

Comments on Upcoming Bluefish Stock Assessment

TO: Ms, Catlin Starks

ASMFC

I offer these comments in hopes that they will become part of the bluefish stock assessment effort that will be done this winter (2018-19).

It is very clear to anyone who looks at the data or who fishes for bluefish without the goal of financial payment that bluefish stocks are in precipitous decline and have been since 1980. If one compares ASMFC data on bluefish stocks from 1980 to the last report, it shows a 50% decline. That's the science and it cannot be ignored or disputed.

Yet, the keen observer notices other changes in bluefish abundance and distribution over that time period, and these observations have been increasing progressively the last 10 years.

We, as scientists, know that as a population expands so too does the range, and when the population shrinks so too does the range. Therefore, in keeping with the science we have noticed fewer adult bluefish and for shorter periods of time beginning in the 1990s but acutely so since 2012. This decline has reached a peak, the last two years, when almost no adult bluefish have taken up residence in the western Sound, where once there were vast schools in every harbor and in the Sound, too. Added to the lack of fish in L.I. Sound was a failure of bluefish runs in the fall along South Shore ocean beaches. Since 2013 there have been no fall runs, rather scattered one-tide appearances of adult fish and only in a few spots.

Recruitment that was generally enormously successful from the 1950s through the 1980s accounted for the proper population of bluefish along the east coast corresponding to those decades. However, in recent years recruitment has been spotty and the number of young fish entering the estuaries in the summer cannot compare to the decades of the 50s through the 80s.

Yes, there are local abundances, but wide spread abundance of snapper blues has been missing for some time, whereas in the decades mentioned above large numbers of young blues were everywhere and not localized. Poor recruitment and normal harvesting has led to a steep decline. I don't know what your scientists will find, but an impartial examination that explores all areas and venues should demonstrate the decline. It is crucial for recreational anglers and the various businesses they access that everything be done to expand the size of the bluefish population. Crucial to that end are the management strategies that are adopted.

In terms of management, we need to maintain the traditional recreational/commercial harvest percentage of 85-15%: a distribution that has not been strictly adhered to recently. This is a truly a recreational species and the commercial harvest must be curtailed. Furthermore, a 15 fish per angler per day is much too large: it should be 5 fish given the shrinking population. Similarly, state transfers should not be permitted. In a time when stocks need to be rebuilt, why not save the

blues that are not harvested in one state as a growth plus for the entire population that might speed up the reestablishment of full population size.

With so many fish populations either fully exploited or depressed (examples: northern weakfish, blackfish, and winter flounder) it is imperative that management strategies do everything possible to regrow the bluefish population. A large population of bluefish is not only important for anglers, it is a mainstay for bait and tackle shops, local party boat and charter boats, local lure manufacturers, marinas, and guides. Especially with other species reduced in numbers, large numbers of bluefish may be the only line of defense for many of these businesses.

So, please assess not only from the center of bluefish ranges, but from estuarine locales away from the ocean. We know that blues are pelagic and, if not pushed into the estuaries by competition, will prefer to remain in the ocean. Thus, it is imperative that sampling and questionnaires include the bays and harbors as well as L.I. Sound. When a proper stock assessment shows us the reality we must make recommendations for a conservative management plan so that the stocks can rebound.

Thank you for your consideration.

William A. Muller, Ph.D.