

MID-ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 1, 2012

TO: Council

FROM: Mary Clark *MC*

SUBJECT: Visioning and Strategic Planning

Please find attached the Executive Summary of the Visioning and Strategic Planning Stakeholder Input Report. The full report, which will be mailed separately and available online, contains the results of the Council's stakeholder engagement and data gathering efforts from September 2011 through February 2012. More specifically, the document includes descriptions of stakeholder themes and recommendations in the following categories:

- Information and Data
- Management Strategies
- Economic Challenges
- Communication and Public Participation
- Governance
- Ecosystems

Additionally, the report includes stakeholder input for the Council's vision and individual data summaries for each of the Council's managed fisheries.

Additional information is included in the Appendices, which will be available online or upon request in hard-copy. These sections contain: a copy of the survey instrument, a complete analysis of survey results, roundtable discussion guides, roundtable meeting summaries, position letter guidelines, and a compilation of the position letters that were submitted.



Visioning and Strategic Planning

Stakeholder Input Report: Executive Summary

May 2012

Executive Summary

Overview

In the spring of 2011, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council launched an effort to develop a comprehensive, stakeholder-informed vision for managed fisheries in the mid-Atlantic. The goals of this initiative were twofold: define and develop new ways for the Council to engage constituents and define strategies to address key challenges. The project will result in a vision, a statement of goals, and a strategic plan that outlines short- and long-term operational strategies, actions, and timelines.

In seeking to ensure its vision and strategic plan reflect the priorities of its constituents, the Council conducted the largest outreach effort in its history. This report summarizes input gathered from over 1,500 constituents through surveys, roundtable sessions, and position letters.

The vision and strategic plan will guide the Council's efforts to:

- Manage fisheries (and the surrounding ecosystem and habitats) more effectively;
- Address existing management problems identified by the Council and constituents;
- Improve communication to constituents and other organizations;
- Improve the Council's ability to utilize input from constituents and other organizations;
- Increase the efficiency of the management process;
- Balance short- and long-term management goals; and
- Address new or potential challenges and threats in a proactive, strategic way.

Strategic planning requires that an organization first have an accurate understanding of the current state of the organization itself and its surrounding environment. To accurately assess the current state of mid-Atlantic fisheries and management, it was essential that the Council solicit stakeholder input. Although stakeholder engagement is an important component of fisheries management, it has become clear in recent years that only a small fraction of stakeholders were actually participating in the Council's management process. As a result, the Council initiated an effort to gain a broader, more detailed understanding of stakeholders' perspectives.

From September 2011 to February 2012, the Council utilized a number of research methods, including surveys, roundtable sessions, and position letters, to gather stakeholder input on all topics related to past and future management of fisheries in the Mid-Atlantic. The results of this effort are intended to provide a foundation upon which the Council can begin developing a vision, goals, and a strategic plan. The following report summarizes input from more than 1,500 constituents during this data gathering phase of the Council's Visioning and Strategic Planning Project.

The ideas and concerns presented in this report represent the perspectives of individuals who voluntarily participated in the project and are not intended to reflect the viewpoints of all constituents or of the Council itself.

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils (Councils) in the United States. The Councils recommend fishery management measures to the Secretary of Commerce through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Decisions made by the Councils are not final until they are approved or partially approved by the Secretary of Commerce through NMFS. The seven states that comprise the Mid-Atlantic Council are New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.

The Council manages fisheries for thirteen species: summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, Atlantic mackerel, short-finned squid (*Illex*), long-finned squid, butterfish, surfclams, ocean quahogs,

tilefish, spiny dogfish and monkfish. Spiny dogfish and monkfish are jointly managed with the New England Fishery Management Council, while summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, and spiny dogfish are co-managed with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

Redefining Goals for Rebuilt Fisheries

Over its 35 year history, the Council's management efforts have largely been driven by rebuilding goals. For most of the Council's managed fisheries, these goals have been achieved. In March 2012, only one of the Council's fisheries (butterfish) was determined to be overfished, and none was subject to overfishing. Although all management decisions are directed by the guidelines of the ten National Standards in the Magnuson Steven Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Council has some flexibility to refine its management strategies for rebuilt fisheries in order to optimize ecological sustainability, industry productivity, and recreational enjoyment.

The Council is at a pivotal point. The Visioning and Strategic Planning Project was initiated to redefine success and establish long term goals for the future. The outcomes of the project will be a *vision*, a *goal statement*, and a *strategic plan* for the next ten years.

- A **vision** will describe the desired future state of the Council's managed fisheries and the Council process.
- The **goal statement** will delineate the specific objectives that the Council intends to reflect in its actions and management decisions. These objectives should be designed to help the Council achieve the vision.
- The **strategic plan** is a detailed framework that includes the goals, specific objectives, actions, timelines, and metrics of success. This plan will provide the specifics for moving from the current state towards the desired future state.

Developing a comprehensive vision and strategic plan is an enormous task for the Council, but the potential benefits are substantial. Improvements in the fisheries management process could create social, economic, and ecological benefits for all stakeholder groups. Clarifying management goals will help the Council ensure that all decisions have specific purposes that will help the Council move toward its stated goals. Also, a detailed definition of success will enable the Council to track its progress and proactively identify areas for improvement. Finally, a forward-looking approach to management will improve the Council's capacity for maintaining regulatory stability.

Stakeholder Participation

When the Council initiated the Visioning and Strategic Planning Project, it was clear that engaging stakeholders would be critical. As a result, the Council solicited perspectives of its diverse constituents, including commercial and recreational fishermen, members of environmental organizations, seafood consumers, scientists, and others. From September 2011 through February 2012, the Council gathered feedback from their constituents through surveys, roundtable sessions, and position letters.

Unlike traditional Council opportunities for public comment in which the scope is generally limited to a particular issue or fishery, stakeholders were given the chance to provide feedback on all topics related to past and future fisheries management in the Mid-Atlantic. Broad discussion questions included:

- Which aspects of management are effective and which are ineffective?
- How can we improve stakeholder engagement?
- What should our goals be beyond rebuilding stocks and preventing overfishing?

Over the 20-week period, the Council gathered feedback from more than 1,500 individuals through multiple methods. Participation was divided among the various methods as follows:

- 1,253 online survey responses
- 1,048 fishery-specific survey responses
- 220 participants in twenty roundtable sessions throughout the region
- 12 position letters received from environmental non-government organizations (ENGOS), state resource departments, and fishing organizations

The data represent a broad range of perspectives from a cross-section of the Council's stakeholders. Perspectives were influenced by a number of variables, including but not limited to: state of residence, fishery(s) of interest, age, duration of interest, participation in the fishery(s), personal history of negative or positive impacts stemming from management decisions, other personal perspectives, social status, and/or economic status. Efforts were made to quantify and understand these variables, but substantial generalizations of "stakeholder group perspectives" were necessary in order to synthesize the information in an informative way.

In this report, four main stakeholder groups were used to summarize data themes:

1. Commercial Industry: includes participants who identified themselves as vessel owner/operators, captains, seafood processors, fishing industry representatives, and vessel crew, among others.
2. Recreational Sector: includes participants who identified themselves as recreational fishermen, recreational industry, and for-hire operators or crew.
3. Environmental Non-Governmental Organization (ENGO)
4. Interested Public: includes participants who identified themselves as interested public, recreational user (boating, diver, etc.), state or local government, federal government, academic institution, non-governmental organization, or elected government official. (*Note: There was insufficient participation from this category to produce a theme summary.*)

Stakeholder Themes

Themes described in the executive summary are meant to summarize the topics that were discussed most frequently. More detailed observations and recommendations can be found in the "Top Themes and Recommendations" section of the report.

Common Stakeholder Themes

Several "big picture" themes were common across all stakeholder groups. Though specific concerns of each group varied, these common themes reflect shared interests and may serve as foundational elements for identifying challenges in the current system and developing goals for the future. They include:

- There is a lack of confidence in the data that drive fishery management decisions.
- Stakeholders are not as involved in the Council process as they can and should be.
- Different jurisdictions and regulations among the many fishery management organizations result in complexity and inconsistency.
- There is a need for increased transparency and communications in fisheries management.

- The dynamics of the ecosystem and food web should be considered to a greater extent in fisheries management decisions.
- Pollution is negatively affecting the health of fish stocks.

Commercial Industry Theme Summary

- **Lack of confidence in the science and data used in the decision-making process makes it difficult to have faith in the Council's management decisions.** Fishery-independent and fishery-dependent data are often inaccurate and lack credibility. The NMFS trawl survey and the observer program are areas of great concern with respect to data collection. In addition, there is resistance by scientists and managers to involve experienced fishermen in the data collection and stock assessment process.
- **Inconsistent state and federal regulations lead to inefficient fishing practices.** Variance between state and federal regulations can result in unnecessary discards, inefficient fishing practices, and other negative outcomes. In addition, the requirement to land fish in particular states due to quota restrictions associated with state-by-state quotas necessitates traveling much longer distances and burning additional fuel.
- **Rising costs, inconsistent fishing regulations, and market pressures make it increasingly challenging to run an economically viable commercial fishing business.** Unpredictable fishing regulations lead to a less stable supply of fish in the market, reduce market opportunities, negatively impact demand and price, and create a highly uncertain future for some of the region's commercial fisheries. The high cost of fuel has made commercial fishing less profitable.
- **There is a lack of trust in the Council and the Council process.** Input from commercial participants has not been considered in the Council process, and fishermen have become increasingly disenfranchised. The needs of commercial industry are not fairly represented, partially due to a lack of commercial industry representatives on the Council.
- **Ecosystem factors are impacting the availability of fish.** There is currently an overabundance of predators in the ocean, including cormorants, dogfish, marine mammals, and striped bass, among others.

Recreational Sector Theme Summary

- **The methods for collecting and estimating recreational effort and catch data are unreliable and reduce anglers' confidence in management decisions.** The Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Surveys (MRFSS) data are inaccurate. The data do not reflect actual recreational fishing effort or catch, and it is uncertain whether the new Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) will bring about significant improvements in catch estimates. The recreational fishing community in the region wants to contribute to the improvement of the recreational catch data.
- **Management strategies do not always encourage sustainable recreational fishing.** Regulations can be wasteful, such as high size limits that result in regulatory discards. High size limits encourage targeting of primarily large breeding fish, reducing the productivity of the resource.
- **Recreational fishermen are looking for reasonable and fair access to the fisheries.** Regulations such as closures, size limits, and bag limits make it hard to take home a fish. Quotas should be more equitable with the commercial industry. Recreational access is not equitable within the states in the region due to existing state-by-state quotas.

- **The Council does not adequately communicate how and when recreational fishermen can participate in the process.** There is an opportunity to increase recreational awareness and involvement by better leveraging the network of fishing clubs and the reach of media.
- **Ecosystems considerations are critical to the health and sustainability of the resource.** Key concerns are habitat destruction, water quality, and overfishing of forage fish.

Environmental Non-Governmental Organization (ENGO) Theme Summary

- **To better understand the health of fisheries, the Council needs more accurate and reliable data.** Effective fisheries management is impossible without adequate observer coverage, monitoring, and estimation of incidental catch.
- **The Council must adhere to a precautionary approach to fisheries management.** Given the high levels of uncertainty and the inherent risks of managing to maximum sustainable yield, additional precaution should be incorporated into management decisions.
- **The Council should transition to ecosystem-based management approaches.** Predator-prey dynamics need to be more fully-integrated in to management plans and/or the Council should develop an ecosystem plan that provides a framework for incorporating ecosystem considerations into the Council process.
- **The ongoing depletion of forage species is a serious concern and should be given full attention by the Council.** Many forage species are under pressure but are not managed under a fishery management plan. Their importance to the ecosystem and to other economically valuable fisheries should be grounds for greater consideration.
- **Protection of fish habitat must be a top priority.** There are areas of essential habitat that are unprotected from destructive fishing practices. Fisheries management needs to include habitat management strategies.

Common Vision

While the majority of stakeholder input revolved around issues, challenges, and concerns, the Council was also interested in understanding how stakeholders envision successful fisheries and fisheries management in the future. All survey or roundtable participants were asked about their vision for Mid-Atlantic fisheries. Many of their responses were shared by members of all groups. These include:

- Fish populations are thriving and are harvested at sustainable levels.
- Management decisions are based on sound data and science.
- There is equitable consideration of the needs of diverse stakeholder groups; the interest of no one stakeholder outweighs the other.
- There is little waste in the fisheries, and regulatory discards are minimal.
- More stakeholders are involved in the management process.

These points are described in greater detail in the “Stakeholder Vision” section of the report.

Conclusion

The majority of stakeholders who provided input for this research effort reported that they rarely or never participate in the Council process. Many of them commented that the surveys and roundtable sessions were welcome opportunities to provide feedback and learn more about the Council. It was

apparent that many were encouraged by the outreach efforts, but participants also expressed doubt that a vision and strategic plan would result in substantial changes in the Council process or fisheries management in the mid-Atlantic.

This research effort has helped build trust with stakeholders and improved communication. The Council's demonstration of commitment to the stakeholders' input will be equally important. As the Council moves forward with the next steps of this project, it is imperative that the concerns described in this report be recognized and addressed. Incorporating stakeholder input in to the vision, goals, and strategic plan in a straightforward and transparent manner will help the Council build upon the trust that was gained through the initial stage of the project.