

2018 Chub Mackerel Advisory Panel Fishery Performance Report

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Mackerel-Squid-Butterfish (MSB) Advisory Panel (AP) met on May 15, 2018 to review the 2018 Chub Mackerel Fishery Information Document and develop this Fishery Performance Report. This document summarizes the perspectives and ideas of advisors. These are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Advisory Panel members in attendance: Katie Almeida, Vito Calomo, Gregory DiDomenico, Joseph Gordon, Jeffrey Reichle

Others in attendance: Terry Alexander (MSB Committee member), Julia Beaty (Council staff), Purcie Bennett-Nickerson (Pew Charitable Trusts), Douglas Christel (GARFO), Peter Christopher (MSB Committee member), Taylor Daley (University of Southern Mississippi), Peter Hughes (MSB Committee chair), Jeff Kaelin (Lund's Fisheries), Meghan Lapp (SeaFreeze Ltd.), Robert Leaf (University of Southern Mississippi), Laurie Nolan (MSB Committee member), Eric Reid (MSB Committee member), Sara Winslow (MSB Committee vice chair)

Factors Influencing Catch/Landings

One advisor said the recent increase in chub mackerel landings in the mid-Atlantic and southern New England was not influenced by market factors as there has always been a market for chub mackerel. He said the *Illex* squid fishery is the biggest determinant of chub mackerel fishing effort and landings. Vessels won't concentrate on chub mackerel if *Illex* squid are available and if the *Illex* price is higher than that for chub mackerel.

Multiple advisors agreed that chub mackerel are difficult and costly to harvest in profitable quantities. Chub mackerel are fast swimmers; therefore, vessels need high horse power to tow fast enough to catch them. In addition, chub mackerel prefer warm water temperatures (around 15-20°C/60-70°F); therefore, vessels must have refrigerated sea water or freezing capacity to store profitable quantities. For these reasons, few vessels in this region are capable of targeting chub mackerel.

One advisor said fluctuations in landings are not reflective of abundance and are instead the result of the capacity of the fleet, the small number of participating vessels, and the operations of the *Illex* squid fishery.

A few advisors said fishermen see some chub mackerel every year, but the abundance is variable. In addition, in some years, chub mackerel are "bunched", which makes them easier to catch. In other years, they are more spread out. Advisors did not know why chub mackerel bunch in some years but not others. One advisor said fewer *Illex* squid are present when chub mackerel are bunched. He said the two species are mixed together to some extent in the beginning and end of the season (usually May and October), but not when both species are most abundant (usually June - September). Although both species are sometimes caught together, fishermen will not store them together.

One advisor said in his many years of fishing from Maine through Rhode Island, he's seen a few chub mackerel, but never any notable abundances.

One advisor said the pattern of commercial landings in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico could reflect multi-year cycles of abundance influenced by environmental factors.

Research Recommendations

One advisor recommended that additional biological data on chub mackerel (e.g. ages, lengths, maturity), be collected through the existing port sampling program.

One advisor asked if the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Apex Predator Program collects diet data which could be used to assess the importance of chub mackerel to the diets of any predators.¹

Two advisors said they were frustrated that the Council decided not to fund a chub mackerel stock assessment.²

Chub Mackerel and Highly Migratory Species

Advisors discussed concerns raised by some stakeholders about the potential for negative impacts of commercial chub mackerel harvest on recreationally-important predators such as marlins and tunas.

One advisor asked if the commercial chub mackerel fishery operates in canyon areas where recreational marlin and tuna fisheries occur. Other advisors said the fishery operates inshore of the canyons.

One advisor said his son fishes recreationally for marlins and tunas and he's not aware of any relationship between chub mackerel abundance and marlin or tuna abundance. He added that fisheries must be managed based on science, not politics, and although public opinion is very important to the process, opinions are not facts until they are proven. Specifically, claims regarding the importance of chub mackerel in the diets of tunas and marlins are not supported by science. He added that his own opinion is that chub mackerel are not important prey. He said the requests for spatial/temporal closures of chub mackerel and herring fisheries are driven by recreational fishermen who simply don't want commercial vessels to fish near them.

One advisor expressed frustration that the Council funded a study on chub mackerel in the diets of marlins and tunas instead of funding a chub mackerel stock assessment. He said the November 2017 webinar on the diets of highly migratory species (HMS) should have been the end of the Council's efforts to evaluate HMS diets. During that webinar, three researchers said they did not identify any chub mackerel in HMS stomach contents. One researcher described his own observations of chub mackerel in tuna stomachs, but these observations were not quantified.³ This AP member argued that any results of the new diet study will be inconclusive and based on low sample sizes.

One advisor emphasized the importance of public comments in the Council process and said

¹ Council staff were unable to answer this question at the meeting. The Apex Predator Program is focused on commercially and recreationally important shark species. Food habits are one area of research within the program. More information is available at: <https://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/nefsc/Narragansett/sharks/>.

² For more information, see http://www.mafmc.org/s/Chub_RFP_outcome.pdf.

³ For more information, see http://www.mafmc.org/s/Chub_HMS_diet_webinar_summary.pdf.

spatial/temporal management of the chub mackerel fishery based on HMS concerns should be considered given the number of public comments received on the subject.

Catch Limit Recommendations

One advisor recommended that the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee consider a range of acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 MT (about 4-11 million pounds). He saw room for expansion of the current fishery and did not support catch limits any lower than that implemented through the Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment (i.e. 2.86 million pounds, or about 1,300 MT, per year).

Another advisor said he did not see the justification for a higher limit than 2.86 million pounds given the unknown ecosystem impacts of any catch level.

Speaking in support of a higher catch limit, one advisor said, given the restrictions in other pelagic fisheries in this region, the chub mackerel fishery can be a way for pelagic fishermen to stay in business.