

Northeast Multispecies (Small Mesh/Whiting) Fishery Management Plan

Species Managed Under Fishery Management Plan (FMP)

Three species of groundfish are managed under a separate “small mesh multispecies” program, Amendment 12 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. These are silver hake (whiting), red hake (ling), and offshore hake (blackeye whiting). Two stocks of whiting and red hake are recognized, divided across Georges Bank, although a significant amount of mixing is known to occur in that area. Offshore hake is considered to be one stock with a more southern and deep-water distribution.

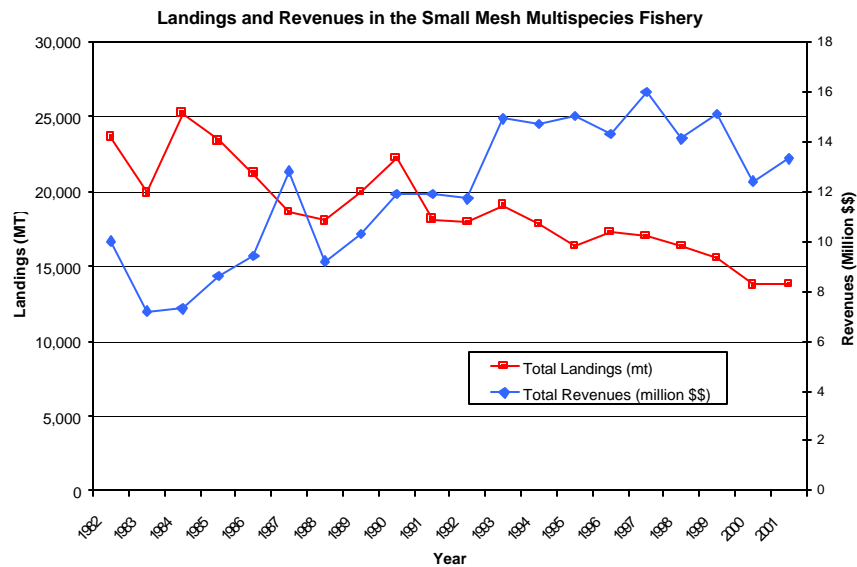
Management Plan Overview

Amendment 12 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP was implemented at the beginning of the 2000 fishing year (May 1, 2000) and initiated the management program for small mesh multispecies. Amendment 12 also introduced offshore hake to the multispecies complex. The objective of the management program is to reduce fishing mortality on whiting and red hake and to rebuild the small mesh multispecies stocks to their long-term sustainable levels. Small mesh multispecies fisheries are managed primarily through a combination of mesh size restrictions and possession limits. Because the intent of the management measures is to encourage vessels to use larger mesh (3-inches or more) to target whiting, higher possession limits are allowed with larger mesh sizes. However, whiting is a component of many small mesh fisheries, some of which target species like squid with mesh smaller than 3-inches. Lower whiting possession limits for these smaller mesh sizes are included to minimize the discarding of whiting in non-directed fisheries. Amendment 12 also contains a very restrictive Year 4 default measure to be implemented on May 1, 2003 if the plan is not meeting its objectives.

A recent review of progress towards the Amendment 12 objectives led the Council’s Whiting Monitoring Committee to conclude that the Year 4 default measure is not necessary to further reduce effort in either stock area. The Monitoring Committee provided a range of options to moderately increase effort in the northern area and recommended that effort should not increase in the southern area while the southern stock continues to rebuild. The Council is currently considering these recommendations as part of Framework 37 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. Framework 37 is scheduled to be implemented prior to May 1, 2003.

History of the Fishery

The U.S. commercial whiting fishery began in the mid-1800s. It wasn’t until the 1940s that the fishery expanded, due primarily to technical advances in refrigeration and improved handling techniques, which extended the shelf life of this highly perishable product. By 1950, U.S. commercial landings of whiting had increased to more than 45,000 metric tons (mt), and the fishery began to move offshore, prosecuted almost exclusively by otter trawl vessels. By 1962, foreign fleets were exploiting the whiting and red hake stocks on Georges Bank, and landings exceeded a record 351,000 mt in 1965. Foreign fishing for whiting and red hake ceased on Georges Bank by 1980 and in the Mid-Atlantic area by 1986. Since that time, markets have remained quite limited, and landings have slowly declined. Since 1998, total small mesh multispecies landings have decreased 15% to some of the lowest levels on record.



Fishery Status

In total, the abundance of small mesh multispecies throughout the region has been increasing over time. Both the northern stocks of whiting and red hake are currently considered rebuilt, or above their biomass (B_{MSY}) target values. The southern stock of whiting is above its biomass threshold value and is rebuilding to the biomass (B_{MSY}) target. According to their current overfishing definitions, none of the five small mesh multispecies stocks are considered overfished at this time.

