NEW BEDFORD, MA – From late September through early November, two commercial fishing vessels from Rhode Island carried researchers from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST) to survey and tag Southern New England (SNE) yellowtail flounder. The stock is especially important these days to fishermen who work in Southern New England and are constrained by very small annual catch limits.

The survey area stretched from Shinnecock Bay off Long Island, NY to the Nantucket Lightship Closed Area (see page 45) and was broken down into three sub-areas – inside the Nantucket Lightship area, to the west of the Lightship, and south of Block Island to Shinnecock.

All told, the project team made 262 randomly selected survey tows during nine trips – six on the Heather Lynn and three on the Travis & Natalie – with 10 or 11 sampling days per sub-area. One of the project’s primary objectives was to gain a better understanding of whether the Nantucket Lightship Closed Area was harboring and protecting yellowtail. But, with a pivotal 2012 stock assessment for Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail on the horizon, the survey had a second key objective – to compare the relative density and abundance of the stock with what was there during the last industry-based survey, which took place in 2003-2005 (see CFN August 2004 for background).

SMAST researchers will generate biological samples and data for potential use in the upcoming assessment. Prior to leaving on his last survey trip aboard the Heather Lynn in early November, DeCelles said, “We’re measuring every yellowtail we catch. We’re taking scale samples that can be used for age and growth analyses, and we’re looking at sex ratios in a sub-sample of the catch.”

SMAST’s Steve Cadrin, the principal investigator for the 2011 survey, said, “We’re looking for change over time across the area.” Furthermore, the crews on both boats were collecting extensive biological samples and data for potential use in the upcoming assessment.

“We need this assessment so we can set accurate catch levels,” Nies explained. “Plus, we need to know how much progress we are making towards rebuilding this stock.”

The survey area was to compare the relative density and abundance of the stock with what was there during the last industry-based survey, which took place in 2003-2005.
Tagging, RAMP

Over the course of the survey, the Heather Lynn and Travis & Natalie caught a total of 9,767 Southern New England yellowtail flounder. Of those, 5,015 were tagged and released in a large-scale effort to better understand movement and migration patterns among the fish.

“We’re tagging all yellowtail that are in good condition when they come on board,” said SMAST’s Adam Barkley prior to heading out on the last survey trip with the Travis & Natalie crew.

Survey partners had hoped to tag an even greater number of yellowtail, but some of the tows were mixed with skates and dogfish, which damaged the more delicate yellowtail and made them less likely to survive after being released. Still, Cadrin was pleased with the tagging numbers.

“More yellowtail have been tagged in Southern New England than ever before,” he said.

All project participants strongly encouraged fishermen who recapture a tagged yellowtail to write down the location, depth, and date of capture, as well as the length of the fish, and call SMAST’s Greg DeCelles at (508) 910-6393 or Adam Barkley at (508) 910-6394.

Findings, funding

SMAST researchers still had a way to go to analyze the survey’s findings, but based on simple at-sea observations, it was clear that the Nantucket Lightship Closed Area wasn’t harboring any great reservoir of yellowtail.

“With the exception of dogfish and skates, it was pretty barren in the Lightship,” said DeCelles.

Barkley added, “We saw a few yellowtail in the far eastern portion of the Lightship, but that was it.”

However, both boats found good pockets of yellowtail on numerous tows outside the Lightship and beyond.

And, noted Barkley, “We were seeing quite a few winter flounder.”

The 2011 survey was funded by the Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Institute, which covered the work inside and around Nantucket Lightship, and by the Commercial Fisheries Research Institute.

See YELLOWTAIL SURVEY, page 45

Below, on Travis & Natalie, Doug Zemecks of SMAST puts a tagged yellowtail back overboard.

The collective desire for more and better assessment data is what drove SMAST to propose the project in the first place.

DeCelles said, “We’re trying to get as much of this 2011 survey information used in the assessment as possible.”

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Hello. My name is Brian and I like beans.

The tough part is, my tummy doesn’t like them as well as I do anymore – but that’s OK. It’s almost worth the occasional unsettledness.

The tougher part is, I can’t make a good batch of beans. Tigger and I have tried, but the results are always lacking something: a little more bite; a little less sweet; a dite more mustard; a skosh something: a little more bite; a little less sweet; a dite more mustard; a skosh more data to improve the 2012 stock assessment.

The current survey team also benefitted from the fact that the Heather Lynn took part in both surveys. Cadrin, DeCelles, and Barkley all emphasized that the survey wouldn’t have been possible without industry’s help, and DeCelles and Barkley, who were on board either together or separately for all of the trips, called the “positive working relationship” with both crews “an asset” to the whole project.

SMAST researchers will be presenting preliminary results from the 2011 survey during a CFRF-hosted informational session on Jan. 24 at the Hampton Inn in South Kingstown beginning at 1:30 pm. The session will feature updates on other projects as well, including the industry-based survey for winter flounder, discard mortality work on Southern New England flatfish, and a cooperative research project with industry to characterize and map habitat in Block Island Sound and Rhode Island waters.

For more information, visit the CFRF website at <www.cfrfoundation.org> or call CFRF Administrative Assistant Jane Dickinson at (401) 515-4892.

Janice M. Plante