



December 2018 Council Meeting Summary

December 10-13, 2018

Annapolis, Maryland

The following summary highlights actions taken and issues considered at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's December 2018 meeting in Annapolis, MD. Presentations, briefing materials, and webinar recordings are available on the Council website at www.mafmc.org/briefing/december-2018.

Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass 2019 Recreational Specifications

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board (Board) to develop recreational specifications for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass for 2019.

Black Sea Bass

The Council and Board reviewed recent recreational fishery performance and recommendations from the Monitoring Committee, Advisory Panel, and staff for 2019 recreational black sea bass management measures. To achieve the 2019 **recreational harvest limit of 3.66 million pounds**, the Council and Board agreed to maintain status quo recreational management measures in federal waters. These include a **12.5-inch total length minimum fish size**, a **15 fish possession limit**, and a **May 15 - December 31 open season**. The Council and Board also agreed that if the states do not take appropriate action to ensure harvest does not exceed the 2019 recreational harvest limit, a set of backstop measures including a 14 inch minimum fish size, a 5 fish possession limit, and a May 15 - September 15 open season should be implemented in federal waters and in all state waters from Maine through North Carolina, north of Cape Hatteras. The Board will approve proposals for state measures during their February 2019 meeting. States have the option of opening their recreational black sea bass fisheries in state and federal waters from February 1-28, 2019 with a 12.5 inch minimum fish size and 15 fish bag limit.

Scup

The Council and Board reviewed recent recreational fishery performance and recommendations from the Monitoring Committee, Advisory Panel, and staff for 2019 recreational scup management measures. To achieve the 2019 **recreational harvest limit of 7.37 million pounds**, the Council and Board agreed to maintain status quo recreational management measures in federal waters. These include a **9-inch total length minimum fish size**, a **50 fish possession limit**, and a **year-round open season**. The Board voted to continue their regional approach to recreational scup management in state waters. The Board will approve proposals for state measures during their February 2019 meeting.

Summer Flounder

The Council and Board reviewed recent recreational fishery performance for summer flounder, and a planned schedule for reviewing and responding to the recent benchmark stock assessment. This assessment was peer reviewed in November 2018, and the assessment report will be finalized in early 2019. Due to this timing, the Council and Board will delay adopting 2019 recreational management measures until their joint February 2019 meeting in Virginia Beach, VA, where they will also consider revisions to the 2019 summer flounder recreational harvest limit.

Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Framework on Conservation Equivalency, Block Island Sound Transit, and Slot Limits

After reviewing public comments and a draft impacts analysis, the Council and Board took final action on a joint framework and addendum for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. They agreed to allow use of conservation equivalency in the recreational black sea bass fishery in future years, starting in 2020. The Board and Council will annually decide whether to use conservation equivalency for black sea bass, which would allow federal waters recreational management measures to be waived and instead require anglers to abide by the measures of the state where they land their catch. They also recommended that non-federally permitted recreational and commercial vessels be allowed to transit federal waters in Block Island Sound while in possession of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass legally harvested from state waters. They recommended that such transit be allowed in the same area as the existing striped bass transit zone. Lastly, the Council agreed to modify their Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan to allow for a maximum size limit to be used in the recreational fisheries for summer flounder and black sea bass. This will allow for the use of regular slot limits, split slot limits, and trophy fish. It is important to emphasize that decisions regarding black sea bass conservation equivalency and slot limits provide additional “tools in the toolbox” and do not implement these measures for any particular fishing year.

Summer Flounder Commercial Issues Amendment

The Council and Board moved to postpone final action on the Summer Flounder Commercial Issues Amendment until their joint February 2019 meeting. The groups considered a motion that would have established a deadline for states to submit proposals for additional commercial allocation options, to be considered at the February meeting; however, this motion did not pass. The Council and Board then voted to postpone selecting preferred alternatives for all amendment issues (revisions to FMP objectives, federal permit requalification, commercial allocation, and landings flexibility framework provisions) until February. Additional information about this decision is available [here](#).

2019 Stock Assessment and Catch Limit Specification Timing

The Council and Board discussed potential timelines for the scheduled stock assessments and the catch limit specification setting process in 2019 for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. At their joint meeting in February 2019, the Council and Board will receive the results of the 2018 peer review of the summer flounder benchmark stock assessment and will recommend revised 2019 commercial and recreational catch limits and set new specifications for 2020-2021. Operational stock assessment updates are scheduled in 2019 for scup, black sea bass, and bluefish. These operational assessment updates will incorporate recent survey information, commercial catch (harvest and discards) data and the revised time series of recreational catch data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). The Council and Board agreed to delay the completion of these operational assessment updates to ensure the most recent information available (i.e. through 2018) will be incorporated to help inform stock status and set specifications. Under the agreed-to schedule, the operational assessment updates and peer review will take place in July 2019, and the Council and Board will set new 2020-2021 commercial and recreational catch limits for all three species in October 2019.

Revised Stock Assessment Process

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) updated the Council and Board on recently approved changes to the stock assessment process and long-term scheduling for Mid-Atlantic and New England stocks. After two years of development, these changes were approved by the Northeast Regional Coordinating Council (NRCC), whose primary responsibility is to set stock assessment priorities and schedules and consists of leadership from the Mid-Atlantic and New England Councils, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO), and the NEFSC. This new process will improve the quality of stock assessments in the region, will allow for greater flexibility and improvements to stock assessments within

a defined process, and will provide for a more strategic and longer-term planning process for research and staffing demands.

Summer Flounder Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) Presentation

Dr. Gavin Fay (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth) and Dr. Jason McNamee (RI DEM Division of Marine Fisheries) presented an interim report on their Council-funded Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) to test potential outcomes of different management approaches for the recreational summer flounder fishery. A simulation model is being developed to demonstrate the relative value of an F-based management approach to developing recreational fishing measures compared to the typical approach of evaluating prior year performance and modifying measures annually to constrain recreational harvest to the annual limit. The MSE will also evaluate the effects of accounting for uncertainty in the recreational estimates when adjusting recreational measures. A final report from this project is expected in late winter 2019.

Black Sea Bass Amendment and Review of Progress on ASMFC Strategic Plan for Black Sea Bass

The Council and Board reviewed past discussions related to an amendment to the black sea bass FMP, as well as a strategic plan developed by Board members for reforming black sea bass recreational management. The Board's strategic plan addresses broad issues for black sea bass recreational management, including annual variability in management measures and equity in regional harvest opportunities. The Council and Board agreed that initiation of a joint black sea bass amendment is not needed at this time. They instead agreed to form a working group of Monitoring and Technical Committee, Council, and Board members to further develop and analyze potential approaches for improving stability in recreational management measures from year to year.

Risk Policy Framework: Next Steps

Dr. Doug Lipton (NOAA Fisheries) and Dr. Cyrus Teng (University of Maryland) provided the Council with the final results of a management strategy evaluation (MSE) that analyzed the economic impacts of different risk policy harvest control rules in the summer flounder fishery. The results indicate statistically significant differences in the total net economic benefits between the different control rule alternatives that were evaluated. These differences are highly influenced by the starting condition of the summer flounder biomass with lower catch and, therefore, lower net economic benefit for some harvest control rules when stock biomass is below the biomass at maximum sustainable yield (B_{MSY}). The Council then discussed potential next steps to complete the risk policy framework action that was initiated in 2017. The Council decided to re-evaluate and reconsider the control rule alternatives, both existing and potentially new alternatives, with the results from all available analyses that consider both biological and economic factors. It is anticipated that the Council will take final action on the risk policy framework in 2019. Also scheduled for 2019, as part of the risk assessment review, the Council will review and provide feedback on a decision document the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) would use when defining the appropriate level of uncertainty to be applied to the Overfishing Limit (OFL).

Collaborative Research Update

The Council and Board received a report and meeting summary as a result of the Research Steering Committee webinar held on November 27, 2018. The report detailed the Committee requests for staff and recommendations to the Council. Through consensus, the Council recommended that staff formalize the "program approach," which will detail how the program will follow steps from setting priorities to utilizing project results in a transparent document that defines the role of the Research Steering Committee and that RSA Program Review/Development be added to possible additions in the 2019 Implementation Plan.

Law Enforcement Workshop Report

The Council received a report on the Law Enforcement/For-Hire Workshop held November 13-14, 2018. This workshop addressed several topics, including: (1) Operator versus angler (client) responsibility for fisheries

violations that occur on for-hire vessels, (2) issues related to the sale of fish by private recreational anglers (particularly golden tilefish and tunas); (3) complexity of fishing regulations impacting enforceability. The Council reviewed a summary of recommendations organized under the categories of HMS Permitting, Data Reporting, and Law Enforcement. After some discussion, the Council tasked the Law Enforcement Committee with reviewing the workshop findings and developing formal recommendations for Council consideration at the February 2019 meeting.

Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team Presentation

Dr. Michael Asaro (NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Office) presented an update on efforts to reduce incidental entanglement of North Atlantic right whales. The population of North Atlantic right whales has been in decline since 2010. Recent evidence indicates that the population is experiencing a low rate of reproduction, longer calving intervals, continued mortality from vessel and fishing gear interactions, changes in prey availability, and increased transboundary movement and risk. A number of measures are already in place to reduce the level of serious injury and mortality of large whales in commercial gillnet and trap/pot fisheries. Dr. Asaro provided an overview of proposals recently developed by the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (ALWTRT) to further reduce incidental entanglement of North Atlantic right whales. The ALWTRT will meet in March 2019 to develop recommendations for NOAA Fisheries to modify the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan.

2019 Implementation Plan

The Council reviewed and approved an implementation plan for 2019. The implementation plan lists activities and priorities for the coming year and is linked to the Council's strategic plan. The final approved plan will be posted at www.mafmc.org/strategic-plan.

Next Council Meeting

Monday, February 11, 2019 – Thursday, February 14, 2019

[Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront](#)

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