



Bluefish Joint Advisory Panel Webinar Meeting Monday, July 31, 2023

MAFMC Advisors in attendance: Steve Heins (NC), Phil Simon (NJ), Eric Burnley (DE), William Mandulak (NC), Tom Roller (NC)

ASMFC Advisors in attendance: Bob Danielson (NY), Frank Blount (RI), Scot Calitri (NH)

Other attendees: Karson Cisneros (MAFMC Staff), Chelsea Tuohy (ASMFC Staff), Chris Batsavage (Council and Board Member), Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), James Fletcher (UNFA)

The MAFMC and ASMFC Bluefish Advisory Panels (APs) met via webinar on July 31, 2023, to provide comments on bluefish recreational management measures for 2024. AP feedback at this meeting will inform the Council and Board's August 9th bluefish specifications and recreational management measures discussions.

Summary

Questions and discussion

One advisor commented on the flat catch over the time series and then the drop in catch from 2017-2018 and asked why that drop off happened. MAFMC and GARFO Staff responded that there were no major changes in regulations across those specific years, however there was an overall decreasing trend in biomass based on the most recent stock assessment. Because of this, the decline in catch may have been related to the availability of bluefish to anglers.

An advisor asked why the ABC is increasing from 2024 to 2025 if the stock has not reached the rebuilt target yet. Staff responded that under the Council's rebuilding plan, the stock biomass is projected to increase to the target over 7 years, so those biomass increases result in ABC increases. Another advisor asked whether it would be better to keep the 2025 catch and harvest limits similar to 2024 since the stock is still below the target. Staff responded that the 2025 limits will be reviewed next year and that is something that the AP and Monitoring Committee (MC) could recommend in order to be more conservative.

Advisors also discussed commercial and recreational discards. One advisor asked why expected discards do not scale up or down with the ABC. Staff responded that trends in discard estimates over time for both sectors don't seem to scale directly with ABCs and are impacted by other factors such as availability in specific areas, regulations, demand/interest in the species, and commercial markets. Each year the MC discusses which values to use for expected discards and they often use an average of recent years. They can also evaluate their prediction performance afterwards and adjust their

assumptions based on how well that prediction plays out. Staff added that the AP can also provide feedback and recommendations on what they feel should be considered or assumed for expected discards. Another advisor asked if the commercial discard estimates capture bluefish bycatch in other fisheries and staff responded that these estimates do cover other targeted fisheries since they are based on observer data.

One advisor asked whether there was a large increase in bluefish recreational harvest during 2020 due to COVID similar to what was estimated for Spanish mackerel. Staff responded that there was not a large jump in harvest estimates and discussed some of the caveats for 2020 including the bag limit decrease and imputation methods using years under the previous bag limits. This advisor commented that it is probably better to put less emphasis on COVID years as a representation of current conditions. Another advisor added that they thought that as people start travelling more, they would be fishing as much or more than they were during the pandemic.

Two advisors commented on the regulations and felt that the regulations don't seem to impact stock conditions. One added that the catch rates are a reflection of bluefish availability and it does not make a difference what the RHL or regulations are. They also added that they are not confident that everyone is counting the fish the same way through MRIP. Another noted that it doesn't seem like we have a good handle on what management should do to keep the stock improving.

2024 Recreational measures considerations/recommendations

All advisors in attendance spoke in favor of status quo recreational measures for 2024.

One advisor commented that anglers have already learned how to deal with the current bag limits and supported status quo. They added that they are already seeing unprecedented water temperatures this year in many places, and it is unclear how this is going to affect the bluefish population, adding that we need to understand these potential impacts. They added that an important part of the population dynamics for bluefish is available forage. Another advisor commented that water temperature could have a negative effect on recruitment leading to a situation where there are few fish to replace those that have been harvested.

Another advisor commented that anglers only want to take home a few fish anyway as their customers prefer to eat bluefish fresh. They added that the split between 3 and 5 fish based on mode isn't really a big difference given that people don't want that many and added the big goal is to avoid a closure.

One advisor added that if there were a need for restrictions in the future, they would prefer the exploration of a minimum size limit instead of further changes to the bag limits. They added that Florida and Georgia already use them in state waters.

One advisor felt that bag limits should be kept at status quo for 2025 as well as 2024 and that we should wait for a new assessment run before changing the measures instead of liberalizing in a review year.

One advisor commented on the liberalization tables in the recreational memo and noted the differences in percent changes for the different methods and modes. Staff discussed that both methods rely on

different assumptions in order to predict a liberalization and that the MC viewed both methods but did not discuss in detail given they did not recommend any changes to the bag limits. This advisor added that the assumptions under the inverse method seemed unrealistic.

Three advisors supported status quo but cautioned that harvest is more about availability. One advisor added that they are not confident that under status quo there wouldn't be an RHL overage because of the increased presence of bluefish in 2023. Another advisor added that in Delaware they are not seeing the large bluefish that are occurring in the Long Island area and instead are seeing the 1-3 pound fish along the beaches. An advisor added that given restrictions in other recreational fisheries such as summer flounder, people may switch to fishing for bluefish, increasing the catch and harvest.

Advisor Comments Received Via Phone or Email

Phone Call: Steve Witthuhn

- Agree with status quo recreational measures.
- There has been [a bluefish tournament](#) in late August since 1984 that can give staff information on bluefish trends in Long Island Sound over time. There is a lot of prize money involved and there are rewards for recapturing a tagged fish.
- Fishing is not as crazy as it was in springtime, but the fish are still hanging out and we are seeing good signs. There is a mix of fish 12 inches or greater. What do mature/spawning females look like and what is the timing of their spawning? (staff are investigating this question)
- Customers never want to keep the full 5 fish.