

Joint Skate Advisory Panel and Plan Development Team

DRAFT Meeting summary

May 31, 2007

Purpose of meeting: To develop a framework of alternatives to address the overfished condition of winter and thorny skates, as well as control mortality on little and smooth skates which are in danger of becoming overfished.

Attendance:

Advisors: Andrea Incollingo, Louis Julliard, Matt Linnell, James Sulikowski, Robert Wescott,
PDT: Kathy Sosebee, April Valliere, Tobey Curtis, Andrew Applegate
Others: Alyssa MacDonald, Fiona Hogan, Bill McCann

Summary:

The Advisors heard a summary of recommendations from the PDT (see memo from the PDT, dated May 30, 2007) on the rebuilding potential of winter skate and management measures that could be effective at controlling fishing mortality.

Analyzing new population data for winter skate, the PDT determined that it would be possible to rebuild winter skates in 10 years, which was within the range of biomass changes observed previously. The PDT also reported that the mean generation time for thorny skate would be similar to winter skate, but it would not be possible to rebuild to the target in 10 years. For little skate, while not needing a rebuilding plan, it would be possible to estimate similar parameters and rebuilding potential, but more analysis was needed.

The PDT estimated how much catch reduction would be needed to begin rebuilding winter skate, compared to 2005 levels. It also said that discards and unintentional landings of thorny and smooth were probably preventing biomass from increasing. Discard mortality for skates was assumed to range between 25 and 50 percent, based on various observations. There were considerable unidentified skate landings and mis-reported landings in the data, and that most controls on landing specific species would be problematic. The one measure that might be effective at controlling catches of particular skate species and reducing discards would be some form of area management, or gear restricted areas.

There was some initial discussion about whether skate management should be incorporated into the Multispecies FMP, either now or at some future time. Some felt there would be advantages to managing skates and groundfish holistically, while others felt that skates have their own management issues and should be managed differently. It was pointed out that combining skate and groundfish management would take time to resolve issues, but by itself it would not address the present overfishing problem or initiate rebuilding. On the other hand, uncertainty was expressed about how the multispecies regulations might change to an output control system using points and how that would apply to skate fishing.

The advisors also discussed the assumed discard mortality rate. It was recognized that discard mortality depends on conditions and circumstances, and that there was no research on this important factor. Both panels felt that determining discard mortality and improving species identification for the landings were top priorities. Although discard mortality will vary greatly over various conditions, gears, and handling methods, most felt that an assumed range of 25 to 50% was reasonable.

Some advisors pointed out that the 2:1 DAS counting off Southern New England was having a large effect on skate fishing. Other regulations in the monkfish and scallop fisheries were having an effect, but the results of these changes were unclear. They felt that this data should be analyzed.

Some advisors felt that a minimum mesh size would reduce the catch of little skate and juvenile winter skate, but others felt that solid information on gear selectivity is lacking and research is needed. Mr. Applegate thought that there might be useful information in the observer data to analyze the measured lengths of landed and discarded skates, because observers also collect information on mesh size. It would be useful to examine that data to see if mesh size made much of a difference.

The advisors discussed the value of using a target TAC with triggers that would tighten or loosen management measures, depending on catch. Some suggested a formulaic adjustment. It was pointed out that a recent paper identified problems with the monkfish adjustment process. The paper indicated that the monkfish adjustments were doomed to fail and would not achieve rebuilding.

The Advisors first developed a list of measures that it thought would be effective and then combined them into four distinct alternatives. Some advisors felt that something needed to be done to control mortality, while others argued for flexibility and time to examine the science more closely.

The measures that advisors thought would be effective to control catch were:

1. Reduce possession limit by x% on winter skate – dockside identification problem
2. Reduce possession limit by x% for the wing fishery and institute a possession limit for the whole skate (bait) fishery. May be specified as a daily/trip limit or as a weekly maximum for each vessel, similar to the state summer flounder regulations or the federal scup fishery regulations (e.g. “aggregate landings program” enrollment)
3. Minimum size restriction during peak egg laying cycles (~44-48 cm for little skate; ~90 cm for winter skate). Jun-Aug for winter skate. Implementation issues
4. Larger minimum mesh for skate fishery targeting large (winter) skate – need to analyze selectivity data from sea sampling.
5. Hard TACs (possibly by season/quarter, regional or triggers) and AMs for the wing and bait fisheries. Catch, including discards, no possession of skates for the remainder of the fishing year, in small amount for incidental catch. Overages would be deducted from the next year’s TAC. A trigger might cause an adjustment to a possession limit which applies to the fishery approaching a quota or catch limit.
6. A target TAC which would trigger a change in annual specifications (e.g. possession limit) as the monitored catch approaches the annual TAC. The PDT should be asked to develop an annual adjustment mechanism that does not jeopardize rebuilding.
7. Replace baseline review process with monitoring and skate management adjustment program
8. Explore and encourage bycatch reduction through gear modifications and other means, possibly via a TAC set aside research initiative.
9. Consolidate skate management into the Multispecies FMP

Area management and gear restricted areas were not chosen for the list, because advisors thought that fishermen would lose access to other valuable species, and there were other less-costly means for controlling skate catches. Requiring skates to be landed whole was also not chosen despite the difficulty identifying skates by species and enforcing some limits that would apply to particular species. Many vessels are not equipped to land whole skates, causing safety problems and requiring considerably more ice. In addition, there could be marketing problems, higher costs for on-shore processing, and disposal problems for the gurry.

The advisors proposed two alternatives to restrict skate catches, one alternative with a hard TAC and adjustments to account for annual overages and another with a target TAC with in-season triggers to change specifications, like possession limits. Two other alternatives were proposed as modifications to the status quo, because some felt that recent management and DAS changes were effectively reducing skate mortality and more regulations were unnecessary. One alternative introduced a possession limit for winter skate and a minimum size for skate species during spawning. The other alternative only added a target TAC with triggers.