

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council



July
2012

Visioning and Strategic Planning Project Stakeholder Input Report



Summer Flounder

584 participants completed the summer flounder visioning survey. Input was given on summer flounder in every roundtable session. Summer flounder was the most frequently mentioned species among all fishermen.

71% of survey respondents rated the HEALTH of the summer flounder stock as excellent or very good (Fig. 5a). 63% rated the EFFECTIVENESS of the management of summer flounder as poor or fair (Fig. 5b).

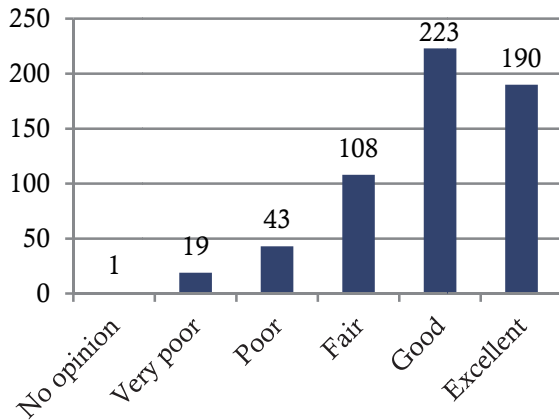


Fig. 5a: Health of Summer Flounder Stock

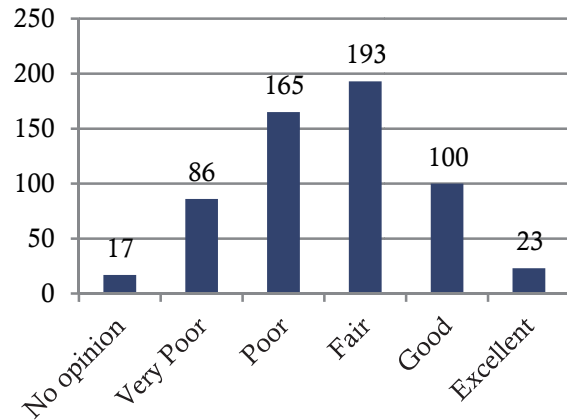


Fig. 5b: Effectiveness of Summer Flounder Management

COMMERCIAL INDUSTRY THEMES

Theme I: The inability to land summer flounder in the nearest port due to state-by-state regulations forces commercial fishermen to travel far out of their way and costs them fuel, time, and money.

Commercial Observations:

- Fishermen must travel greater distances than necessary to land summer flounder, which exacerbates the problem of high fuel costs and makes it less economical to go fishing for summer flounder.
- Boats from other states can travel to fish in Federal waters adjacent to states whose quotas have already been caught, while local fishermen are restricted in that same area. This was a particular concern in New York State.
- The problem is more severe for those fishing in the northern portion of the fishery because there is a larger distribution of quota in southern states, meaning many fish must be landed further south.

Commercial Recommendations:

- Fishermen should be able to land fish in any state and have it count against their state's landings or any other state quota that they are permitted for.
- Work to ensure equality among federal summer flounder permit holders, regardless of state quotas.



Theme 2: Fluctuations in commercial quotas for summer flounder stocks are causing difficulties catching and marketing summer flounder.

Commercial Observations:

- The summer flounder stock has been declared rebuilt, but the quota was decreased this year (2011). This contributes to the feeling that fish are taken away but never given back.
- Fluctuations in the quota for summer flounder are damaging its market. Most buyers need a guaranteed supply, but annual fluctuations in quota create unpredictable supply streams that damage buyer/seller relationships.
- The “derby-style” quota fishery for summer flounder pressures fishermen to catch as much as possible as soon as the season opens. This flux of fishing effort tends to flood the market with fish and drive the price down. Large-scale buyers know when the state fisheries open and use this opportunity to drive the price down.
- Some fishermen feel that the summer flounder allocation is unfair and makes it impossible to catch enough to be profitable.
- Fishermen in some states, particularly New York and Massachusetts, believe that state allocations were based on flawed historical data. In the 1980s, landings in New Bedford were credited to North Carolina quota, which is an example of how historical landing data may be flawed.

Commercial Recommendations:

- Avoid large fluctuations in quota for summer flounder.
- Consider management strategies to minimize the negative effects of “derby style” fishing for summer flounder.
- Consider revisiting the historical landing data that drives quota decisions.

Theme 3: Summer flounder are one of several species that are being encountered more frequently in waters north of their traditional range.

Commercial Observations:

- Fishermen are encountering summer flounder further north and in greater concentrations than they have in the past.
- The shifting range of summer flounder is problematic for fishermen targeting northern species that would not typically be caught in the same area as summer flounder. They are experiencing increasing amounts of summer flounder bycatch but many do not have permits to keep them.

Commercial Recommendation:

- Consider provisions for incidental catch of summer flounder, especially in northern waters.
- Revisit the state quotas to take the shifting range of the fishery in to account.



RECREATIONAL SECTOR THEMES

Theme 1: Current recreational size limits for summer flounder encourage catching the less abundant, larger, more fertile breeding fish.

Recreational Observations:

- There is currently an abundance of undersize summer flounder in the mid-Atlantic waters.
- High size limits result in more encounters with undersize fish and more discards.
- The high ratio of throwbacks to keepers is very discouraging for fishermen, many of whom are finding it hard to catch a keeper. Fishing participation appears to be declining.
- Fishermen want to leave the larger fertile breeding fish in the water and generally prefer to eat younger fish.
- Fishermen burn more fuel finding keepers and are unhappy discarding undersize fish which they believe are likely to die.

Recreational Recommendation:

- Consider slot limits to minimize the mortality of both smaller more abundant fish as well as the larger less abundant breeding fish. This will reduce discards and make it easier for fishermen to take fish home without burning through a lot of fuel.

Theme 2: The disparity between commercial and recreational regulations is unfair and does not help to achieve sustainability.

Recreational Observations:

- The minimum size for the commercial sector is 14 inches while the recreational sector is only allowed to land much larger fish.
- A recreational fisherman must throw back many summer flounder before he can catch a keeper, but he can go to the supermarket and buy a smaller commercially caught summer flounder anytime.
- Commercial fishermen are catching volumes of fish that have not reached full spawning maturity, while recreational fishermen are targeting only the larger, mature breeding fish. This reduces productivity of the stocks.
- Commercial fishing for summer flounder, especially in spawning grounds or winter rest areas, can severely deplete the resource and may damage ocean floor habitat.
- The allocation of summer flounder quota between the commercial and recreational sector does not reflect historic participation in the fishery.

Recreational Recommendations:

- Consider a uniform size limit, or at least reduce the discrepancy between the commercial and recreational size limits.
- Reconsider the 60%/40% split in commercial/recreational allocation.

