



October 2019 Council Meeting Summary

October 7-10, 2019

Durham, NC

The following summary highlights actions taken and issues considered at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s October 2019 meeting in Durham, NC. Presentations, briefing materials, and webinar recordings are available at: <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/october-2019>.

Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass, and Bluefish Specifications

The Council met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Board (Board) and Bluefish Board to adopt 2020-2021 specifications for scup, black sea bass, and bluefish and to review previously-implemented 2020 specifications for summer flounder. During the meeting, the Council and Boards reviewed the results of operational stock assessments for black sea bass, scup, and bluefish, which were peer reviewed and accepted in August 2019. The assessments incorporated fishery catch and fishery-independent survey data through 2018, including revised recreational catch data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). The revised MRIP data are based on a new estimation methodology accounting for changes to the angler intercept methodology and the recent transition to a mail-based effort survey. The revised estimates of catch and landings are several times higher than the previous estimates for shore and private boat modes, substantially raising the overall catch and harvest estimates. The Council and Board also considered recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), Monitoring Committees, and Advisory Panels and comments from members of the public.

The table below summarizes commercial quotas and recreational harvest limits (RHL) for summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish (2019 values are provided for comparison purposes). The summer flounder limits were previously approved by the Council and Board in March 2019. For scup, black sea bass, and bluefish, the Council will forward its recommendations for federal waters (3 – 200 miles from shore) to the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Administrator for final approval. Note that the landings limits shown below are initial limits prior to any deductions for past overages.

	Commercial Quota <i>millions of pounds</i>			Recreational Harvest Limit <i>millions of pounds</i>		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Scup	23.98	22.23	18.06	7.37	6.51	5.34
Black Sea Bass	3.52	5.58	5.58	3.66	5.81	5.81
Summer Flounder	11.53	11.53	11.53	7.69	7.69	7.69
Bluefish	7.71	2.77	2.77	11.62	9.48	9.48

Scup 2020-2021 Specifications

The 2019 scup operational assessment concluded that the scup stock was not overfished, and overfishing was not occurring in 2018 relative to the updated biological reference points calculated through the assessment. Spawning stock biomass was estimated to be about 2 times the biomass target. The assessment indicated that the stock experienced very high recruitment in 2015 and below-average recruitment during 2016-2018. Based on the SSC’s recommendation, the Council and Board approved an Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) of 35.77 million pounds for 2020 and 30.67 million pounds for 2021. After accounting for expected discards, this results

in a commercial quota of 22.23 million pounds and an RHL of 6.51 million pounds in 2020 and a commercial quota of 18.06 million pounds and an RHL of 5.34 million pounds in 2021. Compared to 2019 landings limits, this represents a 7% decrease in the commercial quota and a 12% decrease in the RHL in 2020 and a 25% decrease in the commercial quota and a 28% decrease in the RHL in 2021.

The Council and Board also reviewed an evaluation of scup discards by mesh size, calendar quarter, and statistical area in the commercial fishery. Discards have been well above average in recent years and the Council and Board agreed with the Monitoring Committee recommendation that no immediate management action was needed but that discards should continue to be monitored.

Black Sea Bass 2020-2021 Specifications

The 2019 black sea bass operational stock assessment concluded that the black sea bass stock was not overfished, and overfishing was not occurring in 2018 relative to the updated biological reference points calculated through the assessment. Spawning stock biomass was estimated to be about 2.4 times the biomass target in 2018. The assessment indicated recruitment was above average in 2015 and below-average during 2016-2018. Based on the SSC's recommendation, the Council and Board approved an ABC of 15.07 million pounds for 2020 and 2021, which results in a commercial quota of 5.58 million pounds and an RHL of 5.81 million pounds for both years after accounting for expected discards. This represents a 59% increase for both the commercial quota and the RHL compared to the 2019 measures. This could allow for a notable increase in commercial landings. However, because recreational harvest is now estimated based on the revised MRIP methodology, which shows much higher recreational harvest than under the previous methodology, it will not be possible to allow for an increase in recreational harvest in 2020, despite the 59% increase in the RHL. Recreational measures (bag, size, and season limits) for the 2020 fishing season will be considered at the Council and Board's December 2019 joint meeting.

Summer Flounder 2020 Specifications Review

The Council and Board received a data update for summer flounder, including updated catch, landings, and fishery independent survey indices through 2018. State and federal survey indices indicate that the aggregate stock size of summer flounder increased from 2017 to 2018 and that recruitment in 2018 was above average. The most recent benchmark stock assessment concluded that the summer flounder stock was not overfished, and overfishing was not occurring in 2017. After reviewing this information, the Council and Board determined that no changes are needed to the previously-implemented specifications for summer flounder. For 2020 and 2021, the commercial quota is 11.53 million pounds and the RHL is 7.69 million pounds.

Bluefish 2020-2021 Specifications

The 2019 bluefish operational assessment concluded that the bluefish stock was overfished and overfishing was not occurring in 2018 relative to the updated biological reference points. Based on the SSC's recommendation, the Council and Bluefish Board adopted an ABC of 16.28 million pounds for both years. After accounting for expected discards, this ABC translates to a commercial quota of 2.77 million pounds and an RHL of 9.48 million pounds for 2020 and 2021. Compared to 2019, this represents a 64% decrease in the commercial quota and an 18% decrease in the RHL. In recent years, a portion of the total allowable landings above the expected recreational harvest have been transferred from the recreational fishery to the commercial fishery. However, because the recreational fishery is anticipated to fully harvest the RHL, the Council did not authorize a quota transfer from the recreational to the commercial sectors for 2020-2021.

Bluefish Allocation Amendment and Bluefish Rebuilding

The Council and Bluefish Board received an update on the Bluefish Allocation Amendment and revisited the list of issues previously identified for consideration in the amendment. As background, the Council and Board initiated the amendment in December 2017 with the goal of reviewing and possibly revising the allocation

between the commercial and recreational fisheries and the commercial allocations to the states. In August 2018, the Council and Bluefish Board agreed to postpone finalization of the public hearing document until after the results of the bluefish operational assessment were available. These results, which were released in August 2019, indicate that the stock is overfished with overfishing not occurring in 2018 relative to the updated biological reference points. Once the Council receives official notification from NOAA Fisheries regarding the overfished status of the bluefish stock, the Council will be required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act to initiate a rebuilding plan to be implemented within two years that rebuilds the stock to the biomass target within ten years.

During their joint meeting, the Council and Bluefish Board affirmed the list of five issues previously identified for consideration in the amendment. These include: (1) FMP Goals and Objectives, (2) Commercial and Recreational Allocations, (3) Commercial Allocations to the States, (4) Quota Transfers, and (5) Other Issues. The Council and Board also provided specific recommendations for further analysis by the Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT). Specifically, the Council and Board recommended that the FMAT consider the dynamics between seasonality and region when analyzing state allocations. The Council and Board also requested that the FMAT explore addressing management uncertainty by sector. Lastly, the Council and Board agreed to incorporate rebuilding into the amendment in order to streamline the development and implementation of a rebuilding plan. Because this additional issue modifies the scope of the amendment, the Council and Board will need to provide additional hearings and opportunities for public comment. Additional information and updates will be posted on the Council website at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/bluefish-allocation-amendment>.

Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Commercial/Recreational Allocations

The Council and Board initiated the development of a joint amendment to reevaluate the commercial and recreational sector allocations in the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan. This action aims to address the allocation-related impacts of the revised recreational catch and landings data provided by MRIP. The initiation of the amendment directs Council and Commission staff to begin preparing analyses to guide a public scoping process. The Council and Board will revisit this issue during their next joint meeting in December 2019.

Black Sea Bass Commercial Issues

After reviewing potential management strategies and engaging in a joint discussion on Council involvement, the Board initiated an addendum to consider changes to the black sea bass commercial state by state allocations. Consistent with Board discussion at the August 2019 ASMFC meeting, this action will consider the current distribution and abundance of black sea bass as one of several adjustment factors to achieve more balanced access to the resource. Proposed strategies for adjusting the commercial state allocations include: 1) a dynamic approach, referred to as "TMGC," which gradually shifts allocations over time based on a combination of historical landings information and current stock distribution information; 2) several trigger-based allocation approaches; 3) a method to raise the Connecticut quota to 5% in addition to any other reallocation method; and 4) hybrid approaches. Although this is a Board-specific action, both the Council and Board agreed that future discussions of the addendum should occur at joint Council and Board meetings to allow for Council input. The Council deliberated the need for a joint action but decided to postpone further consideration of a joint action until the joint December 2019 meeting.

Recreational Reform Initiative

The Council and Board reviewed progress made by a joint steering committee on recreational management reform for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. The steering committee has discussed a new process for setting recreational management measures for multiple years at a time, as well as the development of guidelines for maintaining status quo recreational management measures. The Council and Board agreed the steering committee should continue to develop these concepts.

Monkfish 2020-2022 Specifications

The Council approved the same monkfish specifications for 2020-2022 as recommended by the New England Fishery Management Council at their September 2019 meeting. These recommendations include a 10% increase in the ABC for the Northern Fishery Management Area and a status quo ABC for the Southern Fishery Management Area. No changes were recommended at this time by either Council for effort controls, possession limits, or days-at-sea measures. Additional information about these recommendations is available in the New England Council press release: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/nefmc.org/Council-Approves-2020-2022-Monkfish-Specifications.pdf>

Dogfish 2020 Specifications Review

The Council reviewed spiny dogfish specifications for 2020, which will be year 2 of the 2019-2021 multi-year specifications. After considering input from the SSC, the Spiny Dogfish Advisory Panel, and the Spiny Dogfish Monitoring Committee, the Council made no changes to the previously-recommended ABC of 31.1 million pounds for 2020. This ABC results in a commercial quota of 23.2 million pounds, a 13% increase compared to the 2019 quota. Additional information about 2019-2022 specifications is available here:

<https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2019-09915>.

Illex Permitting and MSB Goals and Objectives Amendment

The Council reviewed progress on the *Illex* Permitting and MSB Goals and Objectives Amendment and provided direction to staff on further development. This amendment considers modifications to the *Illex* permitting system and revisions to the goals and objectives for the Mackerel, Squid, Butterfish (MSB) fishery management plan (FMP). For the FMP goals and objectives, staff will continue to refine the proposed wording based on the input of the Council.

For the *Illex* permitting component, staff will further develop re-qualification alternatives and analyses, including several options that consider landings through 2019. The Council also voted that options for individual fishing quotas (or "ITQs" or "catch shares") will not be considered in this action. The Council approved a motion to not include a 10,000-trip qualification since that is the incidental trip limit and approved including options for a tiered approach to *Illex* permit requalification. Updates on this action are posted at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/illex-permitting-msb-goals-amendment>.

Illex Working Group

Staff provided an update on work being done by the *Illex* working group to develop approaches for in-year quota adjustments and the next research track assessment. Updates on this effort are posted at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/illex-working-group>.

Five-Year (2020-2024) Comprehensive Research Priorities

Staff presented the draft Five-Year (2020-2024) Comprehensive Research Priorities for Council review and feedback. The Council's current research priorities run through 2020; however, the Council agreed to update the priorities early in order to align with and be informed by the development of the Council's next Strategic Plan and new 5-Year Cooperative Agreement. The draft priorities document includes revised and updated broad research themes, a proposed new organization and prioritization set-up for species/FMP specific priorities, and potential strategies to improve the effectiveness and utility of the document to the Council and its management and science partners. Council feedback and recommendations will be incorporated into a revised document with final approval of the five-year research priorities scheduled for the December 2019 meeting.

Draft 2020-2024 Strategic Plan

The Council reviewed and provided comments on a draft strategic plan for 2020-2024. The plan contains Mission and Vision statements and a suite of objectives and strategies organized around five goal areas: Communication,

Science, Management, Ecosystem, and Governance. The Council intends to use the plan to guide its management activities and operations over the next five years. Staff will incorporate Council feedback and post the draft strategic plan online for public feedback. The Council will review public comments and approve a final strategic plan at the December Council Meeting. Sign up for the Council's email list to be notified about availability of the draft plan for public comment: <http://www.mafmc.org/email-list>.

Draft 2020 Deliverables

The Executive Committee reviewed and provided feedback on a draft list of actions and priorities for 2020. The full Council will review a revised list of actions and deliverables at the December Council Meeting.

Next Council Meeting

December 9 - 12, 2019

Westin Annapolis

100 Westgate Circle, Annapolis, MD 21401

Telephone: 410-972-4300

<http://www.mafmc.org/council-events/december-2019-council-meeting>