

December 2015 Council Meeting Report

December 7 – 10, 2015

Annapolis, MD

The following summary highlights actions taken and issues considered at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's December 2015 meeting in Annapolis, MD. Presentations, briefing materials, and audio recordings are available on the Council's website at www.mafmc.org/briefing/december-2015.

2016 – 2018 Spiny Dogfish Specifications

The Council adopted spiny dogfish specifications for 2016-2018. After reviewing advice from its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and considering input from the public, the Council adopted the following spiny dogfish specifications for the 2016-2018 fishing years:

Year	Acceptable Biological Catch (pounds)	Commercial Quota (pounds)
2016	52,066,572	40,360,761
2017	50,805,528	39,099,717
2018	49,901,633	38,195,822

The specifications summarized above include revisions to the 2016 specifications previously recommended by the Council. At the October 2015 meeting, the Council [recommended substantial reductions](#) in spiny dogfish catch limits for 2016, including a 50% cut in the commercial quota, in response to the findings of the 2015 spiny dogfish stock assessment update. However, the Council expressed concern that the spiny dogfish assessment update did not include any data from 2014 and requested that the SSC work with the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) to evaluate alternative ABC-setting methods that could address this data gap. Using an alternative approach, the SSC recommended and the Council approved a new set of ABCs that resulted in commercial quotas of approximately 40 million pounds for 2016, 39 million pounds for 2017, and 38 million pounds for 2018.

The 2016 quota represents a 20% reduction relative to 2015; however, landings have been below 50% of the commercial quotas for the last two full fishing years, and the reduced quota is unlikely to be constraining. The New England Fishery Management Council also approved similar specifications at its December meeting for this jointly-managed species. If approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service, the new measures will go into effect May 1, 2016.

Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass

2016 Recreational Management Measures

The Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (the Board) met jointly to set recreational management measures for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass in 2016. Details on the commercial quota and recreational harvest limit (RHL) for each species are available in the [final rule](#) published on December 24, 2015.

Summer Flounder: The Council and Board recommended the use of conservation equivalency to achieve the summer flounder RHL of 5.42 million pounds in 2016. Conservation equivalency allows individual states or multi-state regions to develop customized recreational measures that, in combination, will achieve the coastwide harvest limit. The combination of these measures would be equivalent to the non-preferred coastwide alternative approved by the Council and Board, which includes a four fish possession limit, an 18-inch total length (TL) minimum size, and an open season of May 1 – September 30. In addition, a precautionary

default measure of a two fish possession limit, a 20-inch TL minimum size, and an open season of May 1 – September 30 was approved for states or regions that do not develop management measures consistent with the conservation equivalency guidelines. The Commission’s Draft Addendum XXVII, which was approved for public comment, includes several options for summer flounder recreational management under conservation equivalency in 2016.

Scup: To achieve the RHL of 6.09 million pounds in 2016, the Council and Board voted to maintain *status quo* federal recreational scup measures in 2016, which include a 9-inch total length minimum size, a 50 fish possession limit, and an open season of January 1 – December 31. The Board voted to continue their regional approach to recreational scup management in state waters. The Board will review and approve proposals for individual state measures at their February 2016 meeting.

Black Sea Bass: The Council and Board recommended recreational management measures to achieve the 2.82 million pound RHL for black sea bass in 2016. Based on information available at the time of the meeting, this will require an approximately 16% reduction in landings, although this amount is subject to change based on evaluation of additional landings data for 2015. The Board voted to approve Addendum XXVII for public comment, which includes options for ad hoc regional management of black sea bass in state waters. If the combination of measures in state waters addresses the required reduction, then federal measures would remain status quo, including a 12.5-inch TL minimum size, a 15 fish possession limit, and an open season May 15 – September 21 and October 22 – December 31. The Council and Board also adopted a set of backup coastwide management measures representing the most restrictive size, possession, and seasonal limit across all states that would be implemented only if the ad hoc regional measures do not address the necessary reduction. These measures include a 14-inch TL minimum size, a 3 fish possession limit, and a season from July 15 – September 15 on a coastwide basis. In addition, the Council and Board voted to initiate an amendment to address accountability and issues in the commercial and recreational black sea bass.

Summary of Proposed 2016 Recreational Management Measures

	Recreational Harvest Limit	Type of Measures	Minimum Fish Size (TL)	Possession Limit	2016 Season
Summer Flounder	5.42 million pounds	State/ Federal	Conservation equivalency – <i>Regional measures will be developed through the Commission’s process and voted on in February.</i>		
Scup	6.09 million pounds	State	Regional Management Approach – <i>State-specific measures will be developed through the Commission’s process and voted on in February.</i>		
		Federal	9 inch	50 fish	Jan 1 – Dec 31
Black Sea Bass	2.82 million pounds	State	Regional management approach - <i>State-specific measures will be developed through the Commission’s process and voted on in February.</i>		
		Federal*	12.5 inch	15 fish	May 15 – Sept. 21 Oct 22 – Dec 31

* Subject to the northern states addressing the required reduction.

Commercial Management Measure Review

Each year the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Monitoring Committee reviews several commercial measures that can be modified through the annual specifications process, such as minimum fish sizes, gear regulations, commercial possession limits, and other measures. This year, Council leadership tasked the Monitoring Committee with reviewing these measures in more detail and recommending changes where appropriate.

After reviewing the Monitoring Committee’s recommendations and Advisory Panel input, the Council voted to increase the scup incidental possession limit for federally-permitted trawl vessels for November – April from

500 to 1000 pounds (trawl vessels that possess more than the incidental limit must abide by the minimum mesh requirements for the directed fishery). The Council also discussed increasing the scup incidental possession limit for May – October but decided against doing so to keep the incidental limits lower than the directed fishery possession limits in state waters during that time of year. The NMFS Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office indicated that they will modify language in the federal regulations regarding evaluation of the Summer Flounder Flynet Exemption Program. The proposed modification will not change current practices regarding evaluation of the exemption, but it will ensure that the wording of the regulations matches the initial intent of the program.

The Council tasked the Monitoring Committee with several additional tasks for 2016, including assessing the feasibility of a common minimum mesh size for all three species, summarizing past studies on mesh sizes and pot/trap configurations, further examining data issues related to trip-level landings for scup, and analyzing the biological and economic impacts of modifying the quota period dates for the scup commercial fishery. The Council indicated that they would consider initiating a framework to modify the scup quota period dates after considering the available data and Monitoring Committee recommendations.

Summer Flounder Amendment Update and Goals and Objectives Workshop

The Council and Board are developing a comprehensive amendment to revisit important elements of the summer flounder fishery management plan (FMP). As part of this process, the Council and Board are revisiting the original FMP objectives and developing a revised set of goals and objectives for summer flounder management. To support this process, the Council contracted with the Fisheries Leadership and Sustainability Forum to solicit feedback from members of the Council's Demersal Committee, the Board, and members of both bodies' advisory panels on the structure, content, and use of the FMP goals and objectives. During the meeting, the Fisheries Forum presented a summary of this feedback and facilitated further discussion of revised goals and objectives for the summer flounder fishery. Based on this discussion, the Summer Flounder Amendment Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) will refine the draft revisions to the goals and objectives for future review by the Council and Board.

The Council and Board also received an update from Council staff on amendment progress and additional FMAT recommendations. Although the FMAT recommended splitting recreational issues into a separate action due to ongoing changes to the recreational catch estimate methodology, the Council and Board did not take action to separate these issues. The Council and Board did acknowledge that some recreational issues, as well as recreational/commercial allocation issues, will likely need to be pursued later in the amendment process in order to incorporate revised time series of recreational catch. Next steps for the amendment include formation of issue-specific working groups to begin analyzing recreational and commercial issues.

Scup Gear Restricted Areas (GRA) Framework

The Council discussed a framework to modify the scup Gear Restricted Areas (GRAs). The GRAs were first implemented in 2000 and are intended to reduce scup discards in small mesh fisheries during certain times of the year. The GRAs have been modified several times in response to requests from commercial fishermen. In recent years, several advisors have recommended further modification of the GRAs. Additionally, an analysis by the NEFSC suggests that relatively high scup discards have occurred in areas and times outside of the GRAs in recent years. After reviewing discard information, advisor comments, and a proposed range of alternatives, the Council approved a set of alternatives that includes modifications to the boundaries of the northern and southern GRAs, as well as elimination of either or both GRAs. The Council decided not to include alternatives to modify the timing of the GRAs as there were no data or advisor comments to suggest that a change in timing is warranted. The Council will decide which, if any, modifications to implement at a second framework meeting, planned for the February 2016 Council meeting.

Golden Tilefish Framework 2

The first of two meetings was held to consider Framework 2 (FW2) to the Golden Tilefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP). FW2 was initiated to address a range of issues related to the administration and management of the golden tilefish fishery. The Council reviewed a preliminary range of alternatives and selected preferred alternatives for several issues. Staff will continue development of the framework for further consideration at the April 2016 Council meeting.

Blueline Tilefish

The Council reviewed a draft range of alternatives for the Blueline Tilefish Amendment to the Golden Tilefish FMP. The amendment considers adding blueline tilefish as a managed species in the Golden Tilefish FMP, effectively turning that plan into the Golden and Blueline Tilefish FMP. The Council initiated this action in early 2015 in response to recent evidence that commercial and recreational landings of blueline tilefish were increasing rapidly in the Mid-Atlantic. Emergency action had added conservation measures temporarily, but permanent management is still needed. The alternatives address a wide range of management issues, including:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Management Unit and Objectives | 7. Specifications Process and Risk Policy |
| 2. Status Determination Criteria | 8. Allocations and Specifications |
| 3. Commercial Permitting and Reporting | 9. Commercial Trip Limits |
| 4. For-Hire Recreational Permitting and Reporting | 10. Recreational Bag/Possession Limits |
| 5. Monitoring Committee | 11. Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation |
| 6. Framework Adjustments | 12. Accountability Measures |

Although the amendment is still under development, the Council moved to identify the North Carolina/Virginia border as the preferred management unit for this action. The Council also voted to add a management objective that would reflect blueline tilefish's susceptibility to overfishing and highlight the need for an analytical stock assessment. Finally, the Council added a 750 pound trip limit as an option under the commercial trip limits alternatives.

Staff also provided an update on next steps, including plans to hold a workshop to develop recreational catch estimates for blueline tilefish in the Mid-Atlantic. The workshop will likely be held in January and will include members knowledgeable about the blueline tilefish fishery. Public hearings would be scheduled after the workshop so that the workshop results can be incorporated into the public information document.

Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment

The Council first received a presentation on the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) approach to protecting unfished and unmanaged forage fish species through their Ecosystem-Based Management Amendment 1. Rich Lincoln, PFMC Council member, provided an overview of the purpose and need for the amendment, the list of forage species included, development of trip and annual catch limits for unmanaged forage species, and exempted fishing permits for those species, among other topics.

Following a discussion of the PFMC approach, the Council received a presentation on a draft list of forage species developed by the unmanaged forage Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) for potential inclusion in the Council's Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment. The draft list was based on stomach content data from the NEFSC's biannual bottom trawl surveys, comments received through scoping, and a literature review. The Council requested that the FMAT make several refinements to the list, including (1) adding information on unmanaged forage species that are prey for highly migratory species and marine mammals, (2) focusing the list on low trophic-level species, and (3) grouping species into families where appropriate. The Council also suggested that the FMAT involve additional scientists with expert knowledge of forage species in developing a revised draft list of species.

In addition to providing input on the draft list of forage species for inclusion in the amendment, the Council tasked the FMAT with (1) compiling information on abundance of forage species over time and recent catch information, and (2) drafting options for trip-level catch limits for unmanaged forage species and options for a process to allow new fisheries to develop. Finally, the Council discussed a draft purpose statement and a draft range of alternatives for the amendment. The Council considered modifying the proposed purpose statement, but decided to postpone further discussion on the topic until after upcoming Ecosystem and Ocean Planning Advisory Panel and Committee meetings.

Non-Fishing Activities that Impact Fish Habitat

The Council approved a series of policies that articulate the Council's positions on anthropogenic activities that affect fish habitat. Developed as part of the Council's Habitat Project, the policies are intended to help the Council comment more effectively and collaborate with partners and other agencies to address threats to fish habitat. The policies address five categories of non-anthropogenic activity: wind energy, offshore oil, marine transport, liquefied natural gas, and coastal development. A separate policy is under development to address the impacts of fishing activities on habitat. The final policies and associated background documents are available on the Council's website at www.mafmc.org/habitat.

Additionally, the Council discussed proposed changes to the manner in which the GARFO Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) staff and Council staff communicate on activities that may impact fish habitat. The Council agreed to send a letter endorsing the proposed changes to HCD.

Other Business

Comprehensive 5-year Research Priority Plan: The Council approved a Comprehensive Research Priority Plan for 2016 – 2020. The plan outlines general and species-specific research priorities for the next five years. The Council briefly discussed establishing a working group or steering committee to facilitate implementation of the research plan but agreed to postpone action until the issue could be explored more thoroughly at a later date.

2016 Implementation Plan: The Council reviewed and approved the 2016 Implementation Plan, which details the upcoming year's planned actions and activities.

NEFSC Strategic Plan: The Council received a presentation from Dr. Bill Karp on the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's new strategic plan. Information about the plan is available on the NEFSC website at: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/rcb/stratplan/>.

GARFO Recreational Implementation Plan: The Council received a presentation on a draft Recreational Fisheries Implementation Plan for the Greater Atlantic Region, which outlines regional strategies for implementing the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy.

MAFMC Statement of Organization, Practices, and Procedures: The Council approved revisions to its *Statement of Organization, Practices, and Procedures* (SOPP) document. The revisions were proposed to address and clarify issues related to employee benefits, retiree benefits, unused leave, and travel.

Collaborative Research Committee: The Council received a report from the Collaborative Research Committee regarding final research priorities for the 2016/2017 Collaborative Research Program.

Next Meeting

February 9 – 11, 2015: New Bern, NC
DoubleTree by Hilton New Bern-Riverfront
100 Middle Street New Bern, NC 28560
telephone: 252-638-3585