



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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MEMORANDUM

Date: February 23, 2018
To: Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director
From: Matthew Seeley, Staff
Subject: Blueline Tilefish ABCs

Summary

This memo supports the March 2018 SSC meeting for setting blueline tilefish specifications for up to three years (2019-2021).

Introduction

The Magnuson Stevens Act (MSA) as currently amended requires each Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to provide, among other things, ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for acceptable biological catches (ABCs). The SSC recommends ABCs to the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (the Council) that address scientific uncertainty such that overfishing is unlikely to occur per the Council's risk policy. The Council's ABC recommendations to NMFS for the upcoming fishing year(s) cannot exceed the ABC recommendation of the SSC. As such, the SSC's ABC recommendations form the upper limit for catches of Council-managed species.

Once the SSC meets and decides on an ABC, the Tilefish Monitoring Committee will meet to discuss if changes to other management measures should be recommended per the ABCs from the SSC and other management considerations. These measures include Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), Annual Catch Targets (ACTs), and Accountability Measures (AMs). Based on the SSC's and Monitoring Committee's recommendations, the Council will make recommendations to the NMFS Northeast Regional Administrator. Based on NMFS' evaluation of the Council's recommendations, NMFS will publish a Proposed Rule for specifications and then a Final Rule, which may change from the Proposed Rule based on public comment.

Regulatory Review

In June of 2015 emergency regulations were put into place in the Mid-Atlantic to temporarily constrain fishing effort on the blueline tilefish stock. These regulations consisted of a 300-pound commercial trip limit and a recreational seven fish bag limit and were extended through the 2016 fishing year.

In 2016, based on the output of the DLM Toolkit, which simulates stock responses to different harvest strategies, the SSC recommended a 2017 blueline tilefish ABC of 87,031 pounds as meeting the Council's risk policy to best avoid overfishing when guidance from a standard stock assessment is not available. This toolkit has been used previously by the SSC to develop ABC recommendations for black sea bass and Atlantic mackerel. Details on the analysis and rationale of the SSC can be found in the working group's report, available at <http://www.mafmc.org/briefing/april-2016> (see subcommittee report and SSC presentation). This document also notes that due to the limited information on recreational blueline tilefish catch, the recreational catch histories used in the toolkit resulted from a Delphi Approach workshop with fishermen to develop an approximation of 2015 recreational catch, and then a time series was created based on the Delphi Approach estimate and other available data.

In Spring 2017 the SSC recommended a status quo ABC of 87,031 pounds for 2018. Specifications were only recommended for one year as the SEDAR 50 benchmark assessment was anticipated to be completed late in 2017 and dramatically change the biological reference points.

Biological Reference Points, Stock Status, and Projections

In early 2017, the SSC determined that under the ABC control rule, blueline tilefish are classified as a fishery where the overfishing limit (OFL) cannot be specified given the current state of knowledge and thus, the SSC used methods that do not rely on biological reference points.

The SEDAR 50 assessment for blueline tilefish concluded in late 2017. Within the assessment, blueline tilefish were split into two separate stocks, north and south of Cape Hatteras. ABC recommendations were set for the region south of Cape Hatteras (not overfished, overfishing not occurring), but data limitations restricted an ABC recommendation for the region north of Cape Hatteras, which encompasses the Mid-Atlantic management areas. To assist in developing an ABC recommendation, the Mid- and South Atlantic Councils/SSCs, as well as staff from the Northeast and Southeast Fisheries Science Centers developed a joint subcommittee to rerun the DLM Toolkit for the region north of Cape Hatteras. The results will be partitioned at the Council boundaries using coastwide catch data from the recently completed pilot tilefish survey funded by the MAFMC out of SUNY Stony Brook.

Landings

Updated 2017 dealer landings information is provided in Table 1; the lower 2015/2016 commercial landings were the expected outcome of the emergency regulations in place for part of 2015 and most of 2016. In 2016, dealer landings adjustments were made (landings times 0.89) for landings coming from Virginia. Landings from statistical areas 631 and 632 (which straddle the North Carolina-Virginia border) were apportioned half to north of the North Carolina/Virginia border and half south. These adjustments were initially made to account for landings lacking area information or for the chance those fish may have been caught south of the Virginia border, yet landed in Virginia. For 2017, no adjustments were made to the dealer landings following the methods and recommendations from the joint Mid- and South Atlantic

Blueline Tilefish Subcommittee, which stated that landings into a certain state within the modeled area are 100% landings into that state.

The Delphi process¹ judged VTR records as unreliable before 2012, so the included VTR time series begins in 2012 to facilitate comparison with the most recent years (Table 2). Since 2016, MRIP (2017-preliminary) has estimated substantial blueline tilefish catch for the Mid-Atlantic, totaling 36,818 fish in 2016 (10,644 MD, 3,040 NJ, 23,134 VA) and 3,444 fish in 2017 (all VA). Considering the current changes occurring with MRIP and since blueline tilefish are a rare event species it remains unclear on how these numbers may be affected in the near future.

OFL/ABC Recommendations

OFL

The SSC determined that the approach to estimating the ABC for blueline tilefish qualifies it as a stock for which there is no accepted OFL. Additionally, an OFL recommendation was not provided through the SEDAR 50 assessment.

ABC

The joint Mid- and South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish Subcommittee ran the DLM Toolkit for the stock north of Cape Hatteras using a more recent time series of total blueline tilefish catch (2002-2015) than the SEDAR 50 assessment. The subcommittee agreed that the recommended ABC would be the mode of the total allowable catch distribution provided by a composite management procedure, which is a combined distribution comprised of total allowable catch values estimated by DLMTool's Fdem_ML and YPR_ML management procedures. The DLM Toolkit provided an ABC for the stock north of Cape Hatteras of 236,329 pounds.

To appropriately partition this ABC recommendation to the Mid- and South Atlantic Council's jurisdictions, the subcommittee agreed that using blueline tilefish catch data from the Mid-Atlantic Council funded pilot tilefish survey offered the most updated and reliable stock distribution information. The pilot tilefish survey was conducted using a random stratified design across the Mid-Atlantic from just north of Hudson Canyon to Cape Hatteras (Figure 1). This region was broken into nine strata. Strata 1-3 were removed for blueline tilefish evaluation due to no catch in those regions. Of the 75 blueline tilefish caught, 37 were north of the North Carolina/Virginia border and 38 were between the North Carolina/Virginia border and Cape Hatteras. Incorporating this catch with the sampled stratified area plus a 24.8% area adjustment (in strata 9 of the survey) to account for the unsampled area within strata 9 resulted in a stratified proportion of 56% - MAFMC and 44% - SAFMC.

Considering the recommendations from the joint Mid- and South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish Subcommittee and given recent fishery performance, which has been constrained by the

¹ A Delphi Approach workshop with fishermen was used to develop an approximation of 2015 recreational catch, and then a time series was created based on the Delphi Approach estimate and other available data.

regulations, Council staff recommends a blueline tilefish ABC of 132,344 pounds and specifying it for 3 years (2019-2021).

Table 1. Dealer Landings

Year	Pounds Landed
1999	33
2000	2,446
2001	955
2002	269
2003	7,601
2004	5,829
2005	2,032
2006	3,039
2007	20,459
2008	8,749
2009	9,635
2010	8,360
2011	8,182
2012	9,624
2013	26,780
2014	217,016
2015	73,668
2016	14,203
2017	9,957

Table 2. For-hire VTR kept fish from VA-ME (numbers of fish)

Year	Party Kept Fish	Charter Kept Fish
2012	9,670	381
2013	11,127	711
2014	14,866	983
2015	12,138	2,253
2016	13,476	2,017
2017	8,213	1,413

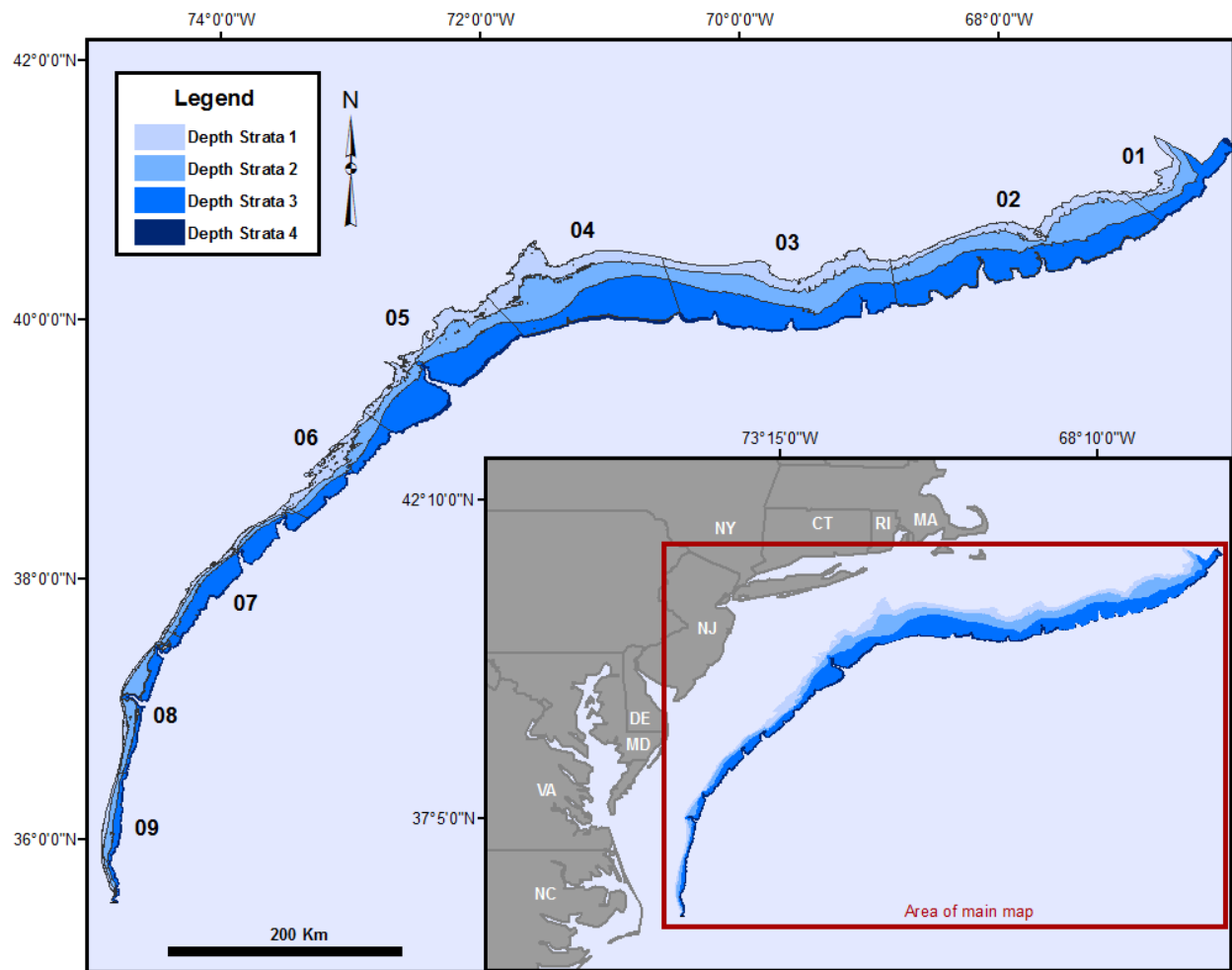


Figure 1. Pilot tilefish survey sampling regions based on a random stratified design.