

Skate Amendment 3 Scoping Hearings
Staff summary of comments
May 22-24, 2007

The hearings were sparsely attended, the highest turnout was in Narragansett, RI by a processor and several fishermen that target skates for the lobster bait fishery. No fishermen that target skates for the wing fishery attended. All were in support of rebuilding skates in the context of an overall groundfish management policy and favored combining skates into groundfish management via Amendment 16. There were no comments on how that would be done, however, or whether skate fishermen would qualify for a groundfish permit, or whether groundfish fishermen would be able to target skates, or whether fishermen in the scallop or monkfish fisheries would be able to land skates, if the plans were combined.

Groundfish fishermen were against additional measures to protect and rebuild skates, which could constrain their access to the groundfish fishery, particularly for the healthier stocks. Some suggested reducing the skate possession limit for the wing fishery. They were generally opposed to area management for skates to reduce incidental catch.

Fishermen in the bait fishery opposed additional restrictions on that fishery if the problem was caused by incidental catch and large amounts of discarding elsewhere. They commented that the differential Days at Sea (DAS) accounting was preventing fishermen from targeting skates in areas where the differential accounting applied.

Skate Amendment 3 Scoping Hearing
Gloucester City Hall
Gloucester, MA
May 22, 2007

Mike Leary chaired the hearing and read an introduction which outlined the purpose for the amendment and the expected timeline for developing the amendment.

The meeting was attended by two NOAA Fisheries employees and one skate advisor.

Comments:

Paul Perra (Resident City of Gloucester)

- Glad that Council is developing an amendment to address the overfished condition of skate stocks.

Chuck Casella. (Recreational Fisheries Alliance)

- Skates are a part of the groundfish complex and the Council should recognize the importance of the long term goal for groundfish rebuilding.
- The Council should avoid taking actions that jeopardize rebuilding of our groundfish stocks, including skates.

Skate Amendment 3 Scoping Hearing
Narragansett City Hall
Narragansett, RI
May 23, 2007

Dave Preble chaired the hearing and read an introduction which outlined the purpose for the amendment and the expected timeline for developing the amendment.

He summarized the purpose for the amendment as follows: NMFS has determined that winter skates are overfished. Thorny skates also have been overfished since 2003. Little and smooth skate are in danger of becoming overfished. The data for this determination are derived from an index based survey. Twelve percent (12%) of skates are landed whole, 34% landed as wings, and 54% of the total skate catch in 2006 are discarded.

The timeline for this amendment requires that written scoping comments must be received by May 30th. A framework of potential management alternatives are to be reported to the Council at the June meeting. The PDT will analyze the alternatives and the Council will approve a draft amendment in September, which would go to public hearing late this year. The Council would approve a final alternative in January and submit the final amendment by the February 2008 deadline.

The meeting was attended by a skate processor, three fishermen, two students from SMAST, a person from URI, and a local reporter.

Comments:

Bob Wescott – Part-time Judith skate and groundfish fisherman, skate advisor

- How the Council manages a wing possession limit is a concern. He favored a possession limit on a per trip basis with a maximum number of trips a vessel could make in a week. Such an approach would keep people from making multiple trips in a week to offset a lower wing possession limit.
- The new skate plan should be incorporated in groundfish Amendment 16, due to the skate waste being discarded, mostly in the groundfish fishery.

Andrea – Lobster bait company

- The company buys whole skates, which are primarily little skates.
- The skate plan should be included in the upcoming groundfish Amendment 16.
- The data used to determine the risk of overfishing occurring with the little skate should be examined closely.

- The bait fishery has declined due to the more restrictive lobster regulations. She was concerned that vessels targeting skates would be penalized due to discards in other sectors. Most RI boats target skates for bait, and during parts of the year, winter skates are abundant in the size that can be cut for wings.
- She asked the Council to favor alternatives that would protect the directed bait fishery.

Glenn Wescott – an owner of the FV Ocean State

- Some regulations, like the 2:1 DAS counting area in Southern New England, prevent fishermen to go out to catch bait fish or even large skates [because the revenue from skate landings does not justify the cost of using a groundfish day-at-sea at a 2:1 ratio].
- There has been quite a drop in little skate/bait landings, because of the double day-at-sea counting.

Frank Gable – URI Coastal Institute

- The Skate and Monkfish FMPs should be included in Groundfish Amendment 16, which would allow the Council to pursue more ecosystem management. The species [regulated by the three plans] are generally caught together. The whiting amendment should be also combined into groundfish management to move management toward ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries.

Skate Amendment 3 Scoping Hearing
Massachusetts Maritime Academy
Buzzards Bay, MA
May 24, 2007

Rip Cunningham chaired the hearing and read an introduction which outlined the purpose for the amendment and the expected timeline for developing the amendment, then opened the hearing for comments.

The meeting was attended by a groundfish fisherman and representatives of the CCCHFA and the Fisheries Survival Fund.

Comments:

Frank Mararchi – commercial fisherman from Scituate

- The driver of productivity in the region is the groundfish fishery, which skates are a component. Other than that, there is some directed fishery for skates occurring inshore with large mesh gillnets.
- He is concerned that because of actions taken to rebuild skates, fishermen would lose the opportunity to fish for groundfish.
- Skates are among most mobile of fish caught. There is a large variation in catch rates, probably caused by water temperature and the availability of feed. Sometimes skates dominate the catch or virtually disappear. He is concerned about discards, including thorny which are a significant portion of the catch in the Gulf of Maine. Survivorship from discarding is a key factor.
- Skates, being the first test of ACLs and AMs, could require a conservative approach which may make it more difficult to have access to groundfish.
- The present measures in groundfish fishery are failing to protect skates and achieve target fishing mortality rates. But the groundfish fishery management program has to be fixed before the Council can fix skates. Overlays of skate protective areas won't work. Output based management system for groundfish should be considered, including the proposed point system.

Ron Smolowitz – Fisheries Survival Fund

- Opposed to closing areas to skate fishing to fisheries that have a high bycatch of skates. It is folly to bring skates up to the level suggested which may keep other species like yellowtail flounder suppressed (due to species interactions). The Council should strive to achieve levels of the 1960s when things were more in balance.

- Area management for skates will be like the skate tail wagging all the fisheries. It would cause a huge economic loss and area management is not the proper approach. The first step should be a soft TAC looking at the landings of skates.
- The Council should manage skates in an ecosystem context.

Eric Brazer – Georges Bank cod hook and fixed gear sectors

- The association has clear support for hard TACs, ACLs, and output control management. Switching to accountable enforceable output controls will bring the mortality under control.
- Rather than managing by input controls, there should be more emphasis on enumeration of catch, including discarding.
- The current skate possession limit may be excessively high. The Council should consider a possible severe reduction in the possession limit to rebuild skates. Vessels very rarely achieve the 10,000 pound skate possession limit.
- Closing areas to rebuild skates is a touchy subject. Area management should include exemptions for gears proven not to interact with skates. Areas should be closed to gear that is accountable for the discard problem.
- Skate management should be folded into the Multispecies FMP. He was also concerned that requirements for skate rebuilding would cause fishermen to lose access to groundfish and healthy stocks.