

Multispecies (Skate) Oversight Committee

DRAFT Meeting summary

April 6, 2007

Purpose of meeting: To receive and evaluate management advice and strawman skate actions from the PDT and to revise and approve a draft scoping document.

Attendance: Mr. Rip Cunningham (chair), Mr. Rodney Avila, Ms. Sally McGee, Mr. Dave Preble, Mr. Terry Stockwell, Mr. Mike Pentony (Regional Office staff), Mr. Andrew Applegate (Council staff)

Motions:

1. Mr. Preble/Mr. Stockwell:
Include all alternatives in scoping document along with an alternative 8 which discusses plan consolidation. Also, revise action #1 to include a target and a hard TAC.
The motion carried 5-1.
2. Ms. McGee/Mr. Preble:
To replace the 4th bullet in “issues to be addressed” with: “How should FMP set skate annual catch limits and how should annual catch limits apply to incidental catch and discards in fisheries targeting other species.”
The motion carried 5-0.
3. Mr. Hill/Mr. Stockwell:
To approve draft scoping document as revised.
The motion carried 6-0.

Summary:

Mr. Applegate reviewed some overall issues and a timeline for development of a amendment to address skate overfishing. The Council received a letter from the Regional Office stating that overfishing was occurring on winter skate, giving the Council one year to develop an action to address the situation. The Council would have to develop a rebuilding schedule and measures to achieve the rebuilding objectives, despite the inability to forecast stock dynamics. He also showed that there was considerable uncertainty in the landings, VTR, and observer data with respect to species identification.

The PDT presented concerns that thorny skate has not been rebuilding from an overfished condition and that there were serious concerns on the status of little and smooth skates as well. The PDT advised that broad scale reduction in skate mortality is needed. Although declining in recent years, a very large fraction of the catch is discards, but discard mortality rates are unknown. A considerable amount of skate landings are not identified by species. There is some gear technology that has been tested and show promising reductions in skate catch, but may have limited applicability. The PDT reported that analytical projections of stock size and biomass would not be possible, given the current state of the science.

Information about trends in landings, recent landings after Framework 42 (which change the rules for skate fishing on a B regular day), and species identification were presented by Mr. Applegate. The committee was concerned about the high level of uncertainty and how at smaller size it was very difficult to distinguish winter from little skate. Preliminary landings in 2006 went up as much as 50% after Framework 42, compared on a year over year basis. It was reported by fishermen at the meeting that

many vessels began using A DAS to fish for skate, because regular B DAS were no longer suitable, having a much lower skate possession limit. It was also reported at the PDT meeting that some vessels in RI had relinquished Federal permits to fish in state waters for skate.

The PDT offered the following actions that the Council should consider to address the skate stock status and initiate rebuilding (see also memo from PDT, dated March 19, 2006):

- Hard TAC
- DAS control
- Changes to skate possession limits
- Area management and exempted fisheries
- Area management
- Elimination of the baseline review process and the proxy input controls (to manage skates)
- Exploration of potential gear modifications to reduce skate catch (in fisheries targeting other species)

Annual catch limits and accountability measures were also discussed, under Hard TACs. Mr. Applegate warned that it would be difficult to set an objective TAC, because the science is not yet able to measure total stock size and the population dynamics models to forecast rebuilding are unavailable. The committee discussed how accountability measures might apply, but guidance on this had not yet been developed. The issues were whether discards would be included in the catch limit and how they might impact other fisheries that have high skate incidental catches and discards. Mr. Pentony said that these issues were under evaluation and there would be a presentation on this issue at the Council meeting.

Some committee members thought that the Council needs to do more work and analysis to identify what is the source of the problem, how much that landings or discards needed to be reduced, and what would be the benefits of doing so. The benefits from other regulations need to be taken into account, for example the catch reduction that would be expected from the 25% reduction in the summer flounder quota. Also, the economic impact needs to be analyzed. One committee member asked what proportion of skate landings were the result of targeting vs. indirect catch.

Mr. Applegate replied that this level of analysis occurs before scoping for adjustments of specifications, where numeric objectives already have been established. He said that analyses of cumulative effects of other regulations on skates and their fishery would be prepared and included in the draft SEIS, which would go out to public hearing. It is too early at this stage to have those types of analyses available, but they are important. It is important to understand where, when, how, and in what programs that skates are caught and the PDT needs to do more analyses.

Committee members were concerned that the primary management measure in the skate FMP was reliance on multispecies, monkfish, and scallop DAS to limit skate catch and cause rebuilding of skate biomass. This approach, however, does not appear to have had the intended effect.

The committee discussed plan consolidation, because skates are caught in many other regulated mobile gear fisheries. Many thought that combining skates into either the Monkfish or Multispecies FMP made sense, due to the high degree of overlap. They thought that combining skate management into another FMP would focus the process, allow for better coordination and development of actions in a more timely manner, create less need for duplicative frameworks and amendments, and open up the possibility of addressing ecosystem objectives and combined optimum yield.

The committee also discussed putting in the scoping document an action to use a target TAC to manage skates. Some members felt that this action was necessary to get public comment during scoping, due to the considerable unknowns and high level of uncertainty. They did not want to rule out approaches at this point. Others were concerned it would mislead the public to think that a target TAC could resolve the problems and that such an approach would be difficult to approve under the new law.

In the draft scoping document, the committee added target TACs and plan consolidation to actions that might be considered. It also clarified a couple of bullet items in “issues to be addressed”, before approving the draft scoping document for recommendation at the Council meeting.