

2014 MAFMC Bluefish

Fishery Performance Report

The Mid-Atlantic Council's Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met from 9:00 AM – 10:20 AM July 11, 2014 via webinar to develop a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for consideration during the upcoming bluefish specification cycle. After the meeting, the AP reviewed and approved the summary below as the FPR.

Attendance

MAFMC Bluefish Advisers: Fred Akers (NJ recreational), Noel Angelucci (NJ recreational), Paul Eidman (NJ recreational charter), Arnold Leo (NY commercial), Patrick Paquette (MA recreational charter) Kevin Wark (NJ commercial).

ASMFC Bluefish Advisors: George Geiger (FL recreational) and Don Swanson (NH recreational).

MAFMC SSC members: John Boreman (Chair), Brian Rothschild, Cynthia Jones, Doug Vaughan, Mike Frisk, Sunny Jardine.

Staff and Other Participants: Jim Armstrong (MAFMC staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC staff), Greg DiDomenico (Garden State Seafood Association)

Because of the localized nature of AP members' observations, remarks under each heading are attributed to the states represented on the AP. Additionally, the remarks are not necessarily confined to the subject heading, but rather, reflect the affiliation of the AP members who made them. A general trend from the discussion was an increase in the abundance of bluefish in the northern part of the range and a reduction in abundance in the southern part of the range.

Recreational Fishery Issues

NH – Bluefish are being targeted much more heavily. This is likely a consequence of the reduced abundance of groundfish.

MA – Availability to the recreational fishery appeared to be down at the start of the year in 2013 but as time went on, it turned out that the fish were being encountered in different than usual places and under different patterns. The abundance was high and a very broad range of sizes was caught including very large fish.

NY – Currently bluefish appear to be very abundant across all sizes. "You can walk on them from Montauk to Riverhead". A lot of 4-5 inch school snappers have been observed in the estuaries.

NJ – Bluefish are becoming a primary target for recreational fishermen. They are currently (2014) replacing striped bass on party boats. Many large fish have been encountered on party boats. Nearshore and in the bays, the fish are mostly small. The number of schools does

appear to be reduced compared to previous years. They have been reported to be consuming grass shrimp instead of the usual finfish.

FL – Extreme cold water events occurred in 2009 and 2010 and virtually everything is reduced, presumably through the cascading effect on seagrass beds, forage fish and bluefish. Large schools of bluefish do occur, but the number of schools is much less along the coast. The fish are generally smaller, although a brief period occurred this year with large (15lb) fish being available. High levels of mercury have been reported in fish from the lagoon and in people eating fish from the lagoon.

Market / Economic Issues

MA – The price for hook caught fish was very much improved in 2013 compared to previous years (\$1.00/lb compared to \$0.50/lb).

NY – Prices are very low, the worst people have seen in a very long time (\$0.10/lb) which is attributed to the very high abundance locally.

NJ – There are reports of large schools but they appear to be a fairly rare event making it difficult to rationalize pursuing them given the offsetting costs associated with a trip. They used to be fairly dependable to the east of Barnegat, and less so to the south around Cape May. Currently, the fish are concentrated more to the east and offshore. When you get a large catch, the payoff can be good, but a lot depends on the market which is unpredictable due to highly variable demand. In the past the fish have come in in two pulses, but the second pulse of summer fish appears to be staying offshore and going north. Barnegat Light has become what Cape May used to be like in terms of availability of bluefish.

Environmental Issues

MA – The distribution of forage may have shifted and pulled bluefish into areas where they are not typically caught.

NJ – Currently, water temperatures are a lot lower than normal offshore, but not in the bays. One commercial advisor observed that there are a lot of forage fish – menhaden and sand eels

FL – The low abundance of bluefish and many other fish is likely related to severe cold water events in 2009 and 2010.

Management Issues

NJ – High discard rates for bluefish are the norm.

ALL – The current 15 fish bag limit was considered to be excessive by all of the recreational advisors on the call.