



New England Fishery Management Council

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To: Tom Nies, Executive Director
From: Scientific and Statistical Committee
Date: April 21, 2014

Subject: Fishermen participation in SSC process

At the request of the Council Chair, the SSC discussed ways that fishermen might contribute more to the SSC process. The SSC agreed that fishermen have a unique and important perspective that can lend insights into biological, ecological and socio-economic trends. A fisherman attendee at the meeting provided an example in which the SSC's perception of risk was changed after learning about the abundance of skates in certain areas, which are caught by the same gears and affect catch rates of monkfish. In light of observations such as that, the SSC urges fishermen to attend and participate in its meetings whenever possible.

The SSC also recognized the value that fishermen's observations on stock status can offer in light of the inevitable lags between when scientific data are collected and formally incorporated into management via stock assessments and development of catch advice. Because of their often daily interaction with the resource, the qualitative observations of fishermen can provide more timely insights that can help the SSC determine whether a stock is likely trending in a positive or negative direction, and therefore the risk tolerance warranted in providing catch advice.

The SSC noted that such insights are especially important at a time when marine ecosystems are undergoing rapid change in response to climate change. Therefore, the SSC emphasized the importance of input from fishermen as the Council transitions toward ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM), wherein a broader range of factors and linkages are considered, and interactions between social and ecological systems are more explicitly considered. In the meantime before EBFM is more fully adopted by the Council, the SSC identified the potential value of fishermen insights especially for assessment and management of data-limited stocks.

The SSC urges fishermen to participate in the science process early, including the assessment process that precedes SSC deliberations, because additional data collection and analysis might be needed to effectively incorporate fishermen insights. Involvement beginning at the stage of developing catch advice might be too late in many cases.

Fishery performance reports, similar to those used by the Mid-Atlantic FMC, have been recommended by the SSC as a means of better utilizing social science and social scientists. If the Council chooses to move in that direction, fishermen can play a role in preparation of those reports, especially via the Advisory Panels, and AP Chairs could deliver the reports alongside PDT Chairs as another means of promoting fishermen involvement in the SSC process.

While acknowledging the importance of fishermen participation and input in its process, the SSC did identify several concerns with the possibility of fishermen being appointed to the SSC. Conflict of interest is a clear concern when catch advice is being developed for a stock on which a given fishermen is financially dependent. Another concern is that the unique and important insights of any individual fishermen will likely be restricted to the gears, species and areas he or she fishes, which will therefore only be pertinent to a minority of SSC responsibilities. Therefore, the SSC does not support designation of dedicated seats for fishermen.

Despite these concerns and the recommendation that dedicated seats not be created, the SSC is also not inherently opposed to fishermen being appointed. Like any other applicants, whether a given fisherman is qualified for appointment should be determined on the basis of his or her experience and credentials, including degrees, service on other bodies, participation in research, and other activities. An example considered by the SSC was the appointment of an industry member to the Gulf of Mexico FMC who was a former Chair of that Council, thereby providing breadth of perspective, and is largely retired, thereby lessening concerns about conflict of interest.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. Fishermen have unique and important insights, and therefore should participate in the science process as much as possible, including SSC deliberations and earlier stages (e.g., assessments).**
- 2. Involvement as early as possible is important because observations provided when developing catch advice might be too late to be reviewed, analyzed and formally considered.**
- 3. Involvement of fishermen is especially important in a rapidly changing ecosystem to provide more timely insights, and as the Council transitions to EBFM.**
- 4. Preparation of fishery performance reports and delivery of those reports jointly by PDT Chairs and AP Chairs can be another means of more formally incorporating fishermen input and participation in SSC process.**
- 5. Dedicated seats for fishermen on the SSC are not warranted. However, fishermen, like anyone else, are welcome to apply for open seats, and appointment in all cases should be based on the credentials and experience of the applicant, and what he or she can contribute to the collective expertise and effectiveness of the SSC.**