Bluefish Monitoring Committee
Meeting Summary
Wednesday, July 26, 2023

Monitoring Committee and Technical Committee Attendees: Cynthia Ferrio (GARFO), Eric Durell (MD DNR), Michael Celestino (NJ DFW), Karson Cisneros (Council staff), Chelsea Tuohy (ASMFC staff), Jim Gartland (VIMS), Joshua McGilly (VMRC), Rich Wong (DNREC), Tony Wood (NEFSC), Sandra Dumais (NY DEC), Nicole Lengyel Costa (RI DMF), Sam Truesdell (MA DMF), Kevin Sullivan (NHFG)

Additional Attendees: Chris Batsavage (Council and Board member), Raymond Kane (Board member), John Almeida (Council member), Kiley Dancy (Council staff), José Montañez (Council staff), Mike Waine (American Sportfishing Association), Nichola Meserve (Board member), Megan Ware (Board Member), Will Poston (ASGA)

The Monitoring Committee (MC) met via webinar on Wednesday, July 26, to recommend bluefish catch and landings limits for 2024-2025 and recreational management measures for 2024. At the meeting, the MC reviewed the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommendation, 2023 management track assessment results, staff memos, and recent fishery performance to assist the MC in their deliberations. Briefing materials considered by the MC are available at: https://www.mafmc.org/council-events/2023/july-26/bluefish-monitoring-committee.

Summary

Management Uncertainty Tool

In March 2023 the MC met to discuss quantitative methods for setting management uncertainty buffers between the annual catch limits (ACLs) and annual catch targets (ACTs). After their March meeting, a subgroup formed and developed a tool that converts a combination of quantitative and qualitative scores for a number of categories that contribute to uncertainty into a quantitative uncertainty metric. The subgroup proposed that this tool could be used on an annual basis to assist the MC in the determination of a management uncertainty buffer, should one be necessary.

At this July meeting, the MC reviewed the proposed tool and discussed its potential use in future years. One MC member asked if examples of how the tool would have performed in previous years were explored. Members of the subgroup noted that they examined prediction performance of total removals over the past ~15 years and in the majority of those years (12 of 13), removals (harvest and dead discards) either fell within an 80% confidence bound of the predictions or would have resulted in "positive" buffers. In the past two years removal predictions were overestimated given the recent downward trend in removals, however overestimating removals cannot result in a positive buffer (i.e., an ACT higher than the ACL) so these situations would yield a buffer of zero. Prediction performance of total removals is one of the key inputs into the decision tool and, in the current configuration, is the

most heavily weighted. Other inputs include compliance, enforceability, reporting, bycatch, and latent effort.

One MC member discussed the differences between the commercial and recreational sectors in terms of accountability measures and end of the year accounting. They added that due to in-season management, more can be done to prevent the commercial sector from having an overage. This is something to keep in mind when thinking about buffers for the different sectors.

The MC also discussed the different weightings and scores of the inputs, for example, an MC member asked why the bycatch score was set to zero in the recreational sector, noting that there is bluefish bycatch occurring. The subgroup responded that bycatch is unlikely to apply to the recreational fishery. Although recreational anglers may catch bluefish while targeting other species, the intent of MRIP is to estimate all recreational catch and the accuracy or precision of the estimates can be evaluated as part of the reporting criterion in the tool. Additionally, values currently in the tool are starting candidate scores and weights that the MC is meant to update as they think about each input in a given year. Another MC member asked about how the group would evaluate latent effort. For example, they are aware that latent effort exists, however it may not necessarily be a problem. The subgroup replied that the latent effort category is a qualitative one, and so best efforts can be made to quantify latent effort, but that the qualitative nature of the question naturally lends itself to MC member experience and intuition.

Overall, the MC supported pursuing the use of the tool with the acknowledgment that the output of the tool (i.e., a candidate uncertainty buffer) would not be binding, but a starting place for buffer discussion in a given year. The MC also discussed considering some modest tweaks to the tool prior to implementation in 2024. One member added that the MC is required to review sector specific management uncertainty, and with the tool's different categories, it is a good way to ensure the MC has discussed these major uncertainty sources and how they are interacting with the fishery. The MC agreed to review the tool individually and fill out preliminary scores for each uncertainty category next year, to be discussed at their July 2024 meeting to review 2025 specifications.

2024-2025 ACTs, Commercial Quotas and RHLs

The MC discussed management uncertainty for both sectors and whether a buffer was warranted to reduce the commercial and recreational ACLs to lower ACTs. They discussed the improvements to discard estimation for both the recreational and commercial sectors through the 2022 Bluefish Research Track Assessment, particularly noting that there are no longer two disparate methods and estimates for recreational discards. These improvements have led to a better understanding of the sector removals and decreased the associated management uncertainty compared with previous years.

One MC member added that when the MC has been off on their prediction of harvest or discards it has been an overestimate and trends in landings appear to have stabilized in recent years. The MC also discussed recent recruitment, and a member noted that based on the 2023 Management Track Assessment, there is a large year class entering the fishery this year in contrast to recruitment that has been fairly constant over the past ~20 years. They wondered if this should be factored into the group's expectation of removals but acknowledged that it is a terminal year recruitment estimate which has larger associated uncertainty and may not materialize. They added that this may be a source of scientific uncertainty accounted for by the SSC rather than management uncertainty. Another member voiced that they were not overly concerned with the recruitment value given that it does not appear to

be a huge recruitment event and added that the model tends to slightly overestimate recruitment. A MC member also suggested looking at former years to see if a jump in recruitment led to increased discards. After a quick review of recruitment and removals plots over the time series the MC felt that the terminal year recruitment estimate may not necessarily lead to an increase in discards or harvest and does not require accounting for in an uncertainty buffer or revised harvest or discard assumption.

Based on the considerations outlined above, the MC recommended a commercial ACL=ACT of 2.45 million pounds in 2024 and 3.06 million pounds in 2025 and a recreational ACL=ACT of 15.03 million pounds in 2024 and 18.78 million pounds in 2025 (Table 1).

The MC also discussed 2024-2025 expected discards by sector. For the commercial sector, they discussed that unlike in previous years, commercial discard estimates for the full time series are now explicitly estimated in, and available through, recent assessments. They agreed with the staff recommendation to use the average commercial discards for 2021-2022 given the COVID related data gaps in observer coverage in 2020. For the recreational sector, they recommended using a multi-year average using years after the decrease in bag limits which were implemented throughout 2020. Therefore, average 2021-2022 discards from the 2023 Management Track Assessment were recommended for use as expected discards in 2024-2025 for both sectors.

Based on the expected discards above, the MC recommended commercial quotas of 2.42 million pounds in 2024 and 3.03 million pounds in 2025, and RHLs of 11.96 million pounds in 2024 and 15.70 million pounds in 2025 (Table 1).

2024 Recreational Management Measures

After the 2024 and 2025 RHLs were recommended, the MC discussed corresponding recreational management measures. In 2024, the RHL is recommended to be 11.96 million pounds while 2021-2022 average recreational harvest was 11.54 million pounds. The MC agreed with the staff recommendation for status quo recreational management measures given how close the 2024 RHL is to recent recreational harvest (Table 1). They agreed that these would be revisited next year, given the increase in RHL in 2025. They discussed that the liberalization and reduction tables provided in the staff recreational measures memo were helpful to include next year, along with providing the calculation spreadsheets used.

Compliance

Lastly, the MC discussed compliance in the recreational fishery and how to collect more information to better inform the MC overall, and specifically the compliance and enforcement inputs in the management uncertainty tool next year. MC members discussed that some states do not collect species specific information on violations, depending on how the enforcement databases are structured. Another issue is that violations where no court summons was written do not always make it into the database or state compliance reports. MC members discussed that when they are filling out the uncertainty tool next year they can consult with their state enforcement to develop their scores; moreover, the enforceability and compliance questions in the uncertainty tool are qualitative, and so best efforts to obtain quantitative information can be made, but scoring will ultimately rely on qualitative judgements. In addition, the MC recommended requesting that the Commission's Law Enforcement Committee review relevant bluefish commercial and recreational compliance and enforcement information and provide feedback to be used in the uncertainty tool.

Public Comment

One member of the public asked why there was an increasing trend in ABCs from 2024 to 2025. The bluefish assessment scientist responded that because bluefish is in a rebuilding plan, the biomass is projected to increase until it reaches the biomass target.

They also asked whether the uncertainty tool discussed at this meeting was planned to be used across all of the MAFMC species. Staff responded that there was no current plan to apply the tool elsewhere but that that decision could or would be made by other committees.

Table 1: SSC and Monitoring Committee recommended bluefish specifications for 2024-2025.

Management Measure	Year				Basis
	2024		2025		
	mil lb.	mt	mil lb.	mt	
OFL	25.90	11,734	27.49	12,467	Stock assessment projections
ABC	17.48	7,929	21.83	9,903	Derived by SSC
Commercial ACL	2.45	1,110	3.06	1,386	ABC x 14% (per FMP)
Commercial Management Uncertainty	0	0	0	0	Derived by the Monitoring Committee
Commercial ACT	2.45	1,110	3.06	1,386	Comm. ACL - Comm. Management Uncertainty
Recreational ACL	15.03	6,819	18.78	8,517	ABC x 86% (per FMP)
Recreational Management Uncertainty	0	0	0	0	Derived by the Monitoring Committee
Recreational ACT	15.03	6,819	18.78	8,517	Rec. ACL - Rec. Management Uncertainty
Commercial Discards	0.02	11	0.02	11	2021-2022 ave. discards (2023 MTA)
Recreational Discards	3.08	1,396	3.08	1,396	2021-2022 ave. discards (2023 MTA)
Commercial TAL	2.42	1,100	3.03	1,376	Commercial ACT - commercial discards
Recreational TAL	11.96	5,423	15.70	7,121	Recreational ACT - recreational discards
Transfer	0	0	0	0	No transfer recommended while rebuilding
Commercial Quota	2.42	1,100	3.03	1,376	Commercial TAL +/- transfer
RHL	11.96	5,423	15.70	7,121	Recreational TAL +/- transfer
Rec. Possession Limit	3: private 5: for-hire		Review in 2024 for 2025		MC Recommendation

Note: six decimal places were used for calculations and rounded to two decimal places for table display purposes, therefore slight mismatches may appear due to rounding.