

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Working towards healthy, self-sustaining populations for all Atlantic coast fish species, or successful restoration well in progress, by 2015

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) was created by the 15 Atlantic coastal states through a Compact approved by Congress in 1942 for the purpose of better managing shared marine fishery resources. Members are those coastal states from Maine to Florida, including Pennsylvania. Through the Commission, the states cooperate in a broad range of programs that include interstate fisheries management, fisheries science, habitat conservation, and law enforcement.

The Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act of 1993 (ACFCMA) provides the policy basis for the Commission's fisheries management program. It charges the states with developing fisheries management plans and provides funding authorization to support such efforts. The Act further empowers the Commission management process by providing a mechanism for the Secretary of Commerce to close those state fisheries not in compliance with Commission fishery management plans.

The Commission actively manages some 22 species of fish and shellfish, a function not performed by its Gulf or Pacific states counterparts. The Commission provides a forum for member states to examine emerging issues and develop response strategies. Typically the Commission sets management goals and objectives, allowing individual states to craft regulations that take into account regional concerns and circumstances. The Commission process, where the political will exists to act, allows swift action, usually measured in months, compared to years for similar federal actions.

This brief overview is intended to give context to the following report of high profile issues faced by the Commission in the past year.

American Lobster – The most valuable commercial fishery in New England is American Lobster (more than \$300M ex-vessel). Maine landings account for more than 80% of the total harvest, and reached near record levels in 2004. Since a massive die-off in 1999, lobster landings continue to decline in Long Island Sound (CT-NY). Results of a joint science task force indicate a combination of warm water, anoxia, and reduced salinity likely caused the die off. State managers have engaged industry members to consider strategies to protect the remaining brood stock. The Commission is constructing a response to the 2003 severe stock decline in Area 2, (includes Rhode Island and Massachusetts waters south of Cape Cod). Commission response has been complicated by Area 2 fishermen strongly opposed to measures to limit effort or cap harvest. Scientists continue to refine a population model and a landings database to support a coast-wide benchmark stock assessment scheduled for completion in Spring 2005. The last assessment in 2000 indicated over-fishing was occurring but the status of the stock was unknown.

Atlantic Menhaden – The Commission completed a peer-reviewed stock assessment indicating the coast wide stock is not over-fished and over-fishing is not occurring. In response, the Commission approved Addendum 1 setting new biological reference points, decreasing the frequency of stock assessments, and updating habitat requirements. In response to concerns from environmental and recreational fishing groups the Commission initiated science-based efforts to examine the ecological role of menhaden and the extent of, if any, localized depletion in the Chesapeake Bay. A plan addendum has been initiated to consider a range of responses while additional data are collected.

Atlantic Croaker – Scientists have completed a peer-reviewed stock assessment indicating the Mid-Atlantic stock is not over-fished and over-fishing is not occurring. The Commission drafting a Plan Amendment to establish biological reference points and provide a range of responses to future changes in stock status.

Atlantic Striped Bass – Nearly depleted in the early 80's this stock was declared fully recovered in 1995. Amendment 6 was developed over four years to reflect shift in management strategy from a recovery to maintenance. 2004 was first year of implementation with a standard coast-wide size and bag limit. Chesapeake Bay authorized different regulations provided fishery maintains a lower F. 2004 assessment update indicates significant increase in F for the coast-wide stock. Technical committee will continue to refine assessment to reduce uncertainty.

Winter Flounder is managed as two stock units. Gulf of Maine stock is not overfished, overfishing not occurring. Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic stocks are overfished, with overfishing occurring. The Commission approved Amendment 1 to establish biological reference points and reduce F in the SNE/MA stock through restrictions on the recreational fishery. The Commission is anticipating significant reduction in off shore harvest through implementation of New England Fishery Management Council's Amendment 13 to the Ground Fish Fishery Management Plan. Some research suggests sub-units of populations with little intermixing. This could explain why recovery of Gulf of Maine stock has not been reflected in the near shore recreational fishery.

Summer Flounder is managed through a joint plan with the Mid Atlantic Fishery Management Council. The stock is rebuilding and is expected to reach its target level in 2010. The Commission continued to work on management strategies to achieve state by state harvest targets for the recreational fisheries. The Commission has adjusted commercial state allocations in response to industry perceived by-catch problems and inequities in state by state quotas. The Commission is working with the Mid-Atlantic Council to take a comprehensive look at the management of summer flounder through the development of Amendment 14.

Black Sea Bass is managed through a joint plan with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council. This stock continues to recover. Council and Commission set annual TAC, Commission completed an addendum to continue state by state commercial quotas for 2005–2007.

Multi-species modeling effort – This on-going project is expected to better quantify the prey-predator relationship between menhaden a forage fish, and striped bass, weakfish, and bluefish. The model has been completed and is scheduled for peer review in late 2005. It has the potential to be a useful tool in confirming that current harvest strategies for menhaden allow ample forage supplies for rebuilding and rebuilt stocks of predators, and that the resultant total mortality on menhaden is sustainable.

Weakfish – Although reported as a healthy stock in the last benchmark stock assessment, scientists are facing confounding data signals. Survey abundance indices are stable or increasing, while commercial and recreational landings have plummeted. Scientists continue to work on completing a new stock assessment. The Commission is likely to face difficult decisions in reacting to the outcome of the new assessment, especially if stock levels are in fact, low.

Leadership – Preston Pate, Director of Marine Fisheries for North Carolina has been elected Chairman, and George LaPointe, Commissioner of Marine Resources for Maine has been elected Vice Chairman. Both terms are for two years.

Please visit our website, www.asmfc.org for a complete description of past and current Commission activities as well as copies of all fishery management plans.