



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 19, 2007
TO: Multispecies Oversight Committee
FROM: Skate PDT
SUBJECT: Skate management advice

The SAW process requires the PDT to develop management advice based on the most recent stock assessment. The following management advice is based on the benchmark assessment for 2005, updated with the 2006 survey data. Using the 2006 data, overfishing of winter skate is no longer occurring, but has become overfished, i.e. the stock has fallen below the minimum biomass threshold. Thorny skate remains in an overfished condition. In addition, the PDT finds that:

1. Thorny and winter skates are overfished. Thorny skate biomass has not increased and winter skate biomass has declined by nearly 50% since FMP inception.
2. Little skate is near the overfishing threshold (18.7 vs. 20%) and will likely be above the threshold as of 2007. It is also near the minimum biomass threshold (3.32 vs. 3.27 kg/tow) and may become overfished.
3. Smooth skate is near the biomass threshold (0.19 vs. 0.16 kg/tow), are could to become overfished in 2007. Biomass has not increased despite reductions in groundfish effort.
4. Broad scale reduction in skate mortality is needed, possibly excluding barndoor, clearnose, and rosette skate. Little, smooth, thorny, and winter skate are either overfished, or very close to an overfished and/or overfishing threshold.
5. Skate landings cannot be reliably differentiated at the species level due to poor identification and insufficient monitoring.
6. Although declining in recent years, discards have significantly exceeded landings over the time series and in recent years, however discard mortality is unknown
7. Gear technology to substantially reduce skate retention may be available for some fisheries, but only in limited cases, e.g. 'eliminator trawl'.
8. Analytic projection scenarios with various fishing mortalities and size selection is not possible, i.e. cannot project rebuilding.

Based on these findings, the PDT offers the following management advice:

- Immediate action to reduce mortality is needed to begin rebuilding winter skates
- The Council must develop a rebuilding schedule for winter (and thorny) skate, consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act and National Standard guidelines
- Immediate action may be necessary to reduce mortality on little skate to prevent overfishing from occurring. This action should be consistent with rebuilding objectives, since the status for these skates are so close to thresholds.
- Landings and discards are frequently mis-identified and this makes species-specific management measures more difficult to implement and enforce.
- Although there has been a recent reduction in total discards, the totals are high and discards must be substantially reduced to rebuild overfished skates.
- Acting as a reasonable system of checkpoints to ensure rebuilding, skate biomass must be monitored annually and compared with a linear or logistic based biomass rebuilding trajectory with periodic adjustments in fishing effort or allowed catch as needed. The Council should build in an adaptive approach to ensure rebuilding, reconsidering approach currently in the FMP for thorny.
- The Council should emphasize reductions in mortality and increases in size selection to allow rebuilding of older, mature skates.
- Management actions should address the new MSA requirements for establishing annual catch limits and accountability measures.