



Council Report

An update published by the New England Fishery Management Council – June 2008

The Council Report summarizes major issues voted on or discussed at each regularly scheduled meeting of the NEFMC. The Council met most recently on June 3-5 in Portland, ME.

At its June meeting the Council addressed management issues related to sea scallops, essential fish habitat, groundfish and skates.

Sea Scallops

Amendment 15: Update on Scoping Comments

The Council received an update on both oral and written public comments received during the Amendment 15 scoping period on the seven issues identified by the Council. These included: implementation of annual catch limits (ACLs); measures to rationalize the limited access scallop fishery; revision of the overfishing definition; modifications to specific aspects of the general category limited entry program implemented by Amendment 11; measures to address essential fish habitat (EFH) closed areas in the Scallop Fishery Management Plan (FMP) if the EFH Omnibus Amendment is delayed; alternatives to improve the research set-aside program and modifications to the start date of the scallop fishing year.

The Council also identified two additional items that will be further considered by the Scallop Committee: to increase the general category possession limit and consideration of modifications to the observer set-aside program. The committee is scheduled to meet several times over this summer and fall to develop specific alternatives for Amendment 15.

The Council also was briefed on the recent Scallop Survey Advisory Panel (SSAP) meeting. In summary, the panel has been meeting to discuss plans for the 2008 scallop survey and calibration of the new survey dredge and vessel to the old survey. Issues discussed involved details about the transition period, the SSAP's recommendations not to deploy turtle chains on the survey dredge, to use rock chains in strata that often pose sampling problems because of the presence of large boulders and an expansion of the NMFS survey into shallower waters in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Habitat

Coordinated Approach to Protect Corals Supported

Furthering use of the increased authority now available in the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to protect deep sea corals, the Council voted last week to expand its activities in that direction by calling for coordination with the Mid-Atlantic Council to allow for a more effective management approach than potential piecemeal efforts by the each Council.

The New England Council's vote at the June meeting is in keeping with previous actions on the issue of coral protection. In 2004, Council members approved the closure of two offshore canyons located southeast of Nantucket to protect deep-sea coral habitats from potential effects of vessels targeting monkfish in the area, marking the first direct protection afforded to deep sea coral communities in New England. At its February 12-14, 2008 meeting, the Council agreed to include an assessment of fishing impacts on deep sea corals and recommendations for minimizing those impacts as a part of Phase II of the NEFMC Omnibus EFH Amendment.

Groundfish

Amendment 16 Timeline Revised

Dr. Paul Rago of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center reported preliminary estimates of new biomass and maximum fishing mortality targets at the June meeting. These were developed at a Groundfish Assessment Review Meeting (GARM) last month. Dr. Rago reported that almost all targets changed, but not all in the same direction. In general many biomass targets decreased, most MSY values decreased and maximum fishing mortality targets changed in both directions. Some of the changes suggest that the region's groundfish resources are less productive than in the past, although it is not yet clear how these changes will impact the Council's rebuilding programs. The actual numbers are available in a memorandum from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) that can be accessed as part of the groundfish meeting materials on the Council's website --- www.nefmc.org.

Dr. Rago also presented preliminary estimates of stock size and fishing mortality in 2006. Based on this information, the NEFSC expressed concern that the draft effort control measures under development for Amendment 16 may not be targeting the correct stocks. This led to a Council discussion over whether the Amendment 16 Draft Environmental Impact Statement should be taken to public hearings this summer. Ultimately, the Council decided to wait until the final GARM assessment results are received in September, design appropriate measures and take a document to public hearing that reflects updated and final information.

Given this decision, Amendment 16 may not be implemented by May 1, 2009. Following a discussion about the implications, the Council noted that Amendment 13 contains an 18 percent reduction in Category A days-at-sea --- scheduled to occur unless very stringent stock conditions are met --- an unlikely scenario given what is currently known. The Eastern U.S./Canada Haddock Special Access Program also expires on April 31.

The tentative schedule for Amendment 16 development is detailed below:

- **June/July 2008: Groundfish Committee meeting(s) to work on sector monitoring, other reporting issues; revisit recreational/commercial allocation decisions; and other issues**
- ***August 4: GARM III final assessment meeting***
- **Mid-late August: Plan Development Team (PDT) review preliminary GARM III results and impact on rebuilding plans**
- **Early September: Council meeting to receive GARM III report, PDT reports, begin development of measures**
- **Early September: Groundfish AP and Recreational AP meetings**
- **Mid-September: Groundfish Committee meeting to develop measures**
- **October 7-9: Council approves measures for Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)**
- **October: PDT completes DEIS**
- **November 18-20: Council approves DEIS for public hearing**
- **January 2009: Public hearings held**
- **February 2009: Council final decision on Amendment 16**
- **March/April 2009: Submit document to the National Marine Fisheries Service**
- **September-December 2009: (estimated) Implementation of new rules**

Skates

Amendment 3: Alternatives Approved for Analyses

The Council approved the Skate Committee and Advisory Panel's recommendations for six Amendment 3 alternatives, which will include measures to limit catch through quotas or target TACs, accountability

measures that will adjust limits for prior overages or in-season accountability measure adjustments to prevent landings from exceeding the catch limits, five time/area closures that would apply to vessels landing more than 500 pounds (whole weight) of skates, skate wing and bait fishery possession limits, a seasonal quota for the bait fishery and an annual review and bi-annual specification setting process. The Council voted to classify, as considered and rejected, a measure calling for area-based gear restrictions for vessels targeting other species. Although intended to reduce skate discards, the Council felt that the measure would be too restrictive and costly and that skate discards would be adequately controlled through days-at-sea and area closures in the multispecies, scallop and monkfish fishery management plans.

The objective of all of the alternatives is to keep total skate catch below 67.4 million pounds and landings below 27 million pounds. Two allocation options will be taken out to public hearings. One option would allocate 19.7 million pounds to the wing fishery, consistent with the average proportion of landings during 2005-2007. The other option would allocate 18 million pounds to the wing fishery, consistent with the proportion of landings during 1995-2006. The remainder of the 27 million pounds would be allocated to the skate bait fishery to be managed either with skate possession limits or with a seasonal quota.

To allow these measures to take effect at the start of the fishing year on May 1, 2009, the Council authorized the Skate Committee to finalize the draft amendment and schedule public hearings in September. The Council will approve the final alternatives and submit the amendment for secretarial review in October 2008.

Presentations

The Council received a number of important presentations at its June meeting in addition to those referred to above. They can be found on the Council website – www.nefmc.org - and include:

- Review of the recently published Draft Management Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary – deadline for comments, August 4, 2008
- NMFS proposed rule to integrate Magnuson-Stevens Act Requirements with those of the National Environmental Policy Act – deadline for comments, August 12, 2008
- NMFS proposed rule to address Magnuson-Stevens Act Requirements for annual catch limits and accountability measures – deadline for comments, September 8, 2008
- An Ecosystem Approach to the Assessment of the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank Herring Complex
- Updating and briefing on the NMFS Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Plan

Materials on the Web

Meeting materials related to the above issues and other agenda items may be found on the Council's website www.nefmc.org. Presentations not discussed in this report, as well as materials related to decision-making are included. Audio files of the full meeting discussions are posted at <http://www.nefmc.org/actions/index.html>.

Upcoming Council Meetings
September, 2008, (date and location to be determined)
October 7-9, 2008 - Mystic, CT