



**Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Focus Group:
Engaging the Recreational Community in the Council Process**

Themes of Discussion from the Concurrent Breakout Session:
What are the recreational community's views on various regulatory strategies
for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass?

December 2011

Introduction

The following summary reflects perspectives contributed by members of the recreational angling community on regulatory options for the management of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass, shared at a focus group hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council ("Council") December 2-3, 2011 in Baltimore, MD. The purpose of this focus group was to provide recreational stakeholders with an understanding of the Council process and Visioning project, while eliciting feedback to help the Council improve communications and support the recreational community's participation in the annual specifications process and in the Visioning project. While this focus group did not specifically address 2012 management measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass, the ideas and themes that emerged may provide additional context for the Council's discussion of 2012 recreational management measures at the December 2011 Council meeting.

This summary is a compilation of perspectives shared during a breakout session on Saturday, December 3. While participants discussed tradeoffs between management options at other points in the agenda, this preliminary summary reflects only the ideas discussed during the breakout session dedicated to this topic. A full summary of the focus group will be available in early 2012.

Focus Group Overview

This focus group was funded by the Council, and developed with input from a Guidance Team of individuals representing a range of perspectives and organizations within the recreational angling community. In addition to providing input on the focus group agenda, the Guidance Team nominated a representative cross-section of participants to attend the workshop. The Council engaged the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum ("Fisheries Forum") and Loftus Consulting to coordinate and facilitate focus group discussions. The focus group was attended by 27 members of the recreational community from North Carolina to Massachusetts, representing private boat and shore-based anglers, party and charter boat owners and operators, national and regional advocacy groups, retailers, and media. The focus group also included Council Chair Rick Robins, Executive Director Dr. Christopher Moore, and members of the Council's Demersal Committee.

Learning Objectives

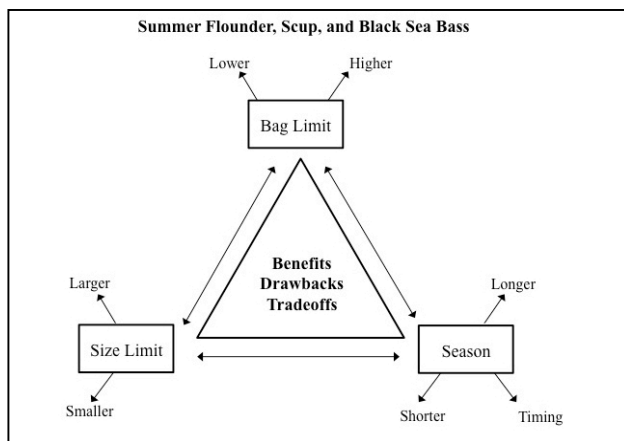
- To enhance the recreational community’s understanding of the regulatory process, focusing on the recreational summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass fisheries;
- To gather perspectives from the recreational community on their engagement in the Council process, including clear steps that the Council can take to improve communication;
- To increase awareness of the Council’s Visioning Process, and support the recreational community’s participation in creating a vision for the future of Mid-Atlantic fisheries; and
- To identify and communicate different perspectives on the regulatory options and tradeoffs for managing the summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass recreational fisheries.

Breakout Session Outcomes: What are the recreational community’s views on various regulatory strategies for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass?

This summary is intended to provide the Council with additional insight into the range of values held by the recreational angling community. This summary is not intended to convey the preferences of one recreational user group, or the recreational community as a whole. The focus group was designed to elicit a broad range of ideas and perspectives, and not to achieve consensus or identify priorities. For the purpose of this summary, similar ideas and themes are aggregated. Recurring themes and similar perspectives are noted where they occur.

Breakout Discussion Context and Facilitation Approach

Prior to the breakout session, Demersal Committee chair Jack Travelstead and Council staff member Jessica Coakley provided an overview of the annual specifications process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. Participants divided into two smaller breakout groups, each including a range of perspectives and affiliations. Fisheries Forum staff led the groups in a structured discussion of tradeoffs between regulatory options, focusing on size limits, bag limits, and seasons. The diagram below served as a visual reference for the discussion.



Participants shared their concerns, preferences, and underlying values, as well as ideas for other regulatory options that are not currently employed by the Council. Facilitators tracked the group’s discussions using flip charts and easels, with separate lists for thoughts about bag limits, size limits, seasons, values, and other ideas that did not fit in these categories. Participants provided general thoughts on each category of options, as well as more specific feedback by fishery, region, state, and component of the recreational community.

Discussion Overview

Both breakout groups stated that the recreational angling community is diverse, and that each component of the community has different needs and preferences, by region and by mode of fishing (private boat anglers, shoreside anglers, and party/charter boats). Similarly, there is no “one size fits all” regulatory approach that works across all three fisheries. Many participants expressed their desire to have more tools available to the Council for managing recreational

fisheries, particularly in the category of size limits. Because all three fisheries are jointly managed with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, discussions were not limited to fishing activity in federal waters but spanned shoreside, nearshore and offshore fishing activity.

Over the course of discussion some participants provided ideas that were specific to a particular fishery, value or point of view; however many ideas had a broader focus. Participants also noted that the values and expectations of the recreational community could change over time. At the individual level, an angler's identification with a particular mode of fishing or point of view can also change. While the groups acknowledged that it can be difficult to examine tradeoffs independently of each year's specifications process and recreational harvest limit, the ideas shared in discussion focused primarily on the recreational community's underlying goals, values, and motivations, rather than on specific options for 2012.

Main points of discussion

Both groups felt that it was important to create positive perceptions about the recreational fishing experience. From the perspective of a for-hire business marketing trips to prospective clients, a retail business selling tackle to customers, or individuals deciding whether to go fishing, positive perceptions keep people coming back and maintain participation over time. What constitutes a positive fishing experience varies not only across, but also within components of the recreational community, and is closely tied to how different user groups define access to the fishery.

Within the recreational community, individuals may define access in terms of yield from a fishery, abundance, availability, number of fishing opportunities, and in a variety of other ways. Anglers may place more value on the yield from a fishing trip, or on the value of the experience itself. While there are different points of view, there are some preferences that may be broadly characteristic of different user groups. For example, many participants felt that party/charter businesses and their clientele value a high bag limit, and that shoreside and private boat anglers value a longer season and more opportunities to go fishing.

There also may be "threshold" levels of access that sell a trip or motivate an angler to go fishing. Some users may define thresholds in terms of a minimum number of fish, while others may view it in terms of the perceived likelihood of catching a legal-sized fish, or a season long enough to justify the expense of keeping a boat in the water. These thresholds can be different for each fishery, as well as for individuals and user groups.

Participants recognized that while it is not realistic to reconcile all definitions of access and opportunity, it's important to strike a balance that acknowledges different modes of fishing, user groups, and points of view. Both groups felt that flexibility by mode, by state or region, and even flexibility of bag limits and minimum sizes within a season, can be valuable tools for meeting different goals of the recreational community. However, participants also discussed the value of consistent regulations from year to year and between states.

Both groups also expressed concern about the impacts of different regulatory options on the long-term sustainability and productivity of each fishery. Participants were particularly concerned about waste in the form of regulatory discards and discard mortality, and the potential for minimum size limits to select for sex or life history stage. There was concern that different combinations of regulatory options may achieve the same harvest limit but have different conservation benefits. Avoiding the perception of waste is also important to maintaining a positive image of angling as a sport.

Bag limits

The discussion of bag limits primarily focused on the positive perceptions associated with a higher bag limit, by party and charter boats and their customers as well as by individual anglers. Participants noted the bag limits are often not constraining and that the incremental value of a reduction in bag limits may only be evident at lower numbers, particularly for black sea bass and scup. Even though not every for-hire trip retains or even prioritizes achieving a full bag limit, the potential for a high bag limit is an important selling point for party and charter boat customers. Customers expect a full day of fishing regardless of the bag limit. Several participants felt that there is a bag limit below which it becomes difficult to attract customers, particularly for scup and black sea bass. Higher bag limits are sometimes perceived as more important for smaller fish, particularly scup. Bag limit preferences may also be correlated to the distance an angler travels to go fishing.

While there was less discussion about the tradeoffs of lower bag limits, the groups noted that lower bag limits can still be a way to limit overall catch and may be associated with other favorable outcomes such as a smaller minimum size limit. Participants emphasized that for all fisheries and for most user groups, the ability to keep some fish is an important part of the fishing experience. Different groups also have different bag limit needs; for example, some participants felt that bag limits are not usually constraining to shoreside anglers.

Size limits

The discussion of minimum size limits primarily focused on reducing regulatory discards and limiting waste in the form of discard mortality. The recreational community is conscious of the interaction between size limits, stock structure and spawning potential, and the life history traits of each species (particularly summer flounder and black sea bass). Many participants felt that it was important to structure size limits in a way that benefits the health of the resource.

Participants felt that a smaller minimum size limit (particularly for summer flounder) would be beneficial, especially to shoreside and nearshore anglers, and would reduce discards while still yielding a desirable sized fish. The groups acknowledged that a smaller minimum size might result in tradeoffs with regard to season and bag limit. Groups also noted the connection between higher minimum sizes and the average weight of a retained fish relative to the recreational harvest limit. The impacts of minimum size limits can be region-specific, and participants felt that in some regions the expectation of catching a legal fish is sufficiently low to discourage participation. Enforcement of minimum size limits was a concern.

Both breakout groups discussed slot limits as a way to reduce regulatory discards, while preserving the reproductive potential of larger fish. Potential downsides to slot limits include enforceability and loss of the opportunity to target larger fish. Participants suggested that other combinations, such as a slot/out of slot (higher and lower were both discussed) combination, could present enforcement challenges but provide some flexibility and create positive perceptions. However, a slot and slot/out of slot combination may introduce new tradeoffs with regard to flexibility.

Seasons

Participants felt that longer seasons are generally advantageous and provide opportunity and access for all groups, including private boat anglers, shoreside anglers and party/charter boats. Longer seasons can also reduce pressure on other species, in situations where a short season

causes effort to shift to other fisheries. The downside to a longer open season may be a higher minimum size limit. From a for-hire perspective, some participants felt that season length can be a balance between providing opportunity and creating demand for a species-specific trip.

The timing of open seasons is also important. Several participants felt that keeping seasons open on holiday weekends (for example, Memorial Day through Labor Day) should be a priority. While peak-season closures or split seasons can help achieve a longer season, several participants felt that seasons should be open during peak tourism seasons and during the times people are actually out on the water. Gaps between open seasons for different can be problematic. Finally, the timing of open seasons (e.g. summer vs. fall fisheries) can affect size and bag limit preferences.

Values and themes discussed by each group:

Note: these are terms that were added to a flip chart over the course of discussion. Values and themes from both groups are combined.

- Financial stability
- Business planning, marketing
- Perceptions
- Perception vs. conservation value
- Ability to take a fish home
- Access
- Enjoyment/experience
- Flexibility
- Targeted trips – what are people willing to pay to catch?
- Experience vs. yield, cost efficiency
- Resource, conservation ethic, waste, perception of sport
- Tourism
- Yield/utilization
- Enforceability
- Communication with public about current regulations
- Justify cost/effort of trip
- Flexibility vs. complexity
- Consistency/equity
- Optimism

Other ideas and suggestions

Note: these are specific ideas and concerns that were not captured elsewhere in this summary

- Challenges of recreational data collection and the impacts of emergency closures
- Allow for some bycatch outside of set seasons
- Re-evaluate how recreational catch is converted to landings, i.e. average size of a fish and how this is converted to landings
- Manage for a mortality threshold (e.g., as for striped bass)
- Reduce discard mortality (circle hooks, education)
- Maximize access and yield from healthy fisheries, especially scup