



Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report

April 2023

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on April 20, 2023 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), Carl Forsberg (For-Hire/Commercial), and Laurie Nolan (Commercial).

Others present: Joe Cimino (Council Member), Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Doug Potts (GARFO), Hannah Hart (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

Industry still experiencing market issues. When the Fulton Fish Market was relocated to Hunt's Point, some business was lost and never returned. Then the world was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, and that has had a huge negative impact on business at Hunt's Point. Sales are down and collecting money has become more difficult. Industry is still not working at full capacity, making fewer trips per year, staggering their landings, trying to maintain consistent product prices. The market cannot handle too much volume of tilefish or prices drop dramatically.

Due to price increases in all operating expenses, fuel, bait, food, ice, fishing gear, vessel insurance, etc., the industry continues to work together and stagger their landings.

Environmental Conditions

Industry reported that windy conditions have impacted fishing (e.g., timing, trip duration, etc.) in some instances. While stormy conditions have existed for many years, recent changes to these storm patterns make trip fishability difficult to predict in the winter months.

Management Issues

The AP recommends that MRIP not be used as a tool for management or stock assessment purposes. When discussing the MRIP data, it is pointed out that there is a huge lack of shoreside intercepts, causing the data to be unreliable, and therefore does not capture recreational golden tilefish effort or landings accurately. There is also fear that MRIP data could somehow be used down the line for allocation purposes.

One AP member raised concerns about tilefish landings in the LPS data and the methodology used to develop the estimates. It was also questioned how applicable and accurate the LPS is to characterize tilefish landings since this survey was not designed to provide estimates of tilefish or non-HMS catch rates.

General Fishing Trends

Effort has been consistent as far as days at sea, and more fish are being landed with the same effort. Fishermen indicated a good mix of fish sizes in 2022. A larger amount of KK (e.g., extra small; < 2 pounds) were present in 2022 compared to previous years.

Other Issues

An AP member expressed the need for NOAA to add a link or reference to the tilefish permitting and reporting requirements on their Highly Migratory Species (HMS) permit renewal website. The AP member noted that almost every private vessel fishing deep enough to catch tilefish likely has an HMS permit. The AP member noted making this same comment in the past and understands staff has been working to get this information on the HMS webpage. The AP member encouraged staff to continue to work through this effort and with HMS to improve the overall awareness of and compliance with the tilefish permitting and reporting requirements.

Advisors also indicated that more enforcement at the state level is required to enforce tilefish/recreational permit requirements.

Another AP member indicated that while there are five headboats that fish for tilefish (both blue-line 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.

For-hire effort was reduced in 2020/2021/2022. Due to the new post COVID-19 economic reality, the industry experienced worse trip bookings in 2022 than in 2021. In addition, the industry is expecting worse trip bookings in 2023 when compared to each 2022 and 2021. Trip bookings are slightly better than during the COVID-19 pandemic but not to the level that we would like to see. Furthermore, in 2022, tuna fishing was better than average, which resulted in less boats targeting golden tilefish. Generally, when tuna fishing is not good, anglers offset those trips by targeting tilefish.

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.

One AP member would like the Council to consider a differential trip limit¹ (for-hire vs private) and longer recreational trips. In addition, it was 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. It is a good marketing tool for these long trips that can last more than 2 days. The AP member commented that it is unfair for customers to pay this much money for a trip (\$800-1,000) and not have the opportunity to harvest a good number of fish to make it worth their while. These management changes could be considered when a quota liberalization is on the table (quota going up). However, another AP member indicated that this could double for-hire landings (e.g., 36 hour trips) or increase access/effort to this sector of the fishery while the commercial sector is under the same quota.

Research Priorities

Panel members indicated concern about the lack of biological sampling of landings on the dock. They emphasized the need of shoreside sampling and the importance of this data for stock assessment purposes. Advisors indicated that keeping sampling at the current level or increasing it is very important. Could observer efforts be incorporated into a biological sampling program? Start a new database for biological sampling?

Public Input

No additional comments

¹ The recreational possession limit of golden tilefish is eight fish per angler, per trip.