



Bluefish Fishery Performance Report June 2018

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission) Bluefish AP on June 25, 2018 via webinar to develop a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for consideration during the bluefish specification cycle. Advisors reviewed the Fishery Information Document and the 2017 data update prepared by the NEFSC for Bluefish to develop the 2018 Bluefish FPR based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings patterns and other trends in these fisheries. **Please note:** Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Attendance

Council Advisory Panel members present: Arnold Leo (NY commercial/East Hampton Baymen's Association), Greg Hurley (Williamsburg, VA), Kevin Wark (Barnegat Light, NJ), Skip Feller (Virginia Beach, VA), Steven Witthuhn (Greenlawn, NJ), Tom Roller (NC recreational for-hire), Phil Langley (Dameron, MD).

Council SSC members present: John Boreman (Chair) and Cynthia Jones

Others present: Matthew Seeley (Council Staff), Caitlin Starks (ASMFC Staff) and Mike Celestino (NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife).

Because of the localized nature of AP members' observations, remarks under each heading are attributed to the states represented on the AP.

Recreational Fishery Issues

NJ – This year was not as good as last year. Most bluefish seemed to be staying in the bay and the inlet. Thus, party boats have fished for bluefish in the estuaries and bays, due to the unusually large amount of large fish in those areas, as opposed to their normal offshore spots where they typically fish. This resulted in party boats not doing as well further offshore as in the previous years. Shark boats have reported large numbers of bluefish offshore (>30 miles) but party boats do not go that far to fish for blues. Additionally, large numbers of forage fish have also been reported near beach areas (menhaden and sand eels).

NC – Compared to previous years, we observed a lot less small fish. There was a run of big fish in the spring (big head, but small weight from early May to mid-June). Aside from observing less small fish, spatially, bluefish were present in similar locations to last year – way up the estuaries, piers, and shore. Targeting bluefish in these areas has become very popular. Overall, bluefish appear to have become more important as a target species to the recreational and for-hire fisheries in recent years, perhaps due to the lack of availability of state managed species. In the last few years, it seems that bluefish schools are smaller and a *little less* available.

NC – An important note for the for-hire; we saw a small run of larger fish (8-15 lbs) in the spring after seeing virtually none in the previous year. There was an incredible run of large fish from Wilmington to Cape Hatteras. Fish were well up the rivers into the sound. Some environmental condition(s) must be adding to this run of fish. Schools of smaller fish are *occasionally* present near shore, but there is a lot of pressure due to the concentrated commercial effort on them. At times, people are using these schools of fish for crab bait even though bluefish have become more accepted as a culinary target.

NY/NC/VA – For-hire is slightly down in recent years due to restrictive bag limits for species like striped bass, which leads to lower directed trips. Since a bluefish trip is any trip where a bluefish is harvested, lower party/charter trips will result in less bluefish for-hire trips. Yet, not all states are experiencing a decrease in the for hire.

VA/NC – Lots of 4-5-pound bluefish on the wrecks last year, but not this year (VA). Often, the for-hire fleet target Spanish mackerel, which will cross over with bluefish. If the Spanish mackerel fishing is really good (like it was last year, but not this year) then fishermen will not target bluefish as often.

NC – Need to be cautious even though abundance seems to be larger in recent years. AP members do not want to see bluefish targeted heavily now that bass or other species are down.

NY – East End of Long Island charter fishermen report very abundant bluefish runs, with all sizes of fish, from south shore ocean through Block Island Sound (east end of LI). Fishermen may be bringing in more bluefish at present (early summer) due to the very restricted limits on black sea bass, fluke, and striped bass. Bluefish fishing has been good for the past several years, but fishermen prefer other species when they are available and permitted. There seem to be about the same number of charter boats working this year as in the past couple of year.

NY – According to the Montauk charter fleet, the bluefish fishery is healthy and this year they had a run of very large fish in May, which were feeding on bunker. This was followed by a run of unusually small (1-1.5 lb fish feeding on sand eels). Then, the large bluefish came back in representing a very typical healthy fishery

NC – In recent years, there have been some good year classes for nearshore species (eg. Sea trout and red drum) in the fall. But, a hard winter on inshore species may direct more effort towards bluefish, but it will take the full year to see the impact. Typically, these species being available to fishermen results in less people targeting bluefish on party/charter vessels.

MD – A northern migration of striped bass drew fishermen further north and away from traditional bluefish targeted habitat. This resulted in a limited number of boats targeting bluefish. But, in the lower portion of the Chesapeake Bay, a patch of large bluefish remains the majority target species for vessels in the area.

NY – Bluefish are not as ubiquitous as they once were. The fishery needs to be monitored more closely and we need to identify research priorities to better answer the unknowns. Adjustments to

different management measures should be considered to help protect the bluefish fishery. (Comment submitted via email post meeting).

Commercial Fishery Issues

NY – Large runs of large (7-pound) bluefish arrived pretty much on normal schedule (third week of May) and were caught from Montauk up into Peconic Bay. The abundance of menhaden and sand eels likely draws the bluefish up into the bays. Most of the catch is by gill net.

NJ – Strong recruitment events over the last few years. Larger sizes of fish are represented in the landings/catch. Fishermen have observed strong recruitment events as indicated in the data from the NEFSC. Continuing to see unusually large fish in the back bays. This year on the third week of May, commercial fishermen have been targeting bluefish in the Cape Cod area, which is early. Habits and movement are inconsistent and unusual compared to historical habits and ranges. (pattern of northern movement may be due to bait availability. But, the fish that are around are most often seen further offshore and to the north. Areas 614 and 615 were the older hot spots.

NY – In the past several years, commercial landings have been above the allocation to the state, and the state had to get transfers from states that do not land their entire bluefish quota. It seems the quota is exceeded almost every year by some amount and we expect it to be exceeded this year.

NY – Prefer status quo management from 2017 to 2018; bluefish are no longer as ubiquitous as they once were. It is important to focus concerns on the young of the year. (Provided post meeting via email.)

NC – Lots of big bluefish being targeted in May. These fish are potentially for bait or consumption markets, but occasionally were not iced down (at times ~400-500 lbs being deck loaded). Proper care of bluefish is very important!

NJ – Appreciate that quota transfers can happen but does not want to see fleets disabled due to loss of quota.

Market / Economic Issues

NY – During the run of larger fish at the end of May, price dipped to \$0.20-0.25 per pound, but with the current runs of 3-pound fish the price seems to stay around \$0.50 - \$0.70 per pound.

NC – Recreationally, the for-hire sector has seen less large bluefish in the spring. On average, they see smaller fish than in the northeast. Bluefish are becoming increasingly important to the recreational fishery, especially to the for-hire sector due to the decrease in abundance of other nearshore available species. Ultimately, when the large run of big fish occurs, it is a very good thing for the bluefish fishery.

NC/NJ/VA – Bluefish fishing has been good and we depend on them a lot. The species is very important and will continue to be. We do not want to see bluefish used as crab bait or being

compared to menhaden and mullet as a bait species. The price of menhaden has made other species targets for bait (i.e. bluefish, shad, hickory shad). We do not want to see food fish used as bait.

NY – Bluefish are sometimes bycatch in trawls. It is better to get some use out of dead fish that cannot go to market. We would rather use them than waste them. Advisors agree, but do not want bluefish to be directly targeted for bait.

NJ - Occasionally, bluefish are selling for over \$1.00/lb. Over \$1.00 indicates market demand, but we want to be careful to not saturate the market.

Environmental Issues

NJ/NC – Runs of large fish show up earlier and they stay around in the inlets which is different than the past.

MD – Fish are moving north from where they used to be relatively stationary. Many Chesapeake Bay stations are no longer valid since many bluefish seem to be further offshore. We observed this same pattern with bonito in the 80s.

Management Issues/Fishery Regulations

NY –The stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring according to the last benchmark stock assessment. The quotas may be too cautious considering the size/abundance of the stock [Council’s Risk Policy is too strict]; the TAL is not caught up. New York commercial landings almost always exceeds the quota, so the New York quota should be increased to use up the TAL.

MD/RI/NC/NY – The current 15 fish bag limit was considered to be excessive. Few recreational fishermen are likely to keep more than 10 fish. AP members would like to see a reduction in the recreational bag limit. Reducing the bag limit (to 10 fish) will likely have minimal impacts on anglers, and would be more in line with state-specific bag limits

NC – Most recreational anglers do not keep a lot of bluefish. They throw back a mix of sizes depending on the individual. Need to protect the abundance in the fishery, this is very important for the viability of the recreational sector. In North Carolina there is a citation program (not a ticket) which allows anglers to fill out a form at a weigh station for bluefish they release. They can receive a certificate for large bluefish in the “release” category. This promotes catch-and-release fishing.

NC – While the commercial discards are considered to be insignificant in the assessment, there is some localized bycatch in some commercial fisheries (beach seine, different trawls, and ocean drop net and estuarine flounder net fisheries) and not zero. Additionally, the *commercial shrimp fishery* has become much larger and may lead to more bluefish discards in the commercial sector.

NY – We are unsure of the commercial discard rates, but they appear to still be very low. Gill netters use a certain size mesh to specifically target only market size bluefish.

NY/NC – Discard issues in the recreational fishery could be improved by implementing educational programs to minimize post-release fish mortality, to promote the phrase “catch what you are going to eat,” and to stress the use of single hook and circle hook gear (e.g., inline), and its benefits.

Research Issues

The high recreational discards of bluefish (particularly small fish in MD/VA/NC) could be an issue. The Council and Commission should consider measures to address this especially if we continue to see the private recreational fishermen increase.

Investigate public stake holder perception of the recreational bluefish fishery in order to identify how the public would like this fishery to look like in years to come. Bluefish is an important recreational fishery and it is important to ask the recreational fishing community to investigate how they perceive this fishery in the future. Use for-hire log books to see what kind of data we can capture. We want to use that data to better understand where the fish are and how to characterize the recreational fishery. This could emerge into a good educational and outreach opportunity.

Need to better understand the dynamics between the inshore and offshore populations. More specifically, during the spring migration, there is another component of the stock that stays way offshore and does not appear to be the same as the fish taking part of the spring migration. This offshore component of the stock seems to miss the Mid-Atlantic Bight during the migration up north (towards Montauk). It is important to investigate this migration event in order to better understand the dynamics of the stock. What are the differences between the offshore and inshore bluefish populations?

Want to better understand what environmental or non-environmental factors bluefish cue in on? What is causing more species like bluefish to move out? Dredges? Sand mining? Mobile gear? Water quality?

Other Issues

Biological characteristics of bluefish life history need to be considered when developing catch and landings limits recommendations for this species. There is evidence that as bluefish migrate along the coast during the spring and summer there may be multiple spawning events. With a species as productive as bluefish, that matures early, and has the potential for multiple spawning events increases the possibility for recruitment and availability for this species. Recent observations are leading fishermen to believe what we think we know may be incorrect. Management should be tailor made for typical or atypical life histories, depending on the species under consideration.