The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s (Commission) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass AP on June 28, 2017. Advisors reviewed Fishery Information Documents for all three species and developed Fishery Performance Reports based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings and other trends in these fisheries. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Council Advisory Panel members present: Meade Amory* (VA), Carl Benson (NJ), Bonnie Brady (NY), Denny Dobbins (VA), Skip Feller (VA), James Fletcher (NC), Ross Pearsall (RI), Michael Plaia* (CT/RI), Harvey Yenkinson (PA/NJ)

Commission Advisory Panel members present: Meade Amory* (VA), Greg DiDomencio (NJ), Marc Hoffman (NY), James Lovgren (NJ), Bob Meimbresse (NJ), Michael Plaia* (RI), Bill Shillingford (NJ), James Tietje (MA), Wes Townsend (DE, and Council member), David Bush (ASMFC Board proxy for NC/AP proxy for Michael Ireland)

Others present: Julia Beaty (MAFMC Staff), Kiley Dancy (MAFMC Staff), Brandon Muffley (MAFMC Staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC Staff)

*Serves on both Council and Commission Advisory Panels.

General Comments

One advisor requested that the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) provide annual assessment updates for all three species to help the Council and Commission understand the status of the stocks each year and adjust management measures accordingly.

Multiple advisors noted that the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data for some states, waves, and/or mode combinations can be highly imprecise. Several advisors expressed frustration that recreational management measures for all three species are based these imprecise data. One advisor requested that the Council and Commission regularly examine the methodology used to generate MRIP estimates each year, including the number and locations of intercepts in each wave. In some cases, a small number of intercepts from one or a few locations have driven harvest estimates in certain waves.

At least one advisor supported requiring all recreational anglers to report all catch through a smartphone app. He said MRIP could be eliminated if recreational anglers were required to report all their catch, as is required for commercial fishermen.
One advisor said the new eVTR systems for for-hire fisheries could be improved if they were vessel-specific as opposed to operator-specific. Multiple captains operate his boat. The current eVTR system stores records for each captain separately and all the records for the boat cannot be viewed simultaneously. Besides this issue, he said the new systems require some getting used to, but should work well.

**Research Recommendations for All Three Species**

Multiple advisors recommended that research be carried out on the factors influencing recruitment for all three species. A few advisors said trends in spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment for all three species suggest that recruitment is higher when SSB is low.

Several advisors agreed that the number of participants in recreational fisheries has declined in recent years, especially in the for-hire sector. Multiple advisors requested an evaluation of trends in the number of federal and state for-hire permits, recreational fishing licenses, and boat registrations to quantify this trend. One suggestion was for states to report this information annually through the Commission’s compliance reports.

**Black Sea Bass**

**Market and Economic Issues**

One advisor said the combination of high black sea bass availability, high prices, and high demand during commercial fishery closures makes poaching and illegal sales very tempting for some commercial and recreational fishermen. Some restaurants and other buyers are willing to purchase black sea bass illegally. In some cases, recreational fishermen are illegally selling their catch. One advisor said the scale of illegal landings has increased in recent years. Some advisors said poaching will occur regardless of management measures. Others said less poaching occurs when markets have a steady supply of black sea bass.

One advisor said the price for black sea bass is lower this year because there are more black sea bass on the market. Massachusetts typically contributes a notable amount of commercial landings; however, the commercial season in Massachusetts is currently closed. The price may decrease even farther once the fishery re-opens.

**General Management Issues**

One advisor said some level of non-compliance (e.g., high grading, poaching) is inevitable when regulations are unnecessarily restrictive, as has been the case with black sea bass in recent years. He argued that if a new stock assessment had been available earlier, management measures could have been updated earlier to reflect changes in stock status and non-compliance would be less of an issue.

Four advisors requested greater stability in management measures for both commercial and for-hire black sea bass fisheries. Multiple advisors agreed that management should not be so reactive to changes in data. One advisor said that if management measure are set for 3-5 years, they should only be modified in the terminal year, if at all. One advisor said constant quotas could lead to negative impacts on the stock in some years, but over the long-term the stock would not be harmed. Another advisor agreed, saying that the current system of deriving quotas and RHLs is already
conservative and accounts for uncertainty, which provides some buffer against potential negative impacts in any given year from stable management measures. One advisor said market stability is also needed.

An AP proxy for the Commission said he supports stability in management measures, but also thought the measures should be adaptable. For example, the Council and Commission could allow for minor changes in annual quotas and RHLs in response to new information.

**Commercial Management Issues**

Advisors discussed the contribution of various gear types to the commercial fishery. Bottom trawls have accounted for a greater proportion of commercial landings in recent years. A few advisors said the contribution of the pot fishery has declined in recent years because trawls are more efficient and trawl-caught black sea bass can be sold for a decent price. One advisor said the few remaining pot fishermen are getting older and those who can are switching to trawls because they are not as physically demanding to operate.

**Recreational Management Issues**

Many advisors said the wave 5 and 6 MRIP estimates from 2016 were impossibly high and were based on flawed sampling methodology (e.g., a small number of intercepts in a small number of locations). Two advisors said it is not possible that most of the wave 6 (i.e., November and December) landings came from private boats as most private anglers do not fish at that time of year. Many advisors agreed that the Council and Commission should not adjust management measures based on data that MRIP staff, Technical Committee members, and other experts have said is inaccurate (e.g., New York wave 6 data for 2016). One advisor emphasized that restrictions based on flawed data can have major negative impacts on the livelihoods of for-hire captains and also negatively impact support businesses such as bait and tackle shops.

Two advisors recommended eliminating the September and October closure of the recreational fishery in federal waters. One advisor said some areas, such as southern New Jersey, do not have inshore black sea bass fisheries during that time of year and the federal waters closure leaves many vessels tied to the dock. Another advisor supported eliminating that closure because it occurs during the peak of black sea bass abundance in federal waters off Rhode Island and between Montauk and Rhode Island.

One advisor said that as the recreational black sea bass season has become shorter and shorter over the past two to three years in an attempt to restrict landings to the RHL, discards have increased. For example, the fishery is now closed during certain times of year when black sea bass are available and the recreational summer flounder fishery is open. Anglers targeting summer flounder are catching black sea bass, but are forced to discard them.

One advisor said low trip limits coupled with high availability decreases angler satisfaction. In recent years, it is not unusual for every angler on for-hire trips to quickly catch their limit of black sea bass.

Three advisors supported establishing state-by-state recreational black sea bass allocations. One advisor said allocations should be based on the number of recreational fishing licenses in each
state rather than MRIP data. He added that the recreational black sea bass fishery in southern New Jersey is declining and state-by-state allocations could help protect the interests of that fishery.

One advisor said that if regional, rather than state-by-state, allocations were established, the Council and Commission should aim for uniform bag limits, minimum fish sizes, and seasons within regions, while accounting for differences in the seasonal distribution of black sea bass in different states. For example, in Massachusetts, the black sea bass fishery has traditionally occurred in the spring, while in neighboring states the fishery tends to take place in the summer and fall. This could pose challenges for establishing a uniform set of management measures if Massachusetts were included in a region with neighboring states.

At least two advisors supported opening the wave 1 (January-February) recreational fishery. One advisor said wave 1 was very important for southern states. Two advisors said wave 1 was traditionally was dominated by for-hire boats, with very few private anglers participating. One advisor said harvest during wave 1 was low but was nonetheless very beneficial for the for-hire industry in certain areas.