Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report

February 2020

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 20, 2020 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the golden tilefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Advisory Panel members present:

Fred Akers (Private), David Arbeitman (Bait and tackle), Ron Callis (Private), Dan Farnham (Commercial), Carl Forsberg (For-hire), Gregory Hueth (Private/For-hire), and Michael Johnson (Fisherman).

Others present: Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Laurie Nolan (Council Member), Doug Potts (GARFO), Paul Rago (SSC), John Boreman (SSC), Andy Loftus (Loftus Consulting), Matthew Seeley (Council Staff), and José Montañez (Council Staff).

Trigger questions:

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

Market/Economic Conditions

Prices continue to be stable in all market categories. Tilefish prices have remained stable because the tilefish industry continues to coordinate times of landings to avoid market gluts and market floods and spread tilefish landings throughout the year. The ability to do this has improved since IFQs came into place.

Golden tilefish caught in the Mid-Atlantic region are mostly sold as gutted fish (95% of fish sold). Traditionally, most tilefish landings were sold to the Korean markets. Due to marketing efforts, tilefish has become a popular item. They are regularly found on restaurant menus rather than an occasional “specials.” Local fish markets, as well as grocery stores like Whole Foods, carry tilefish. Businesses like Sea to Table, a door-to-door seafood delivery service, have also helped spread the word on what a great eating fish tilefish are. Having a steady year-round supply of tilefish has influenced the positive market development for this product.

Extra-large fish have been marketed as 25+ pound fish in both New York and New Jersey in past years. However, more recently (since around 2016), New Jersey has changed the extra-large to 20+ pounds fish. This may explain some of the small increase in extra-large market category landings that has been observed in the last few years. AP members reported that extra-large fish continues to be worth as much as large fish.

Fishing trip expenses continue to rise (e.g., gear, bait, ice, tackle, and food). Due to the high cost of operations, tilefish vessels fish as close to home port as possible. For example, the cost of squid used for bait has doubled. *Illex* cost is $1.00 to $1.50/pound. While the domestic squid season/landings have been good, low foreign landings and high demand are expected to keep squid prices at the current high level or even higher.

Environmental Conditions

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 48.2ºF to 57.2ºF [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. The dogfish are so thick now, when fishermen encounter them, they have no choice but to move to other fishing areas. The dogfish interaction used to be about two or three months in the winter. However, in the last seven years, dogfish presence is about eight months, and extends to June. Additionally, in the last couple of years, after the dogfish have left the tilefish fishing grounds, fishermen are encountering smooth dogfish which are bigger animals, more robust, and harder to release. The interaction with smooth dogfish is not such a big problem when compared to the dogfish interactions. Additionally, skate interactions reduce tilefish catches as well; this is limited to the winter period. Skates can severely damage tilefish gear. When fishermen encounter skates, they move to other fishing areas.

Staff asked the AP members to comment on the timing of the 2020 golden tilefish survey which is scheduled to be conducted May 22 to June 4, 2020. Staff specifically asked about the potential for high dogfish interactions which could adversely affect the survey results. Advisors indicated that it is possible that there may be large quantities of dogfish still around during that time period. They also indicated that lobster gear may also be still deployed in potential survey areas during May/June and will not be moved inshore until later on. They recommended that it may be more advisable to conduct the survey in June/July. Paul Nitschke (NEFSC) will be in contact with industry members to assess fishery interactions with dogfish prior to initiating the survey.

Adverse weather conditions (e.g., storms, rough seas, high winds, and tide) can impact fishing operations. Severe winter conditions experienced in the Northeast in 2013-2019 significantly affected the effectiveness of tilefish fishing operations/practices, resulting in longer fishing trips. Some advisors indicated that in 2019, winter conditions arrived early in October and Northeast winds affected fishing operations towards the end of the 2019 fishing year. Some boats were not able to leave the docks and boats that were offshore could not fish (forcing them to relocate to the west). In addition, with the arrival of early winter conditions, dogfish and skates interactions also increased. These factors resulted in a small underage in landings for the 2019 fishing year.

Recreational and commercial fishermen continue to see aggregations of fish in small areas in the spring/summer-time around the Wilmington canyon (>80 to 90 fathoms).

Commercial fishermen indicated that they continue to see aggregations of large fish in all canyons in the Mid-Atlantic region. Landings for the 2019 fishing year were slightly lower than for the 2018 fishing year.

Two AP members representing the recreational fishery indicated that the amount of large fish aggregations in some southern Mid-Atlantic canyons (e.g., Washington, Baltimore, Poor Man's, Wilmington, and Norfolk) have decreased in size. They also indicated that a higher percentage of their catch is comprised of smaller fish.

Some AP members reported that in the northern canyons they have seen smaller size classes move into larger size classes, when compared to 2 or 3 years ago. Their observations of a strong year class moving through the fishery are similar to those seen by the commercial fleet.

Management Issues

The number of tilefish vessels participating in the fishery was steady since the onset of the IFQ management system. Currently, three vessels constitute the vast bulk of the landings (~ 70% of the landings/IFQ allocation). New Jersey currently holds 30% of the allocation.

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 several fisheries (e.g., monkfish, scallop, and swordfish) and the IFQ system allows them to "fill in" tile fishing 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 can be attributed to the IFQ program.

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General Fishing Trends

AP members observed a new year class coming into the fishery in 2019. Specifically, they have seen larger landings in the extra small size category (<2 pounds). They have also seen a wide range of fish landed in terms of size and weight when compared to the year before.

AP members pointed out that for the last six winter seasons (January-March, 2013-2019) fishing practices have been impacted by severe weather resulting in longer fishing trips than on average. Severe winter conditions in the last five years have made fishing less productive. In 2019, winter like conditions started earlier (October). While severe weather conditions affect all fishing boats, smaller boats are particularly susceptible to severe winter and wind conditions.

Industry indicated that they experience an increase in CPUE in 2019. Fishing has gotten better, outside/external conditions affecting fishery have gotten worse: 1) dogfish interactions in 2019 continued to be high but at the same level seen in 2018, 2) skates interactions increased in 2019 when compared to 2018 (increased size of skates and numbers). Also, interaction with smooth dogfish (e.g., encountering more animals and further east), 3) weather in 2019 continued to be poor, winter started earlier in 2019 (October) when compared to 2018 conditions, 4) they are catching more fish and fishing is improving.

Industry tries to fish as close to port as possible. Basically, fishing in the same areas to maintain low trip expenses. Increasing operating costs keep people from going further out and searching. Industry also indicated that due to recent Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument closures, they do not have access to fishing grounds in the Oceanographer, Gilbert, and Lydonia canyons.

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.

AP members indicated that they have observed a new development regarding gear interaction with other fisheries between Block and Atlantic canyons. They reported to have seen more crab gear in the wintertime, which caused tilefish boats to be pushed out of that area. Also, reported an increase in lobster gear/boat interactions in the summer. In general, industry members are observing more gear competition throughout the year.

AP members have also observed more trawling traffic in the Hudson canyon area, especially when *loligo* availability is high and prices are robust. When trawling activity increases in the Hudson area, tilefish boats are pushed out of that area.

Other Issues

Constant harvest strategy worked well in rebuilding the fishery. Industry would like to get back to a constant ACL in the future given healthy trends in the catch. Industry does not want to see a different ACL every year.

Consider implementing golden tilefish specifications for a longer time period if possible (e.g., 5 year specifications cycle).

One headboat captain indicated that five or six headboats[1] directly fish for golden tilefish but not 100% or full time. Some AP members commented that while the headboat participation in the golden tilefish recreational fishery appears stable they have seen an increase in participation by recreational private boats (July through September) and that private golden tilefish recreational landings are not recorded (and potential sale of fish recreationally caught).

Another AP member indicated that while there are five headboats that fish for tilefish (both blueline and golden) in the mid-Atlantic they have a limited number of dedicated tilefish trips throughout the season (summertime). For example, the boat that has the largest number of trips scheduled during the year (a boat Point Pleasant) has about 24 scheduled trips per year and not all trips are conducted (i.e., taking 50 to 60% of scheduled trips) and in some instances not all of them are full. The other four boats have substantially less tilefish trips scheduled per year.

Industry members indicated that for-hire trips targeting golden tilefish went down in 2019. This decreased in effort was due to weather factors. Also, improved tuna and swordfish fishing conditions in 2019 when compared to 2018 also caused less trips targeting golden tilefish.

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 be used for the management of this species. AP members also stated that recreational values reported under the vessel trip report (VTR) data seems to be more realistic of tilefish catches. It was also indicated that electronic VTR need to be implemented as this may improve data collection.

AP members indicated that Captains and crew should be included in the comingled bag limit (recreational possession limit) for a trip. In other words, the Captain and Crew should also be allotted a bag limit.

AP members are concerned about the fishermen targeting golden tilefish under the incidental limit rules. Some of the vessels engaging in this practice do not have the required permitting requirements to sell fish and do not have the Coast Guard Safety requirements needed to be in compliance with Federal regulations as applicable to commercial vessels.

[1] Two from New Jersey, one from New York, one from Ocean City, MD (direct tilefish but only a few times per year), and 1 from Rudee Inlet, VA.

AP members indicated that the landings monitoring program of the IFQ 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, 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.

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a differential trip limit (for-hire vs private) and longer recreational trips. In addition, they suggested that the Council considers recreational management strategies (e.g., longer recreational trips, multi-day bag limits), structured after the Gulf of Mexico regulations (would make filling trips easier). Multi-day bag limits are important because a hand full of boats target tilefish in January-February when the black sea bass season is closed and while they do not catch much tilefish, this management change could help their business sell more trips. These management changes could be considered when a quota liberalization is on the table (quota going up).

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a recreational allocation.

Some AP members indicated concerns about relaxing recreational regulations (as they could potentially lead to higher recreational landings) while the commercial quota could remain at status quo levels or potentially decrease in the future.

A commercial AP member expressed concerns over increasing any effort, bag limit or quota in the fishery at this time. They felt it would be unfair to allow for an increase in effort/bag limit in the recreational sector while maintaining status quo for the commercial sector.

A recreational AP member articulated that, it should be noted that the commercial sector, pre-IFQ, were the ones that brought the tilefish stock to its knees, not the recreational sector. The commercial sector has 100% of the quota between IFQ and Incidental fisheries. Recreational fishing has always been de minimis. If it were not, AP member assumes that there would be a significant recreational allocation. To say that the three players that catch 70% of the IFQ or the handful of others that make up the remaining 30% would be harmed by allowing a few more recreational fish in the for-hire industry seems preposterous. The fact that those who have 100% of the quota have suffered cutbacks should not constrain the recreational angling public from catching a few extra fish. This is particularly true in the for-hire fleet where reporting is mandatory.

Recreational AP members indicated that the for-hire fishery (more significantly the headboat fishery) seems to be losing more trips due to weather conditions. The commercial sector complains of losing trips to weather but drift fishing for tilefish requires even better weather. In fact, near pristine conditions for both small boats and headboats are required and the loss of trips is far greater than that of the commercial fleet.

Some commercial AP members were very concerned about the tilefish landings by the private/rental mode that are not reported. It is possible that these landings are very high and we have no way to account for them. Since we do not have available information regarding the “true” recreational landings, we should not consider recreational liberalizations.

The AP was unanimous in their recommendation that permitting and reporting be developed for private recreational anglers. This information will offer insight into the impacts private anglers have on the recreational fishery for catch/landings and effort. Furthermore, the Council approved private permitting and reporting requirements for tilefish in 2017 through Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) (added blueline tilefish to the FMP) and are now awaiting implementation.

Research Priorities

Consider the possibility of collecting detailed spatial fishing information from industry to better assess stock status. In addition, consider collecting biological information (e.g., age, length, sex) from golden tilefish directed trips.