

## August 2016 Council Meeting Report

**August 8 – 11, 2016**

*Virginia Beach, Virginia*

The following summary highlights actions taken and issues considered at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's August 2016 meeting in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Presentations, briefing materials, and audio recordings are available on the Council's website at [www.mafmc.org/briefing/august-2016](http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/august-2016).

### Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass, and Bluefish Specifications

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board and Bluefish Board to review previously implemented specifications for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. The Council's recommendations apply to federal waters (3 – 200 miles from shore) and will be forwarded to NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Administrator for approval. The Commission's actions are final and apply to state waters (0-3 miles from shore). For all four species, the Commission and Council actions are consistent with the recommendations of the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee based on the best available scientific information.

The table below summarizes commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish (2016 values are provided for comparison purposes). Please note specifications for years 2017 and beyond may be adjusted based on changes in the fishery or new scientific information.

Species	Year	Commercial Quota (millions of pounds)	Commercial Minimum Fish Size (TL)	Commercial Diamond Mesh Size	Recreational Harvest Limit (millions of pounds)
Summer Flounder	2016	8.12	14"	5.5"	5.42
	2017	5.66	14"	5.5"	3.77
	2018	6.63	14"	5.5"	4.42
Scup	2016	20.47	9"	5"	6.09
	2017	18.38	9"	5"	5.50
	2018	17.34	9"	5"	5.21
Black Sea Bass	2016	2.70	11"	4.5"	2.82
	2017	2.71	11"	4.5"	2.82
Bluefish	2016	4.88	Varies by state		11.58
	2017	6.07	Varies by state		11.58
	2018	7.24	Varies by state		11.58

### ***Summer Flounder***

For summer flounder, the Council and Commission approved a commercial quota of 5.66 million pounds and a recreational harvest limit of 3.77 million pounds for 2017, an approximate 30% decrease from 2016. This decrease in catch and landings limits responds to the findings of the 2016 stock assessment update, which indicates summer flounder has been experiencing overfishing since 2008. In 2015, fishing mortality exceeded the threshold for overfishing by 26%. The 2015 estimate of spawning stock biomass (SSB) is at 58% of the biomass target, and only 16% above the threshold. If the stock were to fall below the threshold, it would be

considered overfished, requiring the development of a rebuilding plan to reduce fishing mortality and rebuild stock biomass. These results appear to be driven largely by below-average recruitment, an underestimation of the fishing mortality level in the last years of the assessment, and declining biomass indices. The 2016 assessment update estimated biomass has been trending down since 2010. Summer flounder harvest limits for 2018 may be adjusted in the future based on changes in the fishery or new scientific information.

### ***Scup and Black Sea Bass***

The Council and Commission maintained the previously implemented multi-year specifications set in August and October 2015 for scup and black sea bass, respectively. The decline in harvest limits for scup since 2016 is due to a decrease in SSB as projected by the 2015 benchmark stock assessment. For black sea bass, 2017 harvest limits remain unchanged relative to 2016 levels (in 2016, there was a reduction in the commercial quota due to overages in the previous year). Both the commercial quota and recreational harvest limit may be changed pending the results of next benchmark stock assessment, scheduled for peer review through the Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Workshop/Stock Assessment Review Committee in late 2016. The Commission and Council will consider the results of the benchmark stock assessment in early 2017.

### ***Bluefish***

The Council and Commission did not recommend any changes to the 2017 and 2018 specifications for bluefish. The 2017 and 2018 commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits are preliminary and will likely change following release of 2016 and 2017 final Marine Recreational Information Program harvest estimates. These estimates can impact how much is transferred from the recreational sector to the commercial sector.

### **Summer Flounder Amendment**

The Council and Board discussed the list of issues for inclusion in the Comprehensive Summer Flounder Amendment. For each issue, staff presented comments from the Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) and the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel. Staff also reviewed potential tasks and next steps for the issue-specific working groups and the FMAT. The Council and Board provided guidance for the FMAT on the list of issues to pursue in the amendment, the development of amendment alternatives, and directions for initial analysis.

### **Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment**

The Council selected preferred alternatives and approved the Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment for submission to the Secretary of Commerce. The amendment would prohibit the development of new and expansion of existing directed commercial fisheries on a number of unmanaged forage species in Mid-Atlantic Federal waters. The prohibition would continue until the Council has had an opportunity to assess the available scientific information for these species and consider the potential impacts to existing fisheries, fishing communities, and the marine ecosystem.

The Council approved a list of 15 taxa to be addressed in the amendment. These taxa encompass more than 50 forage species, including anchovies, halfbeaks, herrings, sardines, and sand lances. After extensive discussion, the Council voted not to include false albacore in the amendment due to its large size and high trophic level. The amendment would designate these taxa, with the exception of chub mackerel, as ecosystem components (ECs) in all of the Council's fishery management plans (FMPs) and would establish an incidental possession limit of 1,700 pounds for all EC species combined. For chub mackerel, the Council approved temporary measures to be implemented while the Council evaluates potentially adding the species as a stock in the Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, Butterfish FMP. These measures would include an annual landings limit of 2.86 million pounds and a 40,000-pound incidental possession limit which would go into effect once this landings limit is met.

The Council also voted to require use of exempted fishing permits (EFPs) prior to allowing any new fisheries or expansion of existing fisheries for unmanaged forage species and to establish a new policy for Council review

of EFP applications. The Council also agreed that, prior to allowing any new fisheries or expansion of existing fisheries, the Council would consider whether the species in question should be managed as a stock in the fishery or if other discretionary management measures should be used.

Additional information, updates, and background materials related to this amendment are available on the Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment page at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/unmanaged-forage>.

### Ecosystem Approaches to Fisheries Management

The Council unanimously approved a guidance document to facilitate the transition to an ecosystem approach to fisheries management (EAFM) in the Mid-Atlantic. The EAFM Guidance Document is designed to serve as an umbrella document that will enable the Council to coordinate ecosystem considerations across fishery management plans (FMPs). The document lays out a transitional framework for introducing ecosystem considerations into fishery management actions in a step-wise, evolutionary fashion. This approach is intended to allow the Council to meet its current requirements for the management of individual stocks while moving toward an approach that takes into account interactions at multiple dimensions of the environment and ecosystem.

The EAFM Guidance Document is organized around four major ecosystem-related issues: forage species, habitat, climate change and variability, and interactions. Development of the document was informed by a series of workshops which brought together scientists, managers and stakeholders to discuss each issue and associated best management practices. The EAFM Guidance Document and supporting documents are available at [www.mafmc.org/eafm](http://www.mafmc.org/eafm).

### Council Policy on Impacts of Fishing Activities on Fish Habitat

The Council reviewed a draft policy on the impacts of fishing activities on fish habitat. This policy is being developed to ensure that future changes to fishery management plans incorporate effective approaches to managing the impacts of fishing on sensitive fish habitat areas. The Council approved the policy after making several minor revisions. A final revised version will be posted at [www.mafmc.org/habitat](http://www.mafmc.org/habitat).

### For-Hire Electronic Vessel Trip Report Framework

Final action was taken on an omnibus framework to require electronic submission of vessel trip reports (VTRs) by for-hire vessels with Federal permits for Council-managed species. Electronic VTR's (eVTR) have been an option since 2011 for some for-hire fisheries, but in early 2016, the first mobile app-based system for submitting eVTRs was approved by NOAA Fisheries. As part of its 2016 Implementation Plan, the Council initiated an omnibus Framework to require the submission of eVTRs by the for-hire sector. During the initial framework meeting in June 2016, the Council decided to also consider modifications to the reporting timeframe requirements to increase the timeliness of data submitted through eVTRs.

After considering several alternatives and weighing the relative benefits and impacts on the for-hire sector, the Council voted to require the electronic submission of VTRs and to change the submission timeframe to 48 hours based on stakeholder input. This alternative changes the NOAA-mandated reporting deadlines from the current (generally the 15th of the month following the month in which fishing activity occurs) to 48 hours after the fishing trip is completed. However, vessels who complete VTRs before entering port (as required by NOAA under current regulation) will likely submit eVTRs earlier based on stakeholder comments. In summary, beginning in mid-2017, owners/operators of for-hire fishing vessels with Federal permits for species managed by the Council will be required to submit VTRs through one of the NOAA-approved eVTR systems within 48 hours following the completion of the fishing trip.

## Other Business

### ***SAFMC Cobia***

The Council voted to request that the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) initiate an amendment to its Coastal Pelagics Fishery Management Plan that would establish geographic specific, variable fishing seasons for cobia that would represent the recent distribution of landings. The MAFMC will also request that the SAFMC establish framework priorities within the amendment to adjust fishing seasons for cobia in the Atlantic Migratory stock when geographic specific landings change. Finally, the Council agreed to request that the SAFMC Coastal Migratory Pelagics Committee meet as a Committee of the Whole when discussing cobia issues.

### ***NEFMC Issues***

The Council considered a letter from the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) requesting joint management of summer flounder. Given the complexity associated with joint management and the fact that the New England states are already represented on the ASMFC Board which meets jointly with the Council to set specifications for summer flounder, the Council rejected this request. The NEFMC already has one seat on the Council's Demersal committee which now meets as a committee of the whole to allow for full participation by that member. The Council agreed that it would be willing to increase the number of New England seats on the Demersal Committee if the NEFMC would be willing to allow for a similar arrangement with its Scallop Committee.

### ***Swearing in of New Members and Election of Officers***

Four individuals were sworn in as new members: Peter Hughes (At-Large - New Jersey), Wes Townsend (At-Large - Delaware), Roger Mann (At-Large - Virginia), and H. Ward Slacum, Jr. (Obligatory - Maryland). The Council also bid farewell to departing members Rick Robins, Lee Anderson, Steve Linhard, and Jeff Kaelin.

During the yearly election of officers, the Council elected Mike Luisi, of Maryland, as its Chairman and Warren Elliott, of Pennsylvania, as its Vice-Chairman.

### ***MAFMC Award of Excellence***

The Council presented its outgoing chairman, Richard B. Robins, Jr., with the first MAFMC Award of Excellence. The award was presented to Robins for his distinguished service to the Council and outstanding contribution to the conservation and management of our nation's marine fisheries resources.

Robins was appointed to the Council in 2007 and was elected as Chairman the following year. During his 8-year tenure as chairman, Robins led the Council in the development of more than 25 amendments, 17 frameworks, numerous specifications for the Council's managed species, and a number of other major projects. He also served on the Council Coordination Committee and the Northeast Region Coordinating Council, represented the Council at New England Council meetings, attended and participated in numerous workshops and committees, and served as the Council representative at various meetings around the world.