



Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report

February 2021

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 17, 2021 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 blueline tilefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Advisory Panel members present: Fred Akers (Private), Gregory Hueth (Private/For-hire), Robert Bogan (For-hire), Doug Zemeckis (Rutgers), Skip Feller (For-hire), and Michael Johnson (Commercial).

Others present: Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Dan Farnham (Council Member), Scott Lenox (Council Member), Sonny Gwin (Council Member), Dewey Hemilright (Council Member), Joe Cimino (Council Member), Michelle Duval (Council Member), James Fletcher (UNFA), Laurie Nolan (Commercial), Doug Potts (GARFO), Paul Rago (SSC), Matthew Seeley (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?

Factors Influencing Catch

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in less for-hire trips and decreased effort overall. However, one advisor indicated that private recreational effort increased, as they observed more recreational fishing boats everywhere in state and federal waters and confirmed that recreational boat sales increased in 2020. For the commercial sector, the quota was exceeded in 2020 and the advisors indicated that individuals from other fisheries may have transitioned to targeting bluelines and also noted that the small quota is difficult to monitor/manage when trips land up to 500 pounds.

AP members confirmed that no major changes have been observed for blueline tilefish in terms of catch rates/composition. Once blueline tilefish limits are met, recreational trips search for other targets (often golden tilefish). However, the commercial advisors from New York indicated they

rarely direct on blueline tilefish and only land incidentally. These incidental landings come from the east end of long island since there is little to no effort in the Baltimore and Wilmington Canyon area.

AP members indicated that the majority of time they target blueline tilefish they land the recreational trip limits. They also indicated that the 3 fish limit is quite limiting. Additionally, the seasonal closure on October 31 could potentially depress catch and effort, which may be beneficial to the stock. Often AP members try to target golden tilefish and find that blueline tilefish abundance is limiting.

Recreational effort decreased this year as it does not make economic sense to target blueline tilefish when tuna are not present. Typically, moderate tuna availability in deeper water translates into the highest effort (enough tuna to create effort, but not so much as to occupy interest for a whole trip). In 2020, advisors indicated there was less pressure on blueline tilefish because the tuna were plentiful and found in shallower waters. However, a Council member on the call indicated private landings in Maryland alone were over 84 fish (the coastwide estimate of private landings from August to October) because they are less dependent on tuna abundance, and more so on swordfish.

Regulations are keeping harvest where they should be since we currently do not have an accepted stock assessment in the Mid-Atlantic. Advisors agreed that they want to see how the current specifications and management measures play out since this is still a newly managed fishery in the Mid-Atlantic. Improved reporting from the rec sector will help.

Market/Economic Conditions

Advisors indicated that in New York (Hunts Point) they were receiving approximately \$2.88 per pound, and occasionally as high as \$4.00 per pound for larger fish. Advisors remain confident that there is continued demand for blueline tilefish, but this demand is driven by low and sporadic supply. Overall, blueline tilefish is becoming a more appreciated species.

Management Issues

To avoid regulatory discarding, anglers often shift effort away from blueline tilefish once the limit is reached. Small amounts of discards do occur as incidental interactions when targeting golden tilefish. But multiple advisors indicated they often know where blueline tilefish are and they know how to avoid them. Thus, the trip limit did not really affect the incidental fishery.

AP members advocate to maintain the 3 (private), 5 (U.S. Coast Guard *uninspected* vessel), 7 (U.S. Coast Guard *inspected* vessel) bag limits in place since there is currently limited reporting for private anglers and we are still learning how the fishery responds to management in the Mid-Atlantic. Additionally, advisors indicated they would like to see captain and crew included in the bag limits and noted that if bag limits drop lower than 7 fish the head boat community will have greater difficulty filling their trips. Furthermore, daytime swordfishing has taken pressure off blueline tilefish and advisors are looking for liberalization in the private sector.

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a higher trip limit for longer recreational trips, structured after Gulf of Mexico regulations (makes filling trips easier). Other AP members

were concerned about the impact of higher recreational limits on the overall fishery especially given low ABC and recreational catch uncertainty. Ultimately, advisors want to avoid creating a directed fishery especially with the uncertainty of the overall stock.

It was noted at the meeting that there is a general decrease in port sampling, which can greatly impact future assessments, particularly tilefish as it relies critically on cyclical recruitment. Port sampling is a key factor that will help identify the life history characteristics of blueline tilefish that will improve the overall stock assessment process.

Research Priorities

Discussion focused on the need to improve the understanding of biological and life history traits. Specifically, age validation, maturity, post-release mortality, and movement. One advisor stated that a defined sampling program has the potential to hit on multiple priorities. For example, developing a tagging program (using applied and natural tags) offers insight into movement, age, maturity, and habitat preference. There are more bluelines now than in previous years and they are being identified in places they have never been before (even in waters as shallow as 60-80 feet off Block Island).

The AP remained unanimous in their recommendation and continued support for private recreational permitting and reporting. The information gathered in 2020 was only from August through October, so the AP is looking forward to the continuation of this initiative to better understand recreational catch/landings and effort.

The AP also reviewed the Council's comprehensive research plan for blueline tilefish and noted that all research focusing on life history characteristics and monitoring (i.e., improvements to biological sampling, aging methods, habitat studies, assessment of discards, mean weight estimates, and collection of catch per unit effort data) are necessary to improve our understanding of the stock and to work towards a successful assessment.