Regarding the AP meeting of July 29, 2016 I would like to offer the following.

1. The general consensus among the advisory panel was that the stocks are in better shape than what management says. When fishermen such as Michael Ireland say that stocks are strong management should remember that the fishermen are out on the waters every day and they really know the status of the fishery. Jim Fletcher spends a lot of time researching stocks and though he may not be out there every day he does know what is going on. I am not on the water but I have known these guys for a long time and I respect their opinions. I sometimes wonder if management respects them as they should.

2. As I have mentioned previously my biggest concern about fisheries management is the discards issue. Someone said at today’s meeting that an 18" flounder goes in the cooler but if they catch a 22" fish later (when they have caught their limit) then the 18" fish goes overboard dead. This is a terrible waste. I firmly believe that the recreational daily quota should be regulated by pounds not numbers. When you have caught 10, 12 or whatever pounds you can keep fishing but everything above your limit goes back alive. Also, lower the recreational size to 14" and return to a coast wide quota. It would not be too terrible a burden for the rec fisherman to buy a hand held scale. On the commercial side the gear restrictions do a good job of keeping the fish at the desired size. In the rare event that an undersized fish is caught it should not be overthrown dead but should be retained and sold. Again we want to eliminate waste.

Thank you,
Art Smith
Belhaven, NC
Kiley.........sorry I was unable to attend the latest AP meeting but I listened to the entire webinar, read all the meeting material, and would like to submit the following comments.

The studies presented show a poor and declining spawning stock biomass and a very low recruitment index. While most of the panel spoke of an abundant stock of fluke, the experience in south Jersey is an entirely different matter. We were lucky to get a somewhat localized increased amount of fluke in the upper reaches of the Delaware Bay this year, the coastal fluke fishery, from the backwaters out to 25 miles, from Cape May to Ocean City has been very poor this year. I have fished this area for many years and we are seeing a constantly declining fishery, with this year being the worse. Usually our reefs and offshore wrecks are teeming with fish, but these good habitat spots are seeing a constant decline.

My observations of my own catch and those of other charters and private anglers is that the catch this year is down between 25-50% compared to recent years. I am strongly suspicious that there are regional shortages of the fluke stock. Reports further north in New Jersey are much better than in the southern half of the state. I am aware there are seasonal variances, but the general trend has been consistently downward in the last decade.

My own theory is that this shortage is multifaceted. I believe this is partially caused by a northern shift in the stock, but not enough to explain the current lack of abundance. In contrast to the other comments I heard at the meeting, I believe the stock is indeed declining as evidenced by trawl data and recruitment surveys. There is a lot of pressure on the fish from the recreational fleet in southern New Jersey. If my reading is correct, North Carolina and Virginia have 48% of the commercial quota, and these boats are putting undue pressure on fish closest to their ports, another factor on regional overfishing.

My suggestions to remedy this regional shortage is the following. On the recreational side, I would strongly suggest we find means to reduce pressure on the spawning stock. I would consider a slot fishery with keepers perhaps 16-19 inches, allowing the best spawners to hopefully survive. On the commercial side, I would consider regional closures of more southern areas, similar to what is done with the scallop fishery where regions such as the Elephant Trunk have had restricted scallop fishing that allowed that stock to regenerate. If the recreational fleet releases larger fish and the commercial fleet is not restricted, these fish will not survive.

The southern states have continued to lose their recreational fluke fishery and fish under smaller size limits as the southern reaches of the stock continue to decline. Many charters have ceased operating in my area, and have gone out of business. Local bait and tackle shops are seeing declining incomes. When most of the head boats should be targeting fluke now, they are instead concentrating on small bluefish and kingfish to try to keep their customers happy.

My belief is that if we deplete regional offshore stocks during the spawning season, we will see regional shortages in the inshore areas where these fish migrate in the summer months. I would strongly suggest some means of allowing these stocks to replenish. I would ask the SSC and monitoring committees to look at the data on a regional basis and see if the recruitment index and spawning stock biomass, on a regional basis, bears out my thought that there is a southerly depletion in the fluke stock from over pressure on this species.

As always, I try to present unbiased information, which I believe best helps sustain the stock and reduce the continual decline in the fluke fishery and its associated businesses in the area I fish. If south Jersey were to lose its fluke fishery, this would be devastating to the local economy.

Capt Harv
AP advisor fluke, sea bass, scup
Cape May, New Jersey
Call or Text 610-742-3891
Email: vetcraft@aol.com