

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Management Update – March 2005

Ecosystem-Based Approach to Fisheries Management

Since June 2004, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council has been actively engaged in developing an improved ecosystems based approach to fisheries management. This effort has been a two-pronged approach. One prong relates to the establishment of a Council Ecosystems Committee. This committee was established in June 2004 and has convened a meeting at every Council meeting (four in number) since its inception. The seven-member committee has addressed defining what ecosystems management is, has invited experts to provide testimony related to Geographic Information Systems (GIS) capabilities and their applications for fishery management, and has reviewed National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) ecosystems efforts regarding the development of a science-based approach to fishery management. The committee will continue to function as an integral part of the Council's efforts to establish an improved ecosystems-based approach to fisheries management.

The second prong of the program relates to the designation of a staff member as project leader for the ecosystems based approach to fisheries management program. Dr. Thomas Hoff was relieved of his fishery management plan responsibilities, and as the Council's senior ecologist, he has participated in a number of meetings with NMFS. These meetings include a GIS (Geographic Information Systems) workshop held during September 2004 in Charleston, South Carolina. At this workshop, Tom identified the Council's GIS needs related to Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and the temporal/spatial distribution of Council managed fish stocks. In addition, Tom has participated in a NMFS sponsored meeting related to developing a survey instrument to solicit from experts and the general public their perceptions of what ecosystems means and how an ecosystems based approach to fisheries management should operate. This meeting was also attended by other Council staff and one Council member. Later this month Tom will be participating in a NMFS sponsored meeting related to identifying the management tools that are available for Councils, as well as the Agency, in adopting an ecosystems based approach to fisheries management. When Tom was relieved of his Council plan responsibilities, we used the lapse associated with his position to hire a social anthropologist on a temporary appointment to help with the development of survey instruments to assess the public's perception and understanding of fisheries management based on ecosystems principles.

We have worked with other east coast Councils to help form this Council's approach to an ecosystems based approach to fisheries management. During this process we have discovered that the Council's single species management approach, and its related quota management of fish stocks, can be construed to be driven by ecosystems based considerations and principles. Hence, as we continue to recover stocks for which this Council is responsible, we will continue to build on our current ecosystems based successes.

New IFQs or Other Rights Based Programs

The MAFMC was the first of the eight Regional Fishery Management Councils to implement an Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) Fishery Management Plan (FMP). In 1990, Amendment 8 to the Surfclam and Ocean Quahog FMP was implemented through federal rule and many of the reasons for its

implementation have been actualized. The principal reasons or needs that caused consideration and eventual adoption of an ITQ-based fishery included:

- Conservation of the resource
- Creation of a limited entry system
- Improved economic benefits for harvesters
- Reduction in excess harvesting capacity
- Establishment of a vessel allocation system

In addition to these specific surfclam and ocean quahog reasons, other reasons for adoption of such programs include:

- Greater sustainability of fishery
- Minimization of gear impacts to EFH
- Minimization of bycatch
- Stability of access to fish and/or income
- Stability of markets and prices
- Creation of an asset for fishermen
- Rationalization of investment
- Stable business environment and opportunity
- Improved productivity and efficiency of fishing industry
- Decreased cost for fishery management and enforcement of regulations

With the recent expiration of the moratorium on individual fishing quotas, the MAFMC is now considering an amendment to its Tilefish FMP. Amendment 1 would consider adoption of an ITQ system for various categories of tilefish fishing vessels. To this end, the Council will address one or more of the following issues:

1. Allocation: Since the implementation of the tilefish limited entry program stakeholders have expressed a desire for the Council to assess the implementation of an ITQ system to further refine the existing management program.
2. Information collection: Since the implementation of the original FMP stakeholders have recommended that the Council assess measures to improve collection of landings information.
3. Minimum hook size: Stakeholders have recommended that the Council assess the potential for implementing hook size measures in the commercial tilefish fishery.
4. Recreational management measures: Some Council members have indicated that tilefish recreational landings have increased in recent years and have suggested that these landings be accounted for in the FMP.
5. New entrants into the commercial fishery: As the stock recovers other methods to allow access to the rebuilt tilefish fishery many need to be evaluated.

The MAFMC is also considering developing a controlled access system for the mackerel fishery that is governed by the Council's Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish FMP. As regards Amendment 9 to this FMP (the Amendment addressing, among other things, a controlled access system for the mackerel fishery), the Council will address the following considerations for the Atlantic mackerel fishery:

1. Is limited access to the Atlantic mackerel fishery warranted or should no action be taken?
2. If limited access in the mackerel fishery is warranted, then what type of system is appropriate?

3. What criteria should the Council consider to qualify vessels for limited access to the mackerel fishery?
4. What is the appropriate qualifying period and should the control date be used in the definition of the qualifying period?
5. Should the Council consider the implementation of a trigger which would initiate controlled access at a future date?
6. What provisions for vessel upgrades, if any, should the Council consider if limited access is implemented in the mackerel fishery?
7. Under limited access conditions, should rules governing at sea processing and transfers at sea in the mackerel fishery be established? and
8. To what extent does the lack of joint management of the Atlantic mackerel resource with Canada affect the development of a limited access program in the portion of the fishery under US jurisdiction?

At this time, the Council neither supports nor rejects any of these plan considerations. These lists are not meant to be the all-inclusive lists of considerations for tilefish and mackerel. The Council, like all other Councils, will entertain and consider any comments or suggestions regarding Amendment 1 to its Tilefish FMP, and Amendment 9 to its Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish FMP.

Improvements in Scientific Review Process

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council has not made any significant change to its scientific review process. The Council uses several sources of scientific review in its decision making. For the majority of its stock assessment advice, the Mid-Atlantic Council relies on the NMFS' Northeast Fishery Science Center's Stock Assessment Review Committee (SARC) process. The SARC meets twice a year to review stock assessments, and is comprised of independent experts from inside and outside the United States.

In addition to the SARC, the Council has Monitoring Committees for most of its fishery management plans (FMPs) that meet once or twice a year to provide management advice to the Council. The Monitoring Committees review the SARC's advice, as well as additional information provided by state scientists and managers on the committee, to develop management recommendations for Council consideration. Because the Council has both a SARC and Monitoring Committee, it generally does not use the SSC for general scientific or management advice. In effect, these Monitoring Committees serve a role that is similar to the SSCs. The Council has an SSC and it meets on occasion to address specific concerns related to stock assessments. These meetings occur only when requested by the Council.

Recent Stock Rebuilding Success Stories

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council continues to improve its conservation and management of the marine resources under its jurisdiction. Together with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, coastal states, NMFS, and the commercial and recreational fisherman, the Council has been successful in recovering and rebuilding the twelve stocks for which the Council has lead or exclusive management responsibility.

Based on the "Status of Fisheries of the United States - 2003" report issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service both summer flounder and spiny dogfish are now no longer experiencing overfishing. In fact, only two of the 12 species directly governed by this council are experiencing overfishing, i.e.,

tilefish and black sea bass, although one other species (scup) is also categorized as experiencing overfishing since a quantitative estimate of the current F is not available.

Three of the 12 stocks are overfished, i.e., tilefish, dogfish, and bluefish. However, it should be noted that both tilefish and dogfish have been under Council management for fewer than five years. The status of the bluefish resource is unknown, but a stock assessment is currently underway.

In the major fisheries where the resource is shared between commercial and recreational fisheries, i.e., summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, and mackerel, only bluefish is overfished. Given the state of these stocks and based on the most recent summer flounder stock assessment that indicated an increase in biomass, the Council and Commission adopted a total allowable landing (TAL) level of 30.3 million pounds for 2005, and 33.0 million pounds for 2006, the highest summer flounder TALs ever. The new TALs have a 75 percent probability of achieving the target F of 0.26 in 2005 and 2006. The scup total allowable catch (TAC) for 2005 was set at the same level as 2004, i.e., 18.65 million pounds with an associated TAL of 16.5 million pounds—the highest level in recent history. The stock biomass of black sea bass stock has continued to increase. As a result of this increase, the Council and Board adopted a TAL for 2005 of 8.20 million pounds. In the bluefish fishery, the Council and Board approved a TAL of 30.86 million pounds with 10.5 million pounds allocated to the commercial fishery as a quota, and 20.36 million pounds allocated to the recreational fishery as a recreational harvest limit. For mackerel, the NMFS recently proposed that 15,000 metric tons be made available to the recreational sector and 100,000 metric tons be made available to the commercial sector.

New MPAs

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) has not initiated any formal Marine Protected Area (MPA) actions as contemplated by Executive Order 13158. Nonetheless, the Council is in compliance with Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requirements arising from the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) of 1996. The Council has identified and described Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for all thirteen of its managed species, and but for two of its Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) has approved plans that minimize to the extent practicable the adverse effects of fishing on EFH. The Council, through its consultation authorities has taken numerous actions to encourage the conservation and enhancement of EFH. In meeting National Standard 1 of the MSA, all Council plans are structured to create conservation and management measures designed to prevent overfishing yet achieve, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each of our fisheries. In doing this, EFH is always considered so as to minimize any adverse impact on such habitat arising from fishing practices.

The Mid-Atlantic Council's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) jurisdiction is approximately 140,000 square miles. Over 90% of this is sand bottom. There is one MPA located in our jurisdiction, i.e., the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary (3.14 square miles). There is also a horseshoe crab reserve of approximately 1,500 square miles off Delaware Bay extending from Ocean City, NJ on the north to the Delaware-Maryland state line on the south. Together with the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC), the MAFMC recently closed Lydonia and Oceanographer Canyons to monkfish fishing to protect deep-water corals. Habitat areas of particular concern (HAPC) have been identified in the Council's Tilefish FMP. Time and area closures are used as fishery management measures to stop fishing when authorized quotas have been landed in quota-managed species. Closures, regardless of duration, have an ameliorating effect on bottom EFH.