



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board

FROM: Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee

DATE: June 11, 2020

SUBJECT: TC Recommendations on Massachusetts Conservation Equivalency Proposal for Black Sea Bass Recreational For-Hire Fishery

The Technical Committee (TC) received a conservation equivalency proposal from Massachusetts to adjust the 2020 for-hire black sea bass season to account for days closed to for-hire fishing at the beginning of the season due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposal was reviewed and discussed by the TC via email. Below is a summary of the Massachusetts proposal as well as TC comments and recommendations.

Summary of Massachusetts CE Proposal

The premise of the proposal was to add additional days to the end of the season during Wave 5, with the number of days being conservationally equivalent to seven Wave 3 days (the number of days closed). To accomplish this, the daily harvest rates during Wave 3 and Wave 5 were compared using 2018 and 2019 MRIP for-hire mode harvest in numbers from Waves 3-5. The proposal had two options. Option A compared Wave 3 daily harvest rates to Wave 5 rates and resulted in 65 additional Wave 5 days (based on 2018-2019 data) or 39 additional days (based on 2019 only). Under Option A Massachusetts proposed opening 53 additional days in Wave 5. The PSEs associated with the Wave 5 data used in Option A were high (>80); thus an alternative approach was also presented. Option B assumed Wave 4 daily harvest rates were a representative proxy for Wave 5 rates. Wave 4 harvest estimates had lower PSEs (55.2 in 2018 and 34.1 in 2019). Option B resulted in 13 additional Wave 5 days (based on 2018-2019 data) or 8 additional days (based on 2019 only). Under Option B Massachusetts proposed 13 additional days. See the attached proposal for additional details on methodology and calculations.

TC Discussion and Recommendations

While the TC agreed that the methods used to calculate the proposed season adjustment were mathematically correct, several members were concerned with the data used under Option A. In particular, the MRIP estimates used to calculate the wave 5 for-hire daily harvest rates had very high PSEs (>80). The TC recommended validating the magnitude of the Wave 5 harvest estimates by comparing them with available VTR or logbook data, but MA does not have any for-hire VTR or logbook reporting after 2014.

In addition to data concerns, the TC noted that recreational harvest was projected to exceed the RHL and ABC in 2020. The final 2019 MRIP harvest estimate is 8.61 million lb, 48% higher than the 2020-2021 RHL of 5.82 mil lb. While incomplete MRIP sampling due to COVID-19 has created substantial uncertainty for 2020 recreational harvest estimates, private fishing effort was likely only slightly impacted by COVID-19. Because the private mode accounts for most black sea bass harvest (e.g., 88% during 2016-2019) under the current MRIP methodology, the 2020 RHL is still likely to be exceeded even with COVID-19 impacts.

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Considering these factors, the TC was more comfortable with the method proposed under Option B of using the most recent two-year average of the Wave 4 for-hire daily harvest rates as a proxy for the Wave 5 rates. Wave 4 estimates for black sea bass harvest in MA are generally more reliable due to more available trip-level data and lower PSEs. The TC found it reasonable to assume that the Wave 5 harvest rate would be similar to the Wave 4 rate based on typical declining effort (due to a combination of weather and behavioral changes at onset of fall), and possible decrease in availability as fish redistribute to the south. The TC recommends using the average of the 2018-2019 Wave 4 for-hire harvest estimates as a proxy for Wave 5 to calculate the daily harvest rate and resulting season modification to achieve conservation equivalency. This provides for opening 13 additional days in Wave 5, 2020. The TC agreed this is a more conservative approach that addresses concerns about data uncertainty and reduces the risk of producing higher than expected harvest in Wave 5; however, the group notes that a significant amount of uncertainty is still involved.