that the actions proposed in the motion are the most reasonable

while the Council develops long-term and regionally-appropriate management measures for the species through the normal rulemaking process.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to working with you and our other management partners to achieve effective management of this fishery. Please call me or Chris Moore if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Richard B. Robins, Jr.
Chairman

cc: Council, R. Crabtree, B. Mahood, S. Rauch