



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Winter Flounder Advisory Panel Call Summary

January 14, 2021

Advisory Panel Members in Attendance: Bud Brown (Chair, ME), David Goethel (NH), Charles Witek (NY)

ASMFC Staff: Dustin Colson Leaning

Others in Attendance: Richard Balouskus

The Winter Flounder Advisory Panel (AP) met via conference call to review the Gulf of Maine (GOM) and Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic (SNE/MA) stock assessments, provide recommendations for 2021 specifications for state waters, and to comment on any other current fishery management issues of concern to them.

The AP members on the call were concerned about the overfished status of the SNE/MA winter flounder stock especially considering the low likelihood of rebuilding by the target date of 2023. Two AP members agreed that the SNE/MA stock was fished to such low population levels back in the 80s that it now struggles to rebound due to natural mortality through predation. One AP member also cited stressors such as rising temperatures, hypoxia, and the introduction of new species into winter flounder habitat. Another AP member said that he does not believe water temperatures are an issue, and thinks fishing mortality should be reined in.

The AP members were also concerned about the GOM stock and commented on the significant reduction in winter flounder availability compared to previous decades when fish were abundant in many inshore areas. One AP member suggested that local depletion is also a big issue considering recent scientific tagging studies that suggest winter flounder have complex stock dynamics. A commercial representative on the AP agreed that there are at least two distinct groups in the GOM. He said that one stock tends to remain offshore year round, which can be found around Jeffrey's ledge. He thought that this population seemed to be pretty healthy and produces winter flounder weighing up to 4 lbs. The same AP member pointed to recent tagging studies that indicate that there is a second stock which tends to migrate inshore during the spawning season.

The AP affirmed that from their experience, the recreational winter flounder fishery is almost non-existent. Two members of the panel thought it was ridiculous that some states' recreational fishing season overlaps with the spawning season. They were supportive of a complete moratorium on recreational fishing of winter flounder throughout the GOM and SNE/MA to allow for winter flounder abundance to rise to more sustainable levels. One AP member cautioned against a complete moratorium and said that this might have some unintended negative economic consequences, especially for party and charter boat operators whose customers are still interested in targeting winter flounder. One AP member suggested a commercial closure of fishing in state waters during the spawning season from December through April. The AP member from the commercial sector thought that the current commercial measures were adequate at least in the GOM.

The advisory panel also provided comments on research recommendations for consideration through the next research track stock assessment. One AP member thought that genetic testing to analyze natal homing in the inshore stock would be worthwhile. This AP member also thought that the nearshore environment has undergone some significant changes since times of high abundance, which may have altered natural mortality. In addition, studies of eggs, larva, and young of the year should be conducted to check for fatal abnormalities. Traditional nutrient pollution caused by raw sewage has largely been eliminated but has been replaced by more insidious and potentially harmful chlorine discharges from treatment plants and insecticides from runoff. In short, the AP member recommended research into the pollution of the nearshore environment and the effects on winter flounder. Another AP member thought that sonic tag tracking studies could be useful in improving our understanding of winter flounder life history.

Lastly, the advisory panel requests that each state on the Board review their advisory panel membership and redouble efforts to appoint representatives with special attention paid to younger members of the fishing community to ensure adequate and sustained stakeholder participation in the management process.