



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: American Eel Management Board
FROM: American Eel Advisory Panel
DATE: April 27, 2021
SUBJECT: Advisory Panel Report on American Eel Fisheries, Recent Landings, and Market Demand

The Advisory Panel (AP) met virtually at 9:00 AM on April 26, 2021 to review yellow eel landings and provide information on the recent trends in the fishery. Only two AP members were in attendance on the call with two additional AP member providing comments over the phone (see below). Staff recommends that jurisdictions revisit their current AP membership in order to improve attendance and participation.

Participating AP Members:

Mari-Beth DeLucia (TNC, Chair)
Mitch Feigenbaum (PA)

Lawrence Voss (DE; provided comments by phone)
Jimmy Trossbach (MD; provided comments by phone)

The following is a summary of the comments provided by AP members- both from the webinar and individually by phone- as well as comments from those in the Commercial Yellow Eel Fishery in Maryland (MD Watermen) not on the AP.

In recent years (2016-2020), have you observed any change in the availability of yellow eels? Has your catch changed (increased or decreased) during this time?

AP Comments (from meeting): No AP members on the call actively fish for yellow eels. Mitch Feigenbaum, representing Delaware Valley Fish Company (primary buyer along the US Atlantic coast), indicated his company has bought fewer yellow eels in recent years due to less demand for food eels in European markets. Due to this, he emphasized that the decrease in landings in recent years should not be interpreted as a decrease in availability of eels or change in their population.

Mr. Trossbach (MD): there has no real change in catch or catch per unit effort. If anything it may have increased but that is largely due to there being less people fishing for eels. Changes to his landings in recent years has been due to less market demand.

Mr. L Voss (DE): has not fished for yellow eels in recent years.

MD Watermen: Availability of yellow eels has increased. In 2021, fishing less gear and catching more eels. Animals appear abundant. One watermen reporting an average catch per pot of 2-3 pounds. Another reported 3-5 pounds. Both are higher than past years.

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What factors influenced recent catch? (markets/economy, environment, regulations, and/or other factors)?

AP Comments (from meeting): The most significant factor effecting landings is market demand. Traditionally the yellow eel fishery operates seasonally (late spring and then again in the fall). In recent years, both the European food market demand and U.S. domestic bait market demand has decreased. The European food market, which historically imported wild-caught yellow eels, has shifted in recent years to sourcing 'farm' raised European eel from aquaculture facilities within Europe. The development of aquaculture facilities to raise glass eels to adult yellow eel size has been an ongoing process over the last 30 years with the shift towards sourcing from it increasing, with many traditional buyers switching to sourcing from these facilities exclusively. Additionally, there have been an overall decrease in demand for eels in Europe – Mr. Feigenbaum indicated that large retailers such as Aldi stopped selling smoked eels products in some European countries due to pressure from environmental groups given the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) is listed as critically endangered by the IUCN.

The U.S. domestic bait market demand for live or frozen eels is primarily for use in recreational fisheries targeting blue catfish, Atlantic striped bass, and cobia. Traditionally, the proportion of landings that go towards this market have been much smaller (approximately 20%) than the European food market. Restrictions imposed as part of COVID-19 appears to have decreased the demand for eels as bait in 2020.

Mr. Feigenbaum emphasized that current state regulations implemented as part of the ASMFC FMP are not a limiting factor for recent landings trend; market demand has driven this change.

Mr. Trossbach (MD): (Aside from market demand mentioned above) the price of bait (primarily razor clams) has been a limiting factor to set pots and traps. Additionally, there has been a decrease of individuals still active in the fishery given the costs (bait, fuel) and interest in shifting to more lucrative fisheries.

MD Watermen: COVID-19 seems to be the driving factor for no market. Most eels go overseas and flights weren't leaving the country. Delaware Valley (Fish Company) stopped buying. On some days, we have to release eels overboard because of no market. The market has been contracting over the last decade. Farm raised eels from Asia have taken over the restaurant markets in the US. Eels can be ordered from Asian markets in the exact quantity and at the exact time they are needed. They are vacuum packed and ready to use. This compared to more expensive US-caught eels which are seasonal and would arrive unprocessed. This is exacerbated by low labor costs in Asia.

What are the primary markets for yellow eels currently? Domestic or International? Food or bait?

AP Comments (from meeting): As mentioned above, historically the yellow eel fishery has largely been driven by demand for eels as food in European grocery stores and restaurants. There remains a much smaller domestic food eel market in cities such as Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston. Domestic demand for eels as bait has decreased over recent decades compared to the 1980s-1990s.

Mr. Trossbach (MD): Aside from selling food eels to Delaware Valley for European Markets, also sell eels as bait to whole seller to meet demand for recreational fisheries in New Jersey, New York (Long Island Sound) and Northeastern Atlantic states (generally).

MD Watermen: Some watermen report a majority international market citing Belgium, France, Holland and Portugal. Flights not leaving the country and restaurants closing in Europe have been part of market problem. Other watermen have a primarily domestic market where eels are purchased for both food and bait. Larger eels are purchased by US-based Asian food markets/restaurants and smaller eels are popular as bait for blue catfish (best bait for commercial catfish trotlines) and for cobia fishing.

Did your catch or landings change from 2019 to 2020? If so, why?

AP Comments (from meeting): Due to limited demand in Europe, Delaware Valley Fish Company had instructed many in the industry who opportunistically catch eels to stop in 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Mr. Trossbach (MD): COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that impacted the U.S. recreational fishing by limiting the number of trips and people on-board headboats and for-hire vessels, affected sales for eels as bait in New Jersey, New York, and Northeast. These factors, in addition to decreased international market demand previously mention, appear to have contributed to a decrease in landings in 2020.

MD Watermen: All watermen report higher catch rates but lower landings due to market problems.

How do you think the fishery will perform in 2021? Different from 2020 or similar?

AP Comments (from meeting): With COVID-19 restrictions being lifted in 2021 which impacted recreational fishing in 2020, there will likely be an increase in yellow eel landings for bait. Given yellow eels for bait constitute a smaller percentage of total landings than food eels for European markets, which maintains a limited demand for wild-caught yellow eels, the overall coastwide total may increase slightly from 2020 harvest levels.

Mr. Trossbach: As state imposed COVID-19 restrictions ease in 2021 that should help increase domestic demand for bait in Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York. That being said, it's unclear whether that will significantly increase yellow eel landings in 2021.

MD Watermen: Nobody is anticipating things to change in 2021 due to ongoing COVID restrictions. There is uncertainty of how market will bounce back in future years but there seemed to be optimism for European markets.