



## **Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report**

**February 2019**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 20, 2019 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:** Advisory Panel members present: Fred Akers (Private), David Arbeitman (Bait and tackle), Robert Bogan (For-hire), Ron Callis (Private), Dan Farnham (Commercial), Skip Feller (For-hire), Carl Forsberg (For-hire), Frank Green (Commercial), Jeffrey Gutman (Commercial/For-hire), Gregory Hueth (Private/(For-hire), Michael Johnson (Fisherman), and Douglas Zemeckis (Academic).

**Others present:** Steve Heins (Council Member); EC Newellman; Paul Nitschke (NEFSC); Mike Luisi (Council Chair); Joe Cimino (Council Member); Laurie Nolan (Council Member); Matthew Seeley 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**

AP members confirmed that no major changes have been observed for bluelines in terms of catch rates/composition. Once blueline limits are met recreational trips search for other targets (often golden tilefish). Yet, there is a sense from some AP members that the fishery restrictions are/will be benefiting recreational catch per unit effort.

When targeting other species, trip limits restrict commercial fishermen from targeting areas where bluelines are present. The increase in trip limit to 500 pounds from 300 pounds will be beneficial because the areas where advisors interact with blueline are usually results in healthy interactions with other species.

AP members indicated that the majority of the time they are targeting blueline tilefish they land the recreational trip limits. They also indicated that the 3 fish limit is definitely limiting. Additionally, the seasonal closure at October 31 could potentially depress catch and effort, which may be beneficial to the stock.

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 because they are not in jeopardy of losing anything.

Recreational effort decreased this year as it does not make economic sense to target blueline tilefish when tuna are not present. 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).

For-hire advisors indicated they would like to see captain and crew included in the bag limits.

### **Market/Economic Conditions**

Advisors indicated that in New York (Hunts Point) and New Jersey (Barnegat Light) they were receiving approximately \$2.25-\$2.50 per pound, and occasionally as high as \$4.00 per pound for larger fish. They remain confident that there is continued demand for blueline tilefish.

### **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, head boat captains indicated that if bag limits drop lower than 7 fish the head boat community will have greater difficulty filling their trips. They confirmed that the larger bag limit is necessary to encourage anglers to come out.

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. Advisors want to avoid creating a directed fishery especially with the uncertainty of the overall stock.

Regarding the recreational measures in Amendment 6 to the Tilefish FMP: Advisors recommended multi-day considerations for head boat trips. Following this recommendation, one advisor recommended standing pat with the current system as it is very important to keep the recreational and commercial sector within the ABC.

## **Research Priorities**

The AP was presented with blueline tilefish research priorities that the Council identified in their Comprehensive Five Year (2016-2020) Research Plan (Appendix A). 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. Additionally, no recommendations were provided on future fishery dependent or independent surveys.

One AP member indicated that it was beneficial the Pilot Tilefish Survey was completed, so it could be compared to the results from the ongoing tilefish survey work being conducted by Coonamessett Fam Foundation (Developing a method for assessing tilefish stocks using a baited underwater video system).

The AP was unanimous in their recommendation that permitting and reporting be developed for private recreational anglers. This information will offer insight into the impacts private anglers have on the recreational fishery for catch/landings and effort. Furthermore, the Council approved private permitting and reporting requirements for tilefish in 2017 through Amendment 6 to the Tilefish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) (added blueline tilefish to the FMP) and are now awaiting implementation.

## Appendix A

### Blueline Tilefish Research Priorities

Below are the research priorities for blueline tilefish that the Council identified in their Comprehensive Five Year (2016-2020) Research Plan. We are seeking feedback from the AP on these priorities (are they right, wrong, which are most important etc.) or other research priorities that you may have for the development of the next comprehensive research plan.

#### **General:**

- Implement novel supplemental surveys to derive fishery independent indices of abundance (black sea bass, golden and blueline tilefish, Atlantic mackerel). **Note:** this priority was under the General category under Surveys. It was not specific to blueline but certainly applies and mentioned.

#### **Blueline Specific:**

- Fishery Independent Surveys
  - Collect discard length and age data from the private sector.
  - Research efforts to incorporate/require logbook reporting from recreational anglers.
- Biology/Life History/Habitat
  - Conduct habitat studies of deep water sites in the mid-Atlantic (Norfolk Canyon, Baltimore Canyon, and Hudson Canyon). **Note:** Identified as a top priority
  - Age readings need to be validated. Marginal increment analysis needs to be undertaken in order to convert increment counts to calendar ages. More recreational fishery age samples need to be collected. **Note:** Identified as second priority
  - Overall, more reproductive samples need to be collected. Because small, young fish were lacking from the biological collections, specimens under 8 inches will be needed to address age and size at maturity. Whole gonads will need to be collected for a fecundity study. Specimens collected from throughout the species range and covering all months of the year are needed to better describe spawning season and spawning periodicity. **Note:** Identified as third priority
  - Conduct genetic study or some other form of stock identification study.
  - Increase untargeted biological sampling in NE and Mid-Atlantic observer programs and increase untargeted dockside sampling in NE and Mid-Atlantic.