



**Small Mesh Multispecies Fishery Management Plan
Scoping Hearing**

Narragansett Town Hall
Narragansett, RI
Wednesday, May 31 2006

Eight individuals attended the scoping hearing in Narragansett, RI. The audience contained three fishermen, three fisheries organization representatives, and one member of academia. NEFMC member Mark Gibson (Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management) chaired the meeting, and NEFMC member David Simpson (Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection) attended as well.

The meeting began with introductions by the Chair. NEFMC staff (Chad Demarest) gave an overview of the Amendment / Fishery Management Plan process as it relates to Small Mesh Multispecies, and discussed the format for the scoping hearing.

It was pointed out that the management action might involve separating the Small Mesh Multispecies fishery from the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and creating a stand-alone FMP for this fishery. Such an action would also require an Amendment of the Northeast Multispecies FMP, which would most likely be Amendment 14 to that Plan. Participants were informed that, should a separate FMP be implemented for the Small Mesh Multispecies Fishery, it would either include (A) one of the four issues summarized in the Small Mesh Multispecies Scoping Document, or, if no action was taken by the Council on these issues, (B) the regulations that currently govern the fishery with no changes. This is to say that, should no action be taken by the Council with on the issues in the scoping document, the creation of a stand-alone Fishery Management Plan for the Small Mesh Multispecies fishery would not otherwise change the regulation of this fishery.

After a few procedural questions, public scoping comments were taken specific to each of the four issues contained in the scoping document. Those issues are:

- (1) Limited entry in the Small Mesh Multispecies fishery
- (2) Hard total allowable catch (TAC)
- (3) Possible restrictions on the juvenile whiting fishery
- (4) Dedicated access privileges

Summary of the scoping hearing

Overall, the participants were favorable toward the potential for limited entry in the fishery; were somewhat cold to the idea of hard TACs; saw a need for protecting juvenile whiting but had no suggestions for doing so; and were somewhat neutral about the ideas surrounding dedicated access privileges. There was little diversity of opinion on any of

the topics—all the speakers tended to re-iterate similar points, or point out different angle regarding the same general concern. Data accuracy was again mentioned as a large problem, with attendees favoring the Vessel Trip Report data over the dealer-reported data. They did point out, however, many trips in both data systems that were reported as “3,000 lbs” that were more likely “30,000 lbs,” so the data inaccuracies they reported exist in both data sets.

Regarding limited entry, the attendees focused strongly on the “devil” in the details. One attendee pointed out that a Point Judith fisherman could consider himself a whiting fisherman despite not having actively landed substantial amounts of the fish in four or five years. The changes in the fishery, it was pointed out, have been dramatic...favorable to some, less so to others. No one spoke in opposition to using the control date (March 25, 2003) as an end date for qualification, and two attendees spoke in favor of enforcing that date. No comments regarding minimum landings for qualification were made. A few attendees expressed desire to use landings as far back as 1980, which others felt the beginning of the VTR period (mid-1994) was appropriate. One attendee spoke in favor of 1996, as that was what was used in groundfish Amendment 13. Some concerns about fabricating landings (a la the squid fishery in an unknown Massachusetts port) were raised. Others expressed concerns about landings criteria based on dealer data when some dealers were not reporting their landings. Some dealers sold directly to Spain, and some landings got confused due to the eventual destination of the fish (that is, fish landed in Rhode Island but sold in New York may or may not have been accurately reported).

Regarding hard TACs, all attendees expressed a preference for limited entry without a hard TAC. The primary concern noted by five of the participants was the lack of scientific certainty for forming the basis of a TAC. There was limited discussion of the recreational fishery and TACs, as one attendee favored turning the issue over to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission due to the fact that the activity in question tends to take place in State waters. Discussions on mechanisms for limiting or preventing derby-style fishing practices under a TAC focused on the fact that a TAC was likely to create a derby, and experiences in similarly managed fisheries (loligo, scup, fluke) were not positive. As in the previous scoping hearing, the question regarding individual allocations of a TAC was taken up under item four, dedicated access privileges.

Regarding protections for juvenile whiting, all attendees noted that the protection of juvenile whiting was important. Ideas on implementing such a strategy seemed to focus on eliminating inshore fishery in order to rebuild it.

Regarding dedicated access privileges (DAPs), attendees were hesitant to speak in favor or in opposition to any one idea due to lack of specificity. Some attendees favored the concept of sectors, but did not want to see the resource handed over to individuals. There was also concern expressed by one attendee that, for example, an offshore allocation of whiting could detract from inshore fisherman’s ability to land the fish if it were to come inshore for any length of time. Another attendee wanted to make sure that the numbers added up, that the sum of the allocations did not add up to a number that the fishery could

not sustain. This brought the conversation back full-circle, to a lack of data for setting a TAC, etc.

The following are the specific comments from the hearing, as transcribed by staff:

Initial issues

“I’m not certain that a three inch diamond mesh is the right mesh. I think that 3 inch square is more appropriate. We need mesh studies to explore other options.”

“There’s an ecosystem issue that I want to look at with whiting, and that is the relationship between squid and whiting. When whiting are down, illex goes up and vice versa. If we can examine this relationship, we may actually learn something.”

Limited Entry into the small mesh multispecies fishery

“Can we use landings prior to the control date?” The Chair responded *“Yes.”*

“Given the diversity of the boats involved, it’s entirely possible for a small boat in PJ to consider him self a whiting fisherman, but not participate in the fishery for 4 or 5 years. Where that line is drawn is very important.”

“The issue of the historical fishery will get more dramatic the farther south you go. The inshore landings inshore have been declining, but landings from offshore have been coming in to Point Judith and Connecticut. New Jersey landings have been decreased, but they have a large historical participation. The change of the nature of the fishery benefited some and not others.”

“The Gulf of Maine never lost access to the whiting fishery...they could have just as easily moved the boat to chase the resource.”

“All of these things are based on overall landings...there’s a serious discrepancy between the landings.”

“On communities, this fishery has been market-driven...prices fluctuate wildly, so in light of fishing costs and fish availability...so boats are going to chase the resource if they want to fish on whiting.”

“I don’t want to see a focus on the last 4-5 years...1994 thru control date.”

“It’s very important that we use 1994 thru control date and not beyond.”

“I think any date range should go back slightly before the Spanish market, because the market hasn’t been as good since then.”

“Data are missing before spring of 1994. In some cases it would be helpful to look at the number of whiting trips per year as a potential for Limited Access criteria. On trips where more than 20K lbs were landed.”

“The Council must recognize the opportunistic nature of the fishery. Assume that the historical fishery range may come back, and don’t limit access to recent participants...and also don’t exclude historical participants. I’d be more comfortable going back into the 1980s.”

“Squid went back to 1980 in their amendment.”

“Was the precedent not set when groundfish limited days? It’s my feeling that we should use 1996 through the control date.”

“Herring went back 10 years, monkfish went back 5 years...”

“I’m worried about fabricated landings.”

“I’m worried about underreporting because the dealers didn’t report.”

“I just want to say that, in summary, yes, Limited Access is a good idea.

“It’s not only a good idea, it has to happen.”

Hard total allowable catch (TAC)

“I am not in favor of hard TAC management because often times the science behind it is not adequate. We don’t know as much about the fish as we should, and it’s irresponsible to jump in with whiting.”

“The demand for a hard TAC will be high, but it would not be a good idea to do separate TACs for the two hake species [presumably silver and red hake]. I’m not saying that a hard TAC is a bad idea, but I am saying that we don’t know enough about the two species to do separate TACs.”

“Note that the last stock assessment could not estimate MSY.”

“I agree...the science is not sufficient to go with a hard TAC. I look at the squid fishery...it’s a complete nightmare, it encourages a derby style fishery...I can’t take too much more of what’s going on with the squid fishery. That’s a problem that I see inherent with hard TACs.”

“I would consider asking the ASMFC to take the lead on the recreational fishery...the Council could send a letter requesting they take action on that.”

Possible restrictions in the juvenile whiting fishery

“We are opposed to the targeting of any juvenile whiting. It seems like when you have a situation where you’re sending the biggest boats after the smallest fish. I think it’s been the demise of the inshore stocks, it seems to me anyway. The targeted juvenile fishery seems to have been the end of the inshore fishery. We should try to grow the stock, not shrink it...the key to a healthy inshore stock would be to eliminate the juvenile fishery.”

“You have no choice. If you had good science and could manage by hard TAC, then the juvenile fishery wouldn’t matter. What do you need to get a solid juvenile fishery? Good science. Until the numbers are there, we should be very precautionary on the juvenile fishery.”

“I think we do need to be very careful with the juvenile fish...if a market opens up that raises the juvenile price, then the fishery could expand dramatically. The price doesn’t have to go up too much more before you could direct on the juveniles.”

Dedicated access privileges

“I am not opposed to the development of harvesting cooperatives. I am opposed to handing of the resource over to individuals. The concept is OK, but the devil is in the details.”

“Follow the lead of the general category scallop and inshore lobsterman, you’ll find that the politicians and decision makers are behind the curve. We know enough to not let the big corporations take over the fisheries.”

“I’m concerned that where the whiting seem to be most abundant for the last few years has been well offshore. Under any assignment of harvesting rights, in a scenario where the whiting come inshore again, and people could be excluded. We’ve got some wildly fluctuating fish...when the whiting shift their zip code, I’m concerned that guys won’t have the ability to catch them. I don’t want to build a bycatch problem, or an access problem.”

“This MAFMC report [unsure what report is being referenced]...in 2001, there was only 33 boats that landed over 250K lbs in that year. Now take your landings, 19 million lbs...so I’m not sure how you make the numbers add up. If you form cooperatives based on landings, must make sure that the numbers add up.”

“Because of the demand for info on certain species, NEMS became the basis for data collection...so a lot of less-important data didn’t get treated equally. There’s almost no info on the whiting fishery that we can use here.”

“I don’t want DAPs to compromise the flexibility that has historically existed in the fishery.”

“Semantics may muddy the issue. Don’t call a DAP a Sector or a Cooperative...they are different.”

“I just think that right now, with the stock, the fuel price and the fish price, that kind of manages the fishery itself. It’s becoming more difficult to fish for whiting. If we do too much on this, we could make it more difficult.”

“If you have a hard TAC, then a lot of things could fall out. Same thing if you give the appropriate number of boats the permits.”

“In that case, the very best management plan is one that doesn’t change things.”

“We need to limit the fishery to what it is right now, before overfishing starts.”

“Understand that the fish move around more than the science gives them credit for. The inshore landings from Rhode Island to New Jersey are believed by the fisherman to have been from Cultivator Shoals” [that is, northern fish caught in the south].