



## New England Fishery Management Council

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### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** September 1, 2013  
**TO:** Skate Oversight Committee and Advisory Panel  
**FROM:** Skate PDT  
**SUBJECT:** **Skate PDT Meeting**

The PDT met in Braintree, MA on August 15, 2013 to discuss the specification package for 2014 and other skate issues.

#### **Stock Status and Catch**

The PDT reviewed the stock status determinations of the Northeast Skate Complex using Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) trawl survey data updated through Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 (for little skate only). Thorny skate was the only species determined to be overfished; both thorny and winter skates were experiencing overfishing (Appendix 1).

Despite overfishing occurring on winter skate, the overall ACL was not exceeded for the wing fishery. Only 65% of the 54,035 mt ACL was caught in 2012; accordingly, no Accountability Measures (AMs) were triggered. The total catch for 2012 was 32,740 mt composed of 11,179 mt of discards and 21,561 mt of landings. State landings were 1,407 mt.

#### **ABC Calculation**

The PDT investigated a preliminary ABC for the specifications package. The ABC is based on the catch/biomass medians and recent three year moving average of the trawl survey data. This estimate was a reduction on the last ABC calculation because of the change in winter skate survey index. The PDT adjusted the effectiveness of prohibition as recent work examining port sampling data (see 90-Day Finding for Thorny Skate) indicated landings of prohibited species were lower than previously thought. The proportion discarded was assumed to be 34%. The discard mortality estimates for little and winter skates (12 and 20% respectively) were the same as adjusted in the last specification action. The PDT decided to pursue further updating of discard mortality estimates for trawl gear for little (9%), winter (22%), thorny (23%) and smooth

skates (60%) (Mandelman et al. 2013) in order to utilize the best available science. A final ABC will be available after the revised discard mortality estimates have been incorporated.

## Overfishing

Both winter and thorny skate are experiencing overfishing, however, because winter is above the biomass target and is not overfished the Council is not required to develop measures for winter skate at this time. Thorny skate is overfished and overfishing is occurring; currently the stock is at 4.4% of its target biomass. The Council is expected to receive formal notice of the stock status before the September Council meeting; the Council will have one year to develop measures to end overfishing after that point. After a preliminary discussion, the PDT concluded that prohibiting possession was not allowing thorny skate to rebuild and considered gear restricted areas or closed areas may be necessary. The PDT agreed to use the hotspot analysis developed by the Closed Area Technical Team to identify hotspots of thorny skates.

A PDT member provided some preliminary kernel analysis on the decadal distribution of thorny skate from survey data that suggests a contraction into the GOM, particularly in parts of the WGOM closed area (Figure 1). This analysis was provided to give the PDT a broad sense of thorny skate distribution; the plot only represents the density of positive thorny skate tows. A default smoothing parameter was generated by ArcView based upon the distribution of the observations. The spring and fall surveys were pooled in each time period for the analysis; all survey data was converted to Albatross units using the approved calibrations. Another PDT member will examine discards by species from the observer data.

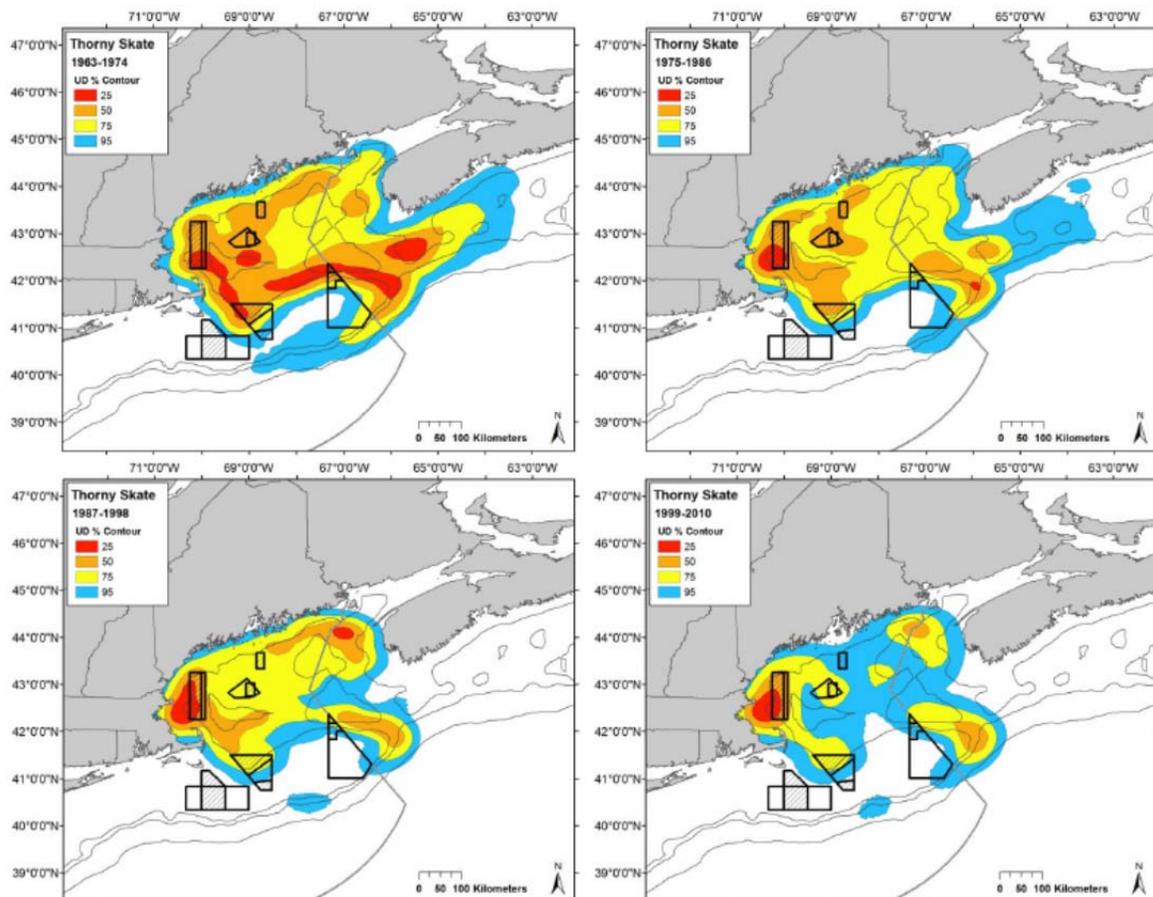


Figure 1. Fixed kernel utilization distribution of positive thorny skate tows for four time periods from the NEFSC bottom trawl survey relative to the Northeast Multispecies year-round closed areas and habitat closed areas. Warmer colors indicate higher density of thorny skate presence.

### **VTR codes**

The PDT discussed the current available VTR codes for reporting skate landings. The PDT concluded that the number of available codes could be reduced. The unclassified code, in particular, was considered unnecessary and inconsistent with the original FMP that requires landings to be reported by species. By removing this code, the PDT hoped it would encourage more species specific reporting of landings; currently 75% of the wing fishery is reported as unclassified despite this fishery consisting of almost entirely of winter skates. There is not regulatory requirement for the Committee or Council on this matter.

### **Benchmark Assessment**

The PDT was strongly in favor of a benchmark primarily to bring the overfishing definitions in line with ABC calculations. Landing of barndoor skate could also be examined along with an investigation of environmental conditions affecting stock status (primarily for thorny skate). A benchmark would also provide a more formal review of the updated discard mortality assumptions.

### **Trip Limits**

Trip limits were briefly discussed but the PDT did not have any recommendations; skate specifications will be reviewed by the SSC on September 16, 2013. Considering the overfishing status of winter skate, there may be no justification for raising the trip limits at this point. This issue will be revisited after the SSC meeting.

### **Priorities**

The PDT discussed potential priorities for 2014; measures to address overfishing of thorny skates and a benchmark assessment were both considered to be important priorities and would be recommended to the Skate Oversight Committee.