



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 19, 2007
TO: Multispecies Oversight Committee
FROM: Skate PDT
SUBJECT: Strawman alternatives for skate management

The Skate PDT developed the following suggestions for potential management measures that would address skate management issues, particularly the overfished condition of thorny and winter skate, as well as the low or declining biomass of little and smooth skate. These alternatives recognize the problems caused by skate species mis-identification, high amounts of discards, and present limitations in gear technology.

1. **Hard TAC:** Set and reduce combined skate TAC for directed fishery only, while prohibiting landings of barndoor skate, smooth, and thorny skates. Fishery specific TACs may help focus catch limits on certain species, since the wing fishery targets larger skates and the bait fishery targets smaller skates. Since methods to estimate fishing mortality have not been accepted, it will be difficult to establish an objective TAC to achieve quantitative mortality or rebuilding objectives.
2. **Day-at-sea control:** Set TAC for combined skate species and allow landings only on a day-at-sea, perhaps with varying skate possession limits by fishery. The alternative may consider allowing the bait fishery to occur only on a day-at-sea, i.e. eliminating the bait exemption (addresses little skate). Exemptions in the Multispecies FMP allow the bait fishery to occur in certain areas without the use of a DAS. These exemption areas could be eliminated to require the use of a DAS in the bait fishery.

Wing landings on regular B DAS trips may have declined as a result of regulations from Framework 42, or they may have increased due to other restrictive multispecies measures.

3. **Changes to skate possession limits:**
 - a. Eliminate the differential possession limit for trips longer than 24 hours. Unless changed (see below), the maximum possession limit for all trips would be 10,000 lb of wings.
 - b. Reduce the wing possession limit to e.g. 5,000 lb of wings (or some other appropriate amount) The PDT should analyze trip-level landings data to determine the appropriate possession limits.
 - c. Establish a possession limit for the skate bait fishery. The PDT should analyze trip-level landings data to determine the appropriate possession limits.
 - d. Establish incidental catch limits for vessels participating in either the bait fishery or the directed wing fishery, e.g., 500 lb. (This would be needed if the FMP stipulates that the full wing possession limits can only be obtained on (a) a groundfish A-DAS or (b) a groundfish A-DAS or a monkfish-only DAS). That would leave groundfish B-DAS (currently 500 lb), a scallop DAS, scallop access area trips, scallop general category trips, and non-DAS fishing out of the Mid-Atlantic to which the incidental catch limit would apply.
4. **Area management and exempted fisheries:** Close existing areas and exempted fisheries (unless recertified for skate bycatch).
 - a. Close existing areas except for SAPs allowed in other plans.
 - b. Close existing areas including access areas, unless the bycatch of skates is certified as being less than 5% total weight of fish onboard.
 - c. Disallow small mesh fisheries and fisheries not on a day-at-sea unless the bycatch of overfished and “protected” skates is less than 5% total weight of fish onboard in an exempted fishery.
 - d. Include overfished and protected skate species in the existing 5% groundfish allowance for exempted fisheries.
5. **Area management:** Close new areas to bottom-tending trawls and dredges to reduce mortality on protected (e.g. winter, thorny, little, smooth) skates, unless the gear is modified to reduce skate retention by 75%. Areas should automatically re-open as stocks are rebuilt.
 - a. Close the smallest area where bottom trawls and dredges fish that comprises up to 75% of the exploitable biomass distribution for protected skates, allowing for overlaps between these areas and existing closed areas.
 - b. Close the smallest area where bottom trawls and dredges fish that comprises up to 50% of the exploitable biomass distribution for protected skates, excluding overlaps between these areas and existing closed areas.
6. **Eliminate the baseline review process and the proxy input controls:** Revise all other plans for fisheries which catch skates, so that new amendments and framework adjustment must quantify how they will affect skate landings and discards. Alternatively, the existing baseline review process should be modified to reflect the present management measures in the scallop, multispecies, and monkfish FMPs as they relate to effort and gear controls that affect skate mortality. Increases in skate catch should not be

allowed for overfished skate species.

7. **Explore potential gear modifications that would substantially reduce skate catch, e.g. eliminator trawl.** Pursue additional research to identify gears that have potential to reduce skate bycatch in various fisheries.

The eliminator trawl, which was tested in 2005 and 2006 in Closed Area I, drastically reduced the catch of unclassified and barndoor skate. Characteristically, the eliminator trawl had lower catches of bottom dwelling species, while the catches of high-profile species increased. These high-profile species included haddock, Pollock, herring, bluefish, mackerel, and illex squid. The catches of loligo squid were about the same in the eliminator trawl and the control net.

While intended for the haddock SAP fishery, the eliminator trawl could also effectively reduce skate catch where vessels are targeting the above species, if the fish habits are the same elsewhere. Research on this or similar gear should be expanded to evaluate its potential for use in other fisheries as appropriate.