

2018 Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report (FPR)

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via Webinar on February 21, 2018 to review the fishery information document and develop the **Blueline** Tilefish Fishery Performance Report (FPR) based on advisor perspectives on catch/landings patterns and other trends in this fishery. The following is the report from the AP.

The Advisers in attendance were: David Arbeitman, Skip Feller, Jeffrey Gutman, and John Nolan III. They represent tilefish commercial fishermen (from New York); recreational fishermen (private/head boats, bait and tackle business, from New Jersey and Virginia). Also in attendance were: Laurie Nolan – Council Member; Ec Newellman; Paul Nitschke – NEFSC; Yan Jiao – SSC Member; Matthew Seeley and José Montañez – Council Staff.

The fishery performance report's primary purpose is to contextualize catch histories for the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) because of the potential importance of this and related information for determining Acceptable Biological Catches (ABCs) in cases of fisheries with high levels of assessment uncertainty. The goal is to allow comparing and contrasting of the most recent year's conditions (2016/2017) and fishery characteristics with previous years. The following trigger questions were used to guide discussion, and the summary of the AP's input follows.

*What factors have influenced recent catch?

– Markets/economy? – Environment? – Fishery regulations? – Other factors?

*Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?

-Gear regulations and exemptions? -Trip Limits? -Others?

*Where should the Council and Commission focus their research priorities?

*What else is important for the Council to know?

General Observations

- No major changes have been observed for bluelines in terms of catch rates/composition. Once blueline limits are met then recreational trips search for other targets (goldens). There is a sense from some AP members that the fishery restrictions are/will be benefiting recreational catch per unit effort (CPUE).
- Two AP members want to leave the 3, 5, 7 bag limit (very important). If head boat bag limits drop lower than 7 the head boat community will have greater difficulty filling their trips. The larger bag limit is necessary to encourage anglers to come out.

Factors Influencing Catch

- When targeting other species, trip limits restrict commercial fishermen from targeting areas where bluelines are present.

- Recreational limits depress catch and effort.
- Weather continues to impact effort – Weather in 2017 (hurricanes) similar or slightly windier vs 2016.
- Recreational effort changes – Some areas seem to have higher numbers of deep-droppers (Northern), others lower in 2017 (Mid Delmarva area – less offshore activity generally in 2017). The fishery is becoming more and more understood and more people have the required gear. Moderate tuna availability in deeper water translates into highest effort (enough tuna to create effort, but not so much as to occupy interest for a whole trip). This applies for bluelines even more than goldens due to shallower depth of bluelines.

Input on Regulations

- Has the 300-pound incidental trip limit caused any regulatory discarding? Not too often – incidental landings in 2017 were typical and generally accommodated by the 300-pound trip limit. Some southern area effort has had to shift within particular trips to avoid bluelines once 300 pounds were retained.
- Has the 7-fish recreational trip limit caused any regulatory discarding? No, but it continues to cause shifts in effort away from bluelines once the limit is reached.
- Some AP members would like the Council to consider a higher trip limit for longer recreational trips, structured after Gulf of Mexico regulations (makes filling trips easier). Other AP members were concerned about the impact of higher recreational limits on the overall fishery especially given low ABC and recreational catch uncertainty. Advisors want to avoid creating a directed fishery especially with the uncertainty of the overall stock.
- Regarding the recreational measures in Amendment 6¹ to the Tilefish FMP: Advisors recommended multi-day considerations for head boat trips. Following this recommendation, one advisor recommended standing pat with the current system as it is very important to keep the recreational and commercial sector within the ABC.

Research Priority Ideas

- Continue to organize/facilitate surveys to help inform the assessments.
- Need a successful assessment to provide biological reference points.

Other Issues Raised

- General concern about appropriateness of current ABC given recent catches. Blueline ABC is 1/20th of golden tilefish despite likely similar productivity in mid-Atlantic – does not make sense.

¹ May 1 – October 31 and per-person recreational bag limits of 7 blueline tilefish on for-hire inspected vessels, 5 blueline tilefish on for-hire uninspected vessels, and 3 blueline tilefish on private vessels