New England Fishery Management Council

SUMMARY
Research Steering Committee Meeting
Courtyard by Marriott, East Boston, MA
June 25, 2012

Committee members: Goethel (chair), Preble (vice chair); Libby, Beutel, Brogan (absent), DuPaul, Hoey, Pol, Serchuk (absent), Platz (absent)
Staff: Haring

The primary purpose of the meeting was to review six cooperative research final reports received since the last meeting earlier this year. In addition, the Committee heard a report from the Northeast Regional Cooperative Research Program, which focused on NOAA's research budget, and a report from the NMFS' Regional Office on the agency's efforts to respond to the Council's concerns about scientific research catch, and other cooperative research matters. The Committee was scheduled to review the following reports, but had not received the Atlantic Sturgeon/gillnet study report (#3, below), and did not discuss it:

1. REDNET - A Network to Redevelop a Sustainable Redfish (Sebastes fasciatus) Trawl Fishery in the Gulf of Maine; Kohl Kanwit, Mike Pol, Pinguo He. (received May 21, 2012)
2. Optimizing the Georges Bank Scallop Fishery by Maximizing Meat Yield and Minimizing Bycatch; 2011 Sea Scallop Research Set-Aside, Ronald Smolowitz, Kathryn Goetting, Farrell Davis, Dan Ward, Coonamessett Farm Foundation, Inc. (received May, 2012)
3. A Study on the Use of Tie-Downs and Their Impact on Atlantic Sturgeon, Marine Mammal Bycatch and Targeted Catch in the New Jersey Monkfish Fishery. Fox, D. A., L. M. Brown, K. W. Wark, and J. L. Armstrong. 2011, NOAA Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program* (*not reviewed*)
4. Pilot Project to assess need and initialize a methodology to groundtruth existing mulit-beam and side-scan sonar seafloor charts – NEC Report, Salvatore Genovese, Ph.D. Northeast University (received October 24, 2011)
5. Ecological role of adult and juvenile anadromous forage fish in downeast Maine estuaries: sea-run alewife and groundfish prey – NEC Report, Karen Wilson, University of Southern Maine (rec'd December 19, 2011)
6. A Collaborative effort to examine new strategies for managing closed bottom habitats for sea scallops – NEC Report, Dr. Brian F. Beal, University of Maine at Machias, Terry Stockwell and Chris Bartlett (rec'd December 21, 2011)

NEFSC staff provided an update on the 2012 research budget and funding availability, and noted that there is little information available about the budget for FY13 at this time. The Northeast Cooperative Research Program (NCRP) is working on completing FY12 budget implementation as we approach the end of the fiscal year. The NCRP has maintained support for several longer-term projects and programs, including support for

the research steering committee, the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP), supplemental funding for the ME-NH inshore trawl survey, and ongoing support for our Study Fleet program, as well as the associated enhanced biological sampling program that has been expanded from a primary focus on flatfish reproductive productivity (ongoing), to now processing black sea bass samples. Additional FY12 funds were provided to three of the FY10 network projects to continue support for optional years; including, additional funds for the fishery avoidance - selectivity tool project with GMRI, additional funds for the GEARNET network, and funding for squid-butterfish feeding and species interaction modeling under the Rutgers -Garden State Seafood squid network project. PI's for all projects have been encouraged to reach out to sectors and solicit additional gear research and gear demonstration projects. Cooperative Research staff is continuing to support and aid our network partners in reaching out to industry and increasing involvement with those activities.

Funds have also been provided to support additional vessel days at sea to complete the two year dogfish tagging project scheduled for late July. An additional award is being finalized to support a pilot longline survey with complementary jig sampling stations in a collaborative effort between Penobscott East Resource Center and UME focused on the eastern Gulf of Maine, cod recovery and data for several data poor stocks including cusk and wolffish. There is an open solicitation for vessel quotes to expand our Study Fleet and we are awaiting delivery of 10 prototype wireless temperature depth probes that will be deployed aboard 5 lobster and 5 trawl vessels to test performance. If the probes function appropriately we plan on purchasing additional probes this year for distribution to study fleet vessels. This will allow the vessels real time access to tow specific bottom temperatures. This effort will then build on work the cooperative research staff has been involved in with oceanographic, ecosystem, habitat and pop dynamics staff within the NEFSC and partners associated with Rutgers, SMAST and the regional oceanographic networks. The study fleet data on bottom temperatures associated with tow records is in final QA/QC processing and we are working to have oceanographers incorporate this information into their models that predict and forecast bottom temperatures on fine geographic scales (3 - 5 km resolution). The goal is to develop a 3 to 5 day forecast of bottom temperatures that can be provided to fishermen through web access. In combination with ongoing habitat and hot-spot modelling efforts supported in the earlier network projects, the NCRP is working with our partners to develop products useful to the fishing community in avoiding stocks with low ACLs.

NMFS staff informed the Committee that the agency was just announcing two recent RSA awards for monkfish, covering genetic stock structure research and an age-and-growth methodology validation study. He also noted that scallop RSA solicitations for 2013 have been issued, and that monkfish would be forthcoming.

Another Regional Office staffer informed the Committee that the mid-sized Ruhle trawl was adopted in Multispecies Framework 47, effective May 1, 2012. The gear configuration in the regulations contained some modifications to what the Committee had reviewed based on discussions with the gear researchers involved. He also updated the ongoing regional and national-level efforts to address the Council’s concerns with

accounting for, and disposition of scientific research catch. He provided some agency perspective on the REDNET project that was scheduled for review at this meeting, and the anticipated increase in similar gear-based sector exemption requests in the future, noting that supporting research should be properly vetted prior to being used as a basis for granting such exemptions.

The Committee then began discussion of the REDNET report. This review was unique in that it was done at the request of the Regional Administrator (RA) as part of NMFS' consideration of a groundfish sector exemption request. Under the sector management program established by Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, the RA has the authority to approve or disapprove requests by individual sectors for exemptions to specific multispecies regulations. In this case, the request was for an exemption to the minimum mesh size so sector vessels could target redfish. The RA requested the Committee review the report of the mesh selectivity experiment to determine if the results supported the granting of the exemption. One Committee member (Pol) recused himself from the decision because he was one of the principal investigators on the project, but presented the report to the Committee.

In response to some comments that the report only covered part of the proposed experiment, testing only 4.5" mesh, the PI stated that the project is not yet complete, and that comparative mesh studies using twin-trawl nets, are planned for the future. One committee member noted that the complete project, of which the mesh studies are only one component, is very comprehensive and covers a range of issues, including processing infrastructure and other economic aspects relevant to re-establishing the redfish fishery as a sustainable and profitable fishery. On that note, a representative of the sector seeking the exemption noted that the sector's plan would include establishing purchasing contracts so that the burgeoning fishery, which is a high-volume fishery, would not result in market crashes. Another member of the committee commented that initial investigations indicate that there is a strong demand for redfish, which will help to establish a stable fishery, and that the lobster fishery is also a significant market for the redfish racks due to other issues in the bait market.

The Chair noted that the committee has been asked to review a progress report, not a final report, and that the technical review provided by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center raised some important issues. In response, another member stated, that while there are some components that need further study, it is clear that 6.5" mesh is inappropriate because it is not effective retaining redfish, and there is a high degree of mortality of fish that escape the net at the surface. He also pointed out that there are quotas to protect against overfishing the stock, and 100% observer coverage to monitor other species bycatch. He said the risks of overfishing and excessive bycatch are at an acceptable level, especially considering the overall conditions of the multispecies fishery, and the need for viable alternatives to other groundfish fisheries, and the fact that the request is only for one year, and can be revoked at any time. Several other committee members agreed.

Consensus

To recommend staff draft a letter to NMFS indicating that the Committee concurs with the findings of the NEFSC report. The letter should state that an exemption to the minimum mesh size requirements could be issued on a year-by-year basis, and that sector should be informed that the terms and requirements of the exemption could change in the future. The Committee notes that the requirement for 100% observer coverage will support further development of appropriate fishery parameters and regulations.

Following this discussion, NMFS staff noted that under sector management, there will likely be more demand for review of research supporting sector exemption requests, and suggested that at some point, the Council may want to revisit the RSC policy and procedures to consider establishing a formal process for conducting such reviews. The Chair concurred that this is a subject that should be taken up by the Committee at a meeting where the discussion is announced in the meeting notice. He also suggested that RSC reviews would still need to be done on final reports that are accompanied by formal technical reviews.

The second report reviewed by the Committee was "Optimizing the Georges Bank Scallop Fishery by Maximizing Meat Yield and Minimizing Bycatch". One Committee member (DuPaul) who was also an investigator in the project, recused himself from the decision. The Principal Investigator gave a presentation on the research which covered a wide range of components besides groundfish bycatch and scallop meat yields, including reproductive biology and disease pathology. He noted that the project is ongoing, and the findings raise a number of issues warranting further research. He also observed that there is a substantial amount of data already compiled that could be used for management decisions by the Councils and Groundfish and Scallop Plan Development Teams. One Committee member questioned the validity of the technical review, noting that it contains a number of instances of subjective and favorable comments ("excellent"), while overlooking a number of shortcomings, such as, missing data analyses and mismatched figure and table references, He was unsure whether the Committee could use the report and review to make management recommendations. The Chair of the Scallop Plan Development Team stated that the PDT would access the data and develop its recommendations based on further analyses, including whether the data is sufficient to support any recommendations, not just on the conclusions of the written report.

Consensus

The Committee agreed that the report is not yet a final report in the traditional sense, but some components have immediate application to some current management needs. The RAMP component results are not sufficient for application to setting mortality rates in the assessment. The PDTs have access to all of the data, and that data are sufficient for the PDTs to use in developing management measures, even though additional data will be collected over the next year. The report also raises a number of questions for future research or investigation.

The next report reviewed by the Committee was, “A Collaborative Effort to Examine New Strategies for Managing Closed Bottom Habitats for Sea Scallops”. This research was conducted inshore along the coast of Maine. One Committee member noted that the project identified a method for handling scallops prior to deployment but not much more. Another noted that the researchers learned a lot from their work but did not achieve their objectives. He suggested that the scallops should be tagged to help determine what happens to it when reseeded. A member of the public noted that scallop enhancement is relevant to the future of scallop management offshore, and the projected may have long-term applicability.

Consensus

> The Committee agrees with the technical review and also agrees that the project has limited applicability to scallop management in federal waters since the project was conducted in an inshore area.

The Committee then discussed the report, “Pilot Project to Assess Need and Initialize a Methodology to Groundtruth Existing Mulit-beam and Side-scan Sonar Seafloor Charts.”

Consensus

> The Committee agrees with the technical review, and that the project did not succeed in developing a methodology with future application. The report should be put on file for possible consideration by the Habitat Committee.

The final report to be reviewed was, “Ecological Role of Adult and Juvenile Anadromous Forage Fish in Downeast Maine Estuaries: Sea-Run Alewife and Groundfish Prey”. Committee members noted that the technical reviews ranged from “poor” to “excellent”. Members stated that the project was poorly designed relative to its objectives, and that the report contains unsupported statements.

Consensus

> The Committee agrees that the report should be filed under groundfish research, but that it has no immediate application to management.