



Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Performance Reports July 2014

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission's) Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panels on July 1, 2014 to review fishery information documents for all three species and develop Fishery Performance Reports (FPRs) based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings patterns and other trends in these fisheries. **Please note:** Advisor comments described below reflect the broader discussion and are not necessarily consensus statements.

Council Advisory Panel members present: Greg DiDomencio* (NJ), Skip Feller* (VA), Harry Doernte (VA), James Fletcher (NC)

Commission Advisory Panel members present: James Tietje (MA), Robert Busby (NY), Marc Hoffman (NY), Paul Risi (NY), Paul Forsberg (NY), Skip Feller* (VA), Bill Shillingford (NJ), Bob Meimbresse (NJ), Greg DiDomencio* (NJ), Mike Fedosh (NJ)

Others present: Kiley Dancy (MAFMC Staff), Kirby Rootes-Murdy (ASMFC Staff), Mike Luisi (MAFMC/ASMFC), John Boreman (MAFMC SSC)

*Serve on both Council and Commission Advisory Panels.

Summer Flounder

Market and Economic Issues

The closure of Oregon Inlet continues to drastically affect the ability to land summer flounder in North Carolina. The Council and Board should allow for increased commercial landings flexibility between states. One advisor noted that managers are currently managing for the benefit of the resource only, and not considering benefits to the fishermen or consumer.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

In the 2014 recreational measures, the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut region has a 45-day limit on the number of days that can be open during wave 3 (May/June). One advisor remarked that there was confusion about where this limitation originated, and that it has had a negative impact on the for-hire fleet in New York.

Advisors commented that current recreational data collection under MRIP is no different from MRFSS. Similar to last year, advisors noted that the MRIP survey has not advanced to the point where it can adequately capture reductions in effort. One advisor described an effort reduction of about 30% in New York and New Jersey (residual effort reduction from Super storm Sandy in 2012) which is not reflected in the MRIP estimates and will result in estimated landings which could be inflated. All components of the new MRIP methodology need to be implemented.

A few advisors expressed a desire for recreational management to move back to state-by-state conservation equivalency. Others commented that if regional conservation equivalency continues to be used, the Commission should look into splitting certain states into separate regions. The advisors gave the example of possibly splitting the southern portion of New Jersey into a region with the states of Delaware through Virginia, while leaving the northern portion of the state with New York and Connecticut. One reason cited for this is that different sized fish are caught in these areas. One advisor noted that a split in the state of New Jersey would be preferable even if regional management is not continued.

Advisors noted recreational effort shifts based on regulations under regional conservation equivalency. For example, Rhode Island has a higher bag limit compared to Massachusetts. Due to this difference, one advisor noted that Massachusetts is seeing fewer charter trips and catching fewer fish. The bag limit drives the perception of customers and encourages more anglers to come to Rhode Island. Another example is the regional split between Delaware and New Jersey, which is negatively impacting business in Southern New Jersey, as more people are driving to Delaware to fish under a lower size limit. Advisors noted that there will always be issues when regulations differ between bordering states.

Similar to last year, advisors noted that high size limits continue to direct the most fishing pressure on large female summer flounder.

Other Issues

One advisor pointed out that the requirement for aluminum TEDs in North Carolina, rather than allowing pre-stressed cable, was affecting landings to the southern range of the management unit and resulting in major effort shifts. This advisor noted that there are plenty of fish available in south, but management measures such as these TED requirements are preventing landings that would otherwise be occurring in southern areas.

Research Recommendations

Research suggestions proposed by advisors included:

- Research into use of different hook types to reduce discard mortality in the recreational summer flounder fishery.
- Explore wider uses of smartphone applications and other electronic monitoring for voluntary angler surveys.

Scup

Market and Economic Issues

One advisor commented that the increase in the minimum fish size over the years has impacted markets for scup. There used to be a market for smaller scup that fit into a frying pan, but that market has transitioned to imported tilapia since the Council has put the larger size limits in place. Managers should work towards total utilization for the commercial fishery, where all catch must be brought ashore and any size can be sold.

One advisor commented that prices for scup are down because of the abundance of the fish, and noted that the price per fish would go up if biomass would go down. Another advisor expressed

that in the commercial fishery, the markets have experienced the growing pains of rebuilding, but are starting to see benefits. Recent management changes will make benefits more pronounced in the commercial fishery (e.g., the increased Winter II trip limit). Scup are now increasingly part of the value-added market in many places, and increasingly placed on restaurant menus. The market for scup is returning, albeit from a different group of consumers.

The price of fuel is affecting every facet of the fishery, predominately by increasing overall costs, and the trend only seem to be getting worse. Fuel prices have had a big economic impact on party/charter fishery, by affecting rates and therefore participation.

One advisor noted that for the first time, he is seeing marinas that are not full. There are fewer boats and less money available. In bad economic times, people will not spend money on recreational fishing. Low income participants used to be able to easily justify the costs of a fishing trip. Now, recreational participants often can't justify the cost if they are not able to balance fees with what they are able to catch and keep. One advisor suggested changing size limits to total cumulative length, which would allow for increased retention of scup.

Environmental and Ecological Issues

Scup are eating juveniles of other species, specifically crabs and lobsters. There is a need to consider how the high biomass of scup impacts other species. One advisor noted that scup biomass should be reduced to reduce significant impacts to other species.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

Advisors commented that current recreational data collection under MRIP is no different from MRFSS. Similar to last year, advisors noted that the MRIP survey has not advanced to the point where it can adequately capture reductions in effort. One advisor described an effort reduction of about 30% in New York and New Jersey, which is not reflected in the MRIP estimates and will result in estimated landings which could be inflated. All components of the new MRIP methodology need to be implemented.

Advisors generally agreed that managers should encourage and incentivize more scup catch given high biomass estimates (200% of the target biomass, based on 2012 stock assessment update), and that the strong, healthy stock can support liberalization of some measures. Several advisors consider it imperative that action be taken to reduce the scup biomass, given concerns of potential predation on other commercially valuable species. Both commercial and recreational minimum sizes could be much smaller, and could always be increased later if there are problems. Smaller minimum sizes will greatly reduce discards. Smaller size limits should be considered before increased trip limits (for both commercial and recreational fisheries) because it would increase availability to all sectors/user groups and would reduce waste. Shore fishermen would have increased opportunity to take home fish with smaller size limits. The scup fishery is strong enough to support these changes, and advisors would not expect fishery to decline back to levels seen in the 80s, when draggers had smaller mesh nets. Gear restrictions are helping to maintain the stock by reducing dead discards.

Fishing Behavior Issues

Advisors noted that managers should consider the subsistence fishing aspect of the scup fishery. In the 80s, there used to be a 100 fish trip limit, with 8-hour trips, with customers predominately

freezing these larger quantities of fish to eat over time. Now with reduced trip limits, the time needed to reach a trip limit is quicker, so trips are shorter, with charter boats booking multiple day trips. While two trips instead of one has been good for for-hire businesses, it's somewhat inefficient for participants (and more expensive, which disadvantages lower-income participants). The various changes in size limits, trip expenses, and availability of fish over past three decades has changed the clientele. A lot of scup trips are tourist trips now. Managers should consider the range of participants that they would like the fishery to be available to in the future.

Other Issues

One advisor noted that the Coast Guard targets commercial fishermen, but should be putting equal effort into checking recreational vessels as well.

Research Recommendations

Research suggestions proposed by advisors included:

- Adding a research recommendation for quantifying the role of scup as a predator, not just as a prey species. There was also support for quantifying the role of juvenile scup as a forage species.
- Recommendation #5 in the draft 5-year research plan (incorporating ecological relationships and oceanic events into the stock assessment model) should be designated as a higher priority.
- Research into cooking methods for cooking the whole fish (with bones), which could lead to improved markets for scup.
- A financial reward system should be created that anyone could access in exchange for contributing to research work, since the current process has become a "closed system."

Black sea bass

Environmental and Ecological Issues

Advisors commented that sea bass are wiping out other species, in particular feeding on juvenile lobsters. Some advisors noted concern about black sea bass biomass movement northward in search of food and potential impact on the lobster industry throughout New England. Increased biomass has led to increased predation on other species.

Advisors noted that there's such a high biomass of fish in the north that they are becoming nearly invasive in some areas. The biomass needs to be regulated to control impacts on other species. One advisor noted that the NEAMAP survey shows that sea bass indices are off the chart, similar to scup. The NEAMAP survey has never been wrong, and there is no reason to have the restrictions that we currently have.

Management Issues & Management Induced Effort Shifts

Advisors agreed that black sea bass is facing a critical management situation that needs to be addressed immediately. Despite Magnuson Act restrictions, the Council and Commission need to approach these issues with more common sense. Waiting until a potential 2016 benchmark assessment will be too late. The current quota is punitive and based on bad information. Faith in

the management system is being lost, and now is the time to break the rules and experiment with different solutions.

Southern states need different recreational regulations than northern states. The recreational season in Virginia has been closed when they most need it open. The highest landings for Virginia are reported in July according to MRIP, however, one advisor noted that they catch far more in the winter. Wave 1 has been closed due to lack of catch accounting, but the wave 1 fishery is primarily larger party/charter boats who file VTRs. VTR data should be used in general (not just in wave 1), as this is good data going unused in favor of lower quality estimates. Managers should also consider also requiring and using state VTR data. Advisors also noted that many people are being shut out of most or all of the sea bass season in some areas (e.g., shore based fishermen). The sea bass fishery can withstand an extended season and increased bag limit, and a limited winter fishery should be open with VTR requirements. One advisor suggested looking at reducing size limits, or going to total (cumulative) length.

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The average size of black sea bass is increasing, but as the result of harvest limits that are in pounds, fishermen can catch fewer total numbers of fish.

Advisors are frustrated with high discards of black sea bass. Boats need to go farther offshore to catch bigger fish, but this means fishing in deeper waters, where discard mortality is higher. Many participants don't know how to vent and properly release. FishSmart¹ should be disseminated to a greater degree among recreational fishermen. There are ongoing efforts to reduce mortality from barotrauma, and hopefully in the future, mortality estimates and resulting catch limits will give anglers credit for this reduced discard mortality.

In Nantucket Sound (part of which is nursery habitat for sea bass), there used to be big pot fishery that was significantly restricted. If managers are able to increase catch limits, they should let pot fishermen get back to fishing.

Research Recommendations

Research suggestions proposed by advisors included:

- Exploring the feasibility of a slot limit in the recreational fishery and research into finding an appropriate range of a potential slot limit.
- Quantifying shifts in distribution and abundance resulting from climate change.
- Effects of chemicals to increase growth rate and influence sex change, and aquaculture research on stock enhancement potential.

¹ <http://www.fishsmart.org/>