

2015 Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP)
Fishery Performance Report (FPR)

The Tilefish AP met via Webinar on February 24 2015 to develop the Tilefish FPR below. This FPR represents a consensus of the Tilefish AP.

The Advisers in attendance were: David Arbeitman, Ron Callis, Dan Farnham, Skip Feller, and Michael Johnson. They represent tilefish commercial fisherman (from NY and New Jersey) and recreational fishermen (private and head boats; from New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia). Also in attendance were Laurie Nolan, Council Member; Doug Potts of the NERO; Paul Nitschke and Barbara Rountree of the NEFSC; Danny Farnham, and Ernie Panacet, general manager of Viking Village, NJ.

The charge to the Tilefish AP was to provide input on factors that have influenced catch levels over time. The following is the consensus report from the Tilefish AP.

Market Issues

Prices have increased and been strong in recent years. A major reason for this is that the tilefish industry is able to coordinate times of landings to avoid market gluts and spread tilefish landings throughout the year. The ability to do this has improved since IFQs came into place.

The price for Golden tilefish decreases when tilefish landed in the South Atlantic derby fishery enters the New York market. This typically occurs a few months out of the year as the South Atlantic tilefish fishery typically closes early in the season, due to its being a 'derby' fishery. It is likely, that as the South Atlantic Golden Tilefish Quota increases¹ and additional Golden tilefish caught in the south Atlantic enters the Fulton market, the downward pressure on the price of tilefish caught in the mid-Atlantic region will become more relevant. In addition, in late fall, striped bass also competes with tilefish in the market place. Fishermen take this into account when planning fishing activity. The adverse effects on golden tilefish prices in the Mid-Atlantic region due to South Atlantic tilefish entering the Fulton Seafood market lessened in 2015 due to the fact that the Mid-Atlantic commercial tilefish quota was reduced by 12% in 2015, the increase in tilefish popularity and demand (year round demand), and the severe winter weather which affected landings in the mid-Atlantic.

Golden tilefish caught in this region are sold as whole fish through regional markets, mainly for ethnic customers. However, an increasing although small amount is going to local buyers on Long Island, where there has been an uptick in local restaurants featuring such local fishes as well as purchases by a Sea-to-Table business serving the larger region (sea2table.com).

¹ Effective October 9, 2012, the commercial Annual Catch Limit (quota) for golden tilefish increased from 282,819 pounds (gw) to 541,295 pounds (gw), 135,324 pounds (gw) allocated to the hook and line fishery and 405,971 pounds (gw) allocated to the longline fishery. As of 2/20/2015, the longline fishery was closed. Source: http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/acl_monitoring/commercial_sa/index.html

Having a steady year round supply has helped the overall marketing development for this product. (And price increase). The market may not be able to absorb larger increases in product availability in the very short-term. At this time, an increase in supply causes a decrease in price, as seen when southern tilefish enters the New York market. Market expansion is needed to further place additional product in the market place and maintain stable prices. Over the longer-term, increases in production can improve markets.

Major costs that have risen in recent years are fuel, bait, and food. The high cost of operating a vessel continues to place a premium on fishing as close to home port as possible.

Environmental Issues

The industry has observed no tilefish aggregation changes due to changes in water temperatures, in contrast with what they observe with other fishes. The temperatures where Golden tilefish are found seem stable due to extreme depth. (Note: tilefish are generally found in rough bottom, small burrows and sheltered areas at bottom water temperatures ranging from 48.2°F to 57.2°F [9°C to 14°C], generally in depths between 328 and 984 ft [100 to 300 m]).

Dogfish interaction reduces tilefish catches and strongly affects where people fish. When fishermen encounter dogfish they move to other fishing areas. The dogfish interaction is mostly in the winter period. However, in recent years, dogfish presence extends past the winter time period (right until June). Skate interaction also reduces tilefish catches; this is mostly limited to the winter period. Skates can severely damage tilefish gear. When fishermen encounter dogfish or skates they move to other fishing areas.

While adverse weather conditions (e.g., storms, rough seas, high winds) can impact fishing operations year round, the severe winter conditions experience in the Northeast in 2014 and 2015 significantly affected the effectiveness of tilefish fishing operations/practices, resulting in longer fishing trips that recently experience in the fishery.

Recreational tilefish fishermen have observed aggregations of large fish in small areas in the spring/summer time around the Wilmington canyon (>80 to 90 fathoms). Not sure if they could be spawning events. Down East, tilefish concentrate in smaller amounts because of canyons and bottom structures. Advisors indicated that while this type of large fish aggregations have been observed in the past by commercial fishermen, they are now increasingly noticed by recreational fishermen as the popularity of tilefish increases. Major factors such advertisement for tilefish fishing trips, tilefish availability, product taste, and the increasing regulations in other recreational fisheries have played a major role in the expansion of the recreational fishery.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

The number of tilefish vessels participating in the fishery has been steady. Data showing a slight increase between 2013 and 2014 reflect participation changes in the incidental category. Since the onset of the IFQ management system, there has been no change in the number of vessels (4) that constitute the vast bulk of the landings (they constitute about 80% of the landings/IFQ allocation).

Tilefish landings are in alignment with the TAL specified for the fishery; observed differences in the data are very small. AP members believe that they are catching their allocation. It is believed that tilefish landings for the 2014 FY (1.847 m lb) reported in the Golden Tilefish AP Information Document are an underestimate of the landings and are likely to be closer the quota limit (1.995 m lb). It is believed that some of the reported underage (0.148 m lb) may be due to late reporting. In addition, one ITQ boat may have also accounted for some of the overage as it did not land entire allocation due to mechanical and physical issues.

The implementation of the IFQ system has particularly benefited those in the former "part-time" and "tier 2" vessel categories of the old limited access program. These vessels can plan their fishing activities throughout the year, rather than being forced into a derby fishery on November 1 (start of the fishing year) if they plan to harvest tilefish in a given year. These vessels participate in a number of fisheries (e.g. monkfish, scallop, and swordfish) and the IFQ system allows them to "fill in" tilefishing when it works best for them. Under the IFQ system, the former "part-time, tier 2, and full-time" vessels are working closely with each other and dealers to avoid landing large quantities of tilefish at the same time and avoid drastic price reductions.

One panel member indicated that even smaller participants in the tilefish IFQ fishery (smaller in terms of IFQ allocation and/or boat size) have greatly benefited from the IFQ management system as they can better plan their fishing operations (fish when and where they need to) and the fact that tilefish prices are relatively good and stable, and in fact, a large proportion of their ex-vessel revenues come from tilefish.

General Fishing Trends

While CPUE has decreased according to the data update, AP members wanted to point out that for the last two winter seasons (Jan-March, 2013/2014) fishing practices have been impacted by severe weather resulting in longer fishing trips than on average. In fact this trend has continued in the early part of 2015. Panel members indicated that while the number of fishing days per trip (days absent per trip) have slightly increased from about 6.5 days per trip in 2012 to 8.0 days per trip in 2014, it is likely that this increase would have been smaller if winter weather conditions would have been less severe. Severe winter conditions in the last two years (and in the early part of 2015) have made fishing less productive and longer than average as fishing operations are significantly impacted.

One advisor indicated that duration of bad weather the window of opportunity to get out slightly decreasing for some vessels. One panel member indicated that since he has a lower allocation he spends a little bit of time exploring fishing grounds to harvest more valuable fish according to market demands. This in turn may also affect CPUE. Two boats indicated that they have a new captain and this may be affecting the catch rates for these vessels. In this small fishery small changes can result in large impacts.

In 2014 a large increase of extra small and kittens size fish (<2 lb) were landed compared to 2013. This observation is consistent with the information provided in the data update.

Observations indicate new incoming multiple-year classes; there is more of a size mix than before (healthy mix of ages). Commercial fishermen are catching a broad size distribution of fish.

Try to fish as close to port as possible. Basically, fishing in same areas all of the time; high fuel prices keep people from going further out and searching.

Fishermen are not moving around much as they are finding a healthy mix of animals in traditional fishing grounds. However, there are areas that are thought to have more quantities of larger fish than smaller fish that could be targeted if needed.

The topography of the traditional fishing areas is well known and they have the advantage of little or no gear conflict, unlike some of the potential tilefishing areas which are used for other fisheries.

Other Issues

-Sometimes, a vessel may underharvest its quota allocation due to fear of overharvesting. The AP would like to see carry-over of unused portions (with a small proportion of the cap) to the next fishing year such as it is done in the scallop fishery. It was also stated that having a carry-over of unused quota may benefit vessels that may not be able to land their entire allocation in one fishing years due to vessel repairs and maintenance.

-Reliance on fishery-dependent data to manage the fishery may be a drawback. Assessment is data poor. No survey information on size distribution.

-Recently, the NMFS added a new code to the dealer data in order to allow fishermen to report landings of tilefish in the large/medium market category (5-7 lb). These are fish that were previously landed under the unclassified market category as there was no large/medium code in the landings data base. It was noted that in 2014 (first full year of the large/medium market category implementation), the bulk of the landings that would have been reported under the unclassified category are now reported under the large/medium market category. Industry estimates that this trend could be extrapolated to the early 2000s when the industry first developed the large/medium market.

-Constant harvest strategy worked well in rebuilding the fishery. Industry would like to see status quo landings in the near future given healthy trends in the catch.

-One headboat captain indicated that 5 headboats² directly fish for tilefish but not 100% or full time. In addition, boats may catch tilefish while targeting tuna or swordfish (i.e., when the tuna

² 2 from New Jersey, 1 from New York, 1 from Ocean City, MD (direct tilefish but only a few time per year), and 1 from Rudee Inlet, VA.

limit has been reached, on the way out or on the way in from a tuna/swordfish fishing trip, or at any time when tuna/swordfish fishing is slow). During the winter period there are no tilefish party/charter boat trips as dogfish are just too abundant.

-Panel members raised concerns and questioned the tilefish catches reported in the NMFS recreational statistics database as they are inaccurate and unreliable. It was recommended that this type of data is not use for the management of this species. It was also stated that recreational values reported under the VTR data seems to be more realistic of tilefish catches.

-One headboat captain fishing out of Rudee Inlet indicated that while they do not run tilefish fishing trips they catch them sometimes (they target blueline tilefish and groupers). However, they have noticed that they are not seeing as many large golden tilefish (>25 lb) as they used to. He also indicated that they are not seeing as many large blueline tilefish as before either. This could be an issue with fishing pressure he stated. The group discussed the fact that fish in the southern canyons (Norfolk, Washington) tend to aggregate in "smaller spots" of about 2 or 3 football fields in size and fishing pressure can be too much and need to wait several months before you go back there to fish again. The group discussed how this contrasts with the wide open areas where the commercial fishery operates in in the northern part of the range (e.g., statistical area 537 - Atlantis and Block Canyons; statistical area 616) where tilefish are found in wide open areas in contrast to "smaller spots" where some recreational fishing occurs in the south. Commercial fisherman indicated that the Montauk fleet has seen an increase in the amount of blueline tilefish caught (ranging from 0 to 100 lb per trip in the last four years)³ and that the recent decrease in the amount of large blueline tilefish found in the south (i.e., Rudee Inlet) may be due to warmer water temperature and changing migratory patterns. Blueline tilefish harvested by the Montauk fleet are shipped to the Fulton market.

-Advisors are concerned about directed trip in the incidental category by non-trawl vessels. The AP members are recommending that the Council reviews the management aspects of the incidental fishing category. More specifically, it was reported by several industry members that there may be individuals fishing for tilefish using incidental permits that are not actual commercial fishermen and that they are not landing and reporting tilefish caught legitimately thru a dealer. The AP suggested that the stipulation of qualifiers for the issuing of incidental tilefish fishing permits be developed. For example, that a certain amount of Mid-Atlantic or New England managed species would have to be landed each trip that any incidentally caught tilefish was landed. Essentially, each trip would have to be a directed trip on other species as was the intent in the original FMP. The AP would like to see this issue addressed in the next framework document (Framework 2).

-The AP members indicated that the landings monitoring program of the ITQ system is very reliable. In all, there is good accountability mechanisms to track landings in the directed commercial fishery (IFQ vessel) and VTR data (commercial and recreational vessels). However, it there is concern that directed incidental trips (non-otter trawl vessels) may be missing. In addition, there is no accurate information of catch/landings by private recreational anglers.

³ One industry member indicated that 1,500 lb of blueline tilefish were landed during a directed golden tilefish trip once in a 35 year period.

