



## **Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report**

**February 2022**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Tilefish Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on February 24, 2022 to review the Fishery Information Document and develop the following Fishery Performance Report. The primary purpose of this report is to contextualize catch histories by providing information about fishing effort, market trends, environmental changes, and other factors. A series of trigger questions listed below were posed to the AP to generate discussion of observations in the golden tilefish fishery. Please note: Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

**Advisory Panel members present:** Fred Akers (Private), Daniel Farnham Jr. (Commercial), Carl Forsberg (For-Hire/Commercial), Gregory Hueth (Private/For-hire), Michael Johnson (Commercial), and Laurie Nolan (Commercial).

**Others present:** Wes Townsend (Council), Paul Nitschke (NEFSC), Daniel Farnham Sr. (Council Member), Scott Lenox (Council Member), Joe Cimino (Council Member), Doug Potts (GARFO), Lee Anderson (SSC), Jason Didden (Council Staff), and José Montañez (Council Staff).

### **Trigger questions:**

1. What factors have influenced recent catch (markets/economy, environment, regulations, other factors)?
2. Are the current fishery regulations appropriate? How could they be improved?
3. What would you recommend as research priorities?
4. What else is important for the Council to know?

### **Market/Economic Conditions**

While market prices and landings have been improving, the fishery is still experiencing some COVID-19 pandemic issues. The Industry is not working at full capacity, making fewer trips per year, trying to maintain consistent product prices. The market cannot handle too much volume of tilefish or prices drop dramatically. Due to price increases in all operating expenses, fuel, bait, food, ice and fishing gear, the Industry must continue to stagger landings and cap their total catch per trip.

### **Environmental Conditions**

Industry reported that windy conditions have impacted fishing (e.g., timing, trip duration, etc.) in some instances.

## **Management Issues**

The AP recommends that MRIP not be used as a tool for management or stock assessment purposes. When discussing the MRIP data, it is pointed out that there is a huge lack of shoreside intercepts, causing the data to be unreliable, and therefore does not capture recreational golden tilefish effort or landings accurately. There is also fear that MRIP data could somehow be used down the line for allocation purposes.

Two advisors suggested there should be further analysis of directed fishing at the current blueline trip limit and golden incidental limits. These limits were generally designed to cover incidental catch in other directed fisheries, but can be combined, currently to create a directed trip. The goal is to not encourage directed fishing with these limits, but to accommodate incidental catch in other directed fisheries that encounter tilefish as an incidental catch to their other directed fishing efforts.

## **General Fishing Trends**

Industry members commented CPUE increased in 2021. More fish are being caught with the same trip effort than were caught in 2020.

Fishermen indicated a good mix of fish in 2021, perhaps better than in previous years (both in terms of weight and landings mix). The overall catch percentage of small/kittens is increasing for some of the Montauk and Barnegat Light vessels.

A larger amount of small/kittens (2 to 3.5 pounds) were present in 2021 compared to previous years. Industry feels that biomass is increasing and they see multiple year classes being recruited into the fishery. Overall, a positive trend is evident and CPUE is increasing as a result.

## **Other Issues**

NOAA should have a link or reference to the Tilefish permit requirement on their HMS permit renewal website. Almost every private vessel fishing deep enough to catch tilefish has an HMS permit. I have made this comment before. I renewed my HMS permit for this year, and there was no reference to the tilefish permit requirement. There have been recurring complaints that many private vessels are fishing for tilefish without the permit. NOAA and MAFMC are missing an important outreach opportunity by not putting a reference to the tilefish permit on the HMS permit shop website.

Advisors also indicated that more enforcement at the state level is required to enforce tilefish/recreational permit requirements.

Another AP member indicated that while there are five headboats that fish for tilefish (both blueline and golden) in the mid-Atlantic they have a limited number of dedicated tilefish trips throughout the season (summertime). For example, the boat that has the largest number of trips scheduled during the year (a boat Point Pleasant) has about 24 scheduled trips per year and not all trips are conducted (i.e., taking 50 to 60% of scheduled trips) and in some instances not all of them are full. The other four boats have substantially less tilefish trips scheduled per year.

For-hire effort was reduced in 2020/2021 due to COVID-19, and the industry is expecting the same for 2022. In addition, the industry experienced cancellations of overnight trips in 2020/2021 due to the pandemic. Furthermore, in 2020/2021, tuna fishing was better than average, which resulted in less boats targeting golden tilefish. As a general rule, when tuna fishing is not good, anglers offset those trips by targeting tilefish.

AP members indicated that Captains and crew should be included in the comingled bag limit (recreational possession limit) for a trip. In other words, the Captain and Crew should also be allotted a bag limit.

AP members indicated that the landings monitoring program of the IFQ system is very reliable. In all, there is good accountability mechanisms to track landings in the directed commercial fishery (IFQ vessel) and VTR data (commercial and recreational vessels). However, there is concern that directed incidental trips (non-otter trawl vessels) may be missing. Currently, there is no accurate information of catch/landings by private recreational anglers. Happy to see that the recreational permitting/reporting requirements are in place. However, we need to do further outreach/enforcement to improve reporting.

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a differential trip limit (for-hire vs private) and longer recreational trips. In addition, they suggested that the Council considers recreational management strategies (e.g., longer recreational trips, multi-day bag limits), structured after the Gulf of Mexico regulations (would make filling trips easier). Multi-day bag limits are important because a hand full of boats target tilefish in January-February when the black sea bass season is closed and while they do not catch much tilefish, this management change could help their business sell more trips. These management changes could be considered when a quota liberalization is on the table (quota going up).

Some AP members would like the Council to consider a recreational allocation.

Some AP members indicated concerns about relaxing recreational regulations (as they could potentially lead to higher recreational landings) while the commercial quota could remain at *status quo* levels or potentially decrease in the future.

A commercial AP member expressed concerns over increasing any effort, bag limit or quota in the fishery at this time. They felt it would be unfair to allow for an increase in effort/bag limit in the recreational sector while maintaining *status quo* for the commercial sector.

### **Research Priorities**

Panel members indicated concern about the lack of biological sampling of landings on the dock. They emphasized the need of the shoreside sampling and the importance of this data for stock assessment purposes. Advisors indicated that keeping sampling at the current level or increasing it is very important.