



Bluefish Fishery Performance Report

June 2020

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Bluefish Advisory Panels (AP) met via webinar on June 23, 2020 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 bluefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

MAFMC Advisory Panel members present: Vince Cannuli (MD), Victor Hartley III (NJ), and Judith Weis (NY).

ASMFC Advisory Panel members present: Robert Lorenz (NC), Paul Caruso (MA), and Rusty Hudson (FL)

Others present: Chris Batsavage (MAFMC), Dustin Colson Leaning (ASMFC Staff), Greg DiDomenico (Lunds), Steve Cannizzo (NY), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), Paul Rago (MAFMC SSC), Sonny Gwin (MAFMC), Mary Sabo (MAFMC Staff), and Matthew Seeley (MAFMC 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?

Factors Influencing Catch

Recreational

There was consensus on the increase in bluefish abundance coastwide with an emphasis on NY and NJ from 2018 to 2019. Southern states (FL) experienced this abundance, however, it was short lived due to many weather-related issues (hurricanes and nor'easters). Advisors also continue to indicate that larger bluefish are often identified to be further offshore and not available to anglers that typically target them (private anglers may not want to travel to where the bluefish are). Small fish (1-3 lbs) were available early in the year while larger fish (5-10 lbs)

were not present for long periods of time.

Paul Caruso (MA) – Bluefish have been scarce in MA. The fishery only marginally improved from 2018 to 2019, and 2018 was one of the worst years we have experienced for the bluefish fishery. There was a lot more smaller fish (2-3-year-old fish) later in the year. The larger fish were hardly ever seen in the spring of 2019 and we think abundance was the primary driver of the recent catch. Abundance may be related to the environment because we are not seeing any sand eels. A few rod and reel fishermen and gillnetters catch bluefish as bycatch. The change in recreational regulations does not matter much to the recreational fishermen.

Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – There are a whole lot of fish offshore. The for-hire fleet does not go far enough offshore to target where the biomass is. There is a large fleet of for-hire fishermen who target bluefish in the NJ area as their primary species. Most for-hire boats did well in 2019 when targeting bluefish. In terms of bait, Raritan Bay has so much menhaden you can “walk on top of them”. There are a lot of whales and consistent bait in the area. This is the reason for the higher bluefish abundance this year.

Steven Cannizzo (NY-Public) – Party/charter industry in NY. We came off a warm winter with no runoff or ice, however, in April the weather changed and then everything got shut down because of COVID-19. The NY/NJ Bight and Hudson River is an extremely important area for forage fish. The absence of icing and freezing of nearshore habitats helped with bait abundance. Prior to the shutdown, we had an amazing run of weakfish, which was the best in my memory. There were also lots of striped bass coming through the sound. The for-hire fleet have seen so many sand eels in NY and are now seeing a whiting fishery for the first time in a long while. There was also a bluefin tuna run on the beach in 30-40 feet of water due to the abundance of sand eels. NY has seen one of the finest bluefish runs in recent years. Small, medium, and large bluefish are abundant. The shore-based fishermen have seen a huge amount of availability resulting in an abundance of people fishing from shore

Bob Lorenz (NC) – Bluefish have historically been a fish that experiences a cyclical nature. Even when we did not manage them there was a big spike in the 80s. Bluefish are not a primary target for recreational fishermen. In NC, most bluefish targeted are around 1-3 pounds.

Vince Cannuli (MD) – This spring there was a good run of bluefish, both nearshore/inshore and they have been chasing the menhaden inshore. The headboats have not been targeting bluefish in MD, however, the charter vessels are continuing to target bluefish. Two years ago, there were schools of menhaden like what we are seeing now. Last year there were few nearshore schools of menhaden like prior years. There was not a lot of striped mullet last year, but there was a good amount of brown shrimp. There are acres of adult sized menhaden, which is in part why MD gets a good bluefish run. They have been getting good size bluefish upwards of 30 inches. The bay did not freeze at all, which helps the forage species.

Commercial

Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – Larger bluefish are offshore and available to the commercial fishermen.

Steven Cannizzo (NY-Public) – The commercial fishermen are upset that they have maxed out their quota due to the low amounts. When you see whiting in the mudhole, it bodes well for the rest of the fisheries.

Rusty Hudson (FL) – 2018 was one of the best years they have had in FL (gillnet fishery). However, 2019 was not a good year due to Hurricane Dorian and the continued nor'easters all fall continuing into January, which really hurt FL commercial fishermen. Occasionally, mackerel fishermen target bluefish offshore. The commercial and recreational sampling has paused for 2020 due to COVID-19, which is an issue. Additionally, the estimate of commercial landings for FL was wrong in ACCSP for 2018.

Market/Economic Conditions

Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – The economy is going to be tough on fishermen. The COVID-19 factor is huge and hurts a lot of for-hire fishermen. Bluefish are not going to be hit as hard because you do not have as many passengers on the boats (i.e. not targeted as often as species like striped bass).

Rusty Hudson (FL) – The value of bluefish the past couple years has been at a great price per pound. The demand has remained high. The price per pound has gotten up to \$1.00, which is much higher than recent prices of around \$0.30.

Vince Cannuli (MD) – Last year, MD had a good run of bluefish and anglers were confused as to why there was a change in bag limit. This seems to be an example of over management.

Management Issues

Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – The for-hire fleet is not happy about the 5 fish bag limit.

Steven Cannizzo (NY-Public) – For-hire fishermen need a higher bag limit and the Council should explore for-hire sector separation. We are very positive of the future years due to the abundance of bait, and specifically, sand eels. This will be very good for the bluefish fishery.

Research Priorities

Paul Caruso (MA) – Bait abundance is certainly a factor in the northern states and should be researched further. He would be interested to know how harvest has occurred. Abundance in the north is related to the amount of harvest in the south. It would be great to understand how catch in the southern states affects harvest in the northern states.

Bob Lorenz (NC) – Researchers should investigate the cyclical nature of bluefish that has been observed since before the early 1980s.

Other Issues

There seemed to be consensus amongst advisors that they prefer regulations and management measures to remain more stable. Increases in quota are appreciated, however, if they are going to be followed by declines, stakeholders prefer management measures that remain stable.

Bluefish Allocation and Rebuilding Amendment

Issue 1: FMP Goals and Objectives

- Paul Caruso (MA) – If you read about the history of this species and fish for them, you hear about the inshore and offshore cyclical aspect of this fishery. It would be helpful to acknowledge this aspect of the fishery. It is tough to manage this fishery because biomass is highly variable.

Issue 2: Sector Allocation Alternatives

- Greg DiDomenico (NJ-Public) – It is important to understand that the catch-based approach is rewarding the decision made by individual anglers to release their fish. A catch-based approach will reduce the ability for sector transfers to occur.
- Paul Caruso (MA) – From a stock assessment perspective, the catch-based approach does make sense. If you put a confidence interval across these allocations, they are all about the same.
- Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – Status quo allocations.
- Rusty Hudson (FL) – The state of FL has a problem with MRIP estimates and thus, supports status quo allocations. The full-time series is closest to the status quo.

Issue 3: Commercial Allocations to the States

- Rusty Hudson (FL) – Status quo allocations.
- Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – NJ commercial representatives would prefer status quo allocations.
- Steve Cannizzo (NY-Public) – Status quo allocations for NY.
- Greg DiDomenico (NJ-Public) – Status quo allocations for NJ.
- Vince Cannuli (MD) – Status quo allocations for MD.

Issue 4: Regional based allocations

- Rusty Hudson (FL) – Listening in on the June joint meeting, I heard support from southern states, but pushback from other states. This alternative set should be further developed. If there is potential to grow the commercial industry, FL would support regional quotas. There may be potential for growth if the mackerel fishery fleet decides to target bluefish.
- Vince Cannuli (MD) – We do not quite understand why bluefish come and go. To restrain the commercial fishery by implementing seasons reduces flexibility and becomes over management. I would not be in favor of the regionalization approach should seasons be implemented.
- Bob Lorenz (NC) – Regionalizing quota would be interesting to investigate further.

Issue 5: Commercial State-to-state transfers refereed approach

- Rusty Hudson (FL) – I support the continued development of the refereed approach. At the very least state to state transfers should remain in the plan.
- Paul Caruso (MA) – State to state transfers are great and the refereed approach may provide stability. Just because you are transferring quota does not mean you are transferring fish, meaning you can lead to localized depletion of fish.

Issue 6: Sector Transfers

- Rusty Hudson (FL) –the MRIP estimates cause many problems for transfers due to the availability of data in a given year caused by the consistent delay. That is going to affect recreational projections. Commercial data is a census and not an estimate.

Issue 7: Rebuilding Plan

- Rusty Hudson (FL) – I am skeptical of the P* approach because of the very low levels of catch. The cyclical nature of the stock will likely lead to variable catch. I would like to see the constant

harvest 10-year approach used. The next management track assessment may show that the stock is doing much better than previously thought.

- Bob Lorenz (NC) – I support a longer rebuilding plan. The cyclical nature of the fish could rebound the stock quite quickly. Due to that, we should not overburden the fisheries with restrictive measures.
- Greg DiDomenico (NJ-Public) – I support the longer rebuilding plan.
- Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – I support a longer rebuilding plan for stability’s sake.

Issue 8: Sector Specific management uncertainty

- No comments

Issue 9: For-Hire Sector Separation

- Captain Victor Hartley (NJ) – Recreational sector separation should continue to be developed and ultimately implemented. We need to improve management and better use the data we have available for recreational fisheries. Moving to for-hire sector separation is important because we already have VTR data. If we went that route (rec sector separation) we would need a committee of for-hire members to help inform management decisions. There would need to be meetings to discuss setting seasons, bag limit, min size, etc. If people do not submit VTRs, they should not be part of the for-hire allocation.
- Steve Cannizzo (NY-Public) – The for-hire industry needs to be protected against changes in bag limit. There has to be a sector separation or allowance. The allocations should be set using MRIP data since not all vessels submit VTRs. We want as much flexibility as possible for for-hire and recreational fishermen. We would prefer the alternative of for-hire sector “allowances”, which allows a higher bag limit without needing a separate allocation.
- Bob Lorenz (NC) – Fisheries management must be considered fair. The differing bag limits between the two sectors is not fair anymore. The recreational NGOs are going to be against sector separation. There needs to be a fair allocation between for-hire/commercial/private anglers. Additionally, there is an increasing number of private boat anglers that are concerned about for-hire and commercial fisher jobs and economic vitality. These individual recreational anglers could likely support some sector separation in recreational fisheries as a matter of fairness and support to the for-hire fishers who have better and more accurate recording of catches than private anglers.

Issue 10: *de minimis*

- No comments

Late Comments (not on the webinar)

From: Capt. TJ Karbowski [<mailto:tedkarbowski@yahoo.com>]

Sent: Thursday, June 25, 2020 3:28 AM

To: Dustin C. Leaning <DLeaning@asmfc.org>

Subject: Re: [External] Re: Following up after the Bluefish Advisory Panel Meeting

Comments:

Bluefish abundance in Long Island Sound is directly related to the amount of baitfish abundance. When small baitfish such as silversides, juvenile butterfish, juvenile squid or peanut bunker are abundant, generally there are small to medium size bluefish. When adult menhaden are abundant, generally there are large (alligator) bluefish.

The absence of large bluefish the last 5 or so years in our area correlates with the absence of menhaden we have had. Our town, Clinton, CT is known as the “Bluefish Capitol of the World”. Clinton even annually held the annual “Bluefish Festival” for as long as I can remember (possibly even before I was born). The bluefish numbers have been so poor the last several years, that somewhere around 2015 the town actually discontinued the event. At the event would be tables set up with various prepared bluefish dishes; fried, smoked etc. competitions. People couldn’t find bluefish to cook!

This spring (2020), although I cannot say with certainty (but likely due to the COVID-19 effect on the commercial market), that the commercial pair trawlers squid boats that usually operate off of Rhode Island in the spring might not have worked the area as hard, or maybe even at all this year. This is the best run of spring squid in Long Island Sound in at least 8 -10 years. The Sound is currently teeming with life. Squid, Menhaden, Butterfish, Stripers, Bluefish, Fluke, Porgies, Black Sea Bass. It is back to the way it used to be.

Also please keep in mind that Omega Protein has had reg changes this year. I think all of this contributed to the success of this season. – Starting in 2014 (The year Omega Protein started taking most of their quota from the Chesapeake after getting banned from fishing in North Carolina) Long Island Sound was virtually BARREN of life. The Sound was virtually DEAD. Also around this time was when the Rhode Island squid boats started pair trawling for squid just over the border of the entrance to Long Island Sound. – We have not had a decent run of fluke until this year because of this. We ALWAYS had a reliable spring fluke run before that.

Regs: Bluefish regs should be- approx 15 per person. –This is needed for head boat “marketing” and a realistic retention limit for “snappers”. There is not enough rec. anglers harvesting bluefish to even put a small dent in the population. The time and effort involved in the bluefish regulation process should be spent on studying and regulating their forage species which ACTUALLY DOES affect the health of the stock. Set the regs at 15 per. person for at least 5 years and revisit it then.

Research Priorities: Regulate their forage better. That’s the problem.

Allocation: Leave it status quo. No need to pin the recs and commercials against each other.

Additional Comments:

Regulating this species down to 3 per person is ridiculous and highlights how flawed the system is; especially MRIP. In 2019 they had Connecticut anglers harvesting THOUSANDS of bluefish just from “shore” mode alone. The laughable part was the harvest numbers were logged at a time of year when bluefish aren’t even in the Sound. The “New” MRIP numbers are a total SHAM.

Thank you,
Capt. TJ Karbowski
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