



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Winter Flounder Technical Committee Meeting Summary

Webinar
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The Winter Flounder Technical Committee (TC) met via webinar to review the Gulf of Maine (GOM) and Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic (SNE/MA) stock assessments, commercial and recreational fishery trends, and federal specifications for fishing years 2023-2025 approved by New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC). State waters management measures for fishing year 2023 were set as status quo the last time specifications were reviewed by the Winter Flounder Management Board in 2021. Therefore, the Winter Flounder Technical Committee focused on recommendations for management measures for fishing years 2024-2025, which will put state specifications in line with the NEFMC specifications cycle.

Fishery Performance and Stock Status

The Winter Flounder TC began by reviewing fishery performance and stock status information for both the GOM and SNE/MA stocks. Both the GOM and SNE/MA winter flounder stocks had time series lows in total catch (commercial and recreational landings and discards) in 2020, with a slight increase in total catch in 2021.

Based on the 2022 management track assessment, the GOM stock biomass status is unknown and overfishing is not occurring. The 2021 30+ cm exploitation rate was estimated to be 0.033 which is 14% of the overfishing exploitation threshold proxy (0.23). Overall, indices of GOM winter flounder abundance have not demonstrated any positive response to the large declines in commercial and recreational removals since the 1980s. However, there were increases in the fall 2021 and spring 2021 and 2022 area-swept biomass estimates, which, if they continue, could be the beginning of a positive response to the recent record low exploitation rates.

The SNE/MA stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring in 2021. The SNE/MA stock biomass (SSB) in 2021 was estimated to be 3,353 mt which is just above the biomass target (3,314 mt). This change in stock status from overfished to not overfished is due to a change in the years of recruitment estimates that were used to complete the projections to estimate biological reference points. Instead of drawing upon the entire time series of recruitment estimates, the projections now only use recruitment estimates from the last 20 years (2002-

2021). The winter flounder stock is most likely not capable of achieving the high levels of recruitment prior to 2000; therefore, using a truncated recruitment time series of only the last 20 years was deemed a better reflection of future stock productivity for biological reference point estimation. Despite a change in stock status, the perception of the stock SSB and recruitment trends has not changed; trends in survey indices and model estimates all continue to indicate the stock is in poor condition.

Federal Specifications Approved by the NEFMC

Table 1 displays the sub-ACLs and corresponding state sub-components for both the GOM and SNE/MA stocks that were approved in Framework 65 by the NEFMC at their December 2022 meeting. A comparison of the 2022 to the 2023 fishing year federal groundfish sub-ACLs reveals that the GOM sub-ACL was adjusted up by 116% and the SNE/MA sub-ACL was adjusted up by 53% to reflect the results of the 2022 management track stock assessments. The state sub-component is an estimation of what the state recreational and commercial fisheries will harvest each year based on status quo state regulations, however, it is not an allocation. The commercial portion of the state sub-component is caught by vessels that do not hold federal Northeast multispecies permits, and the recreational portion is based on calibrated Marine Recreational Information Program catch estimates. There are no accountability measures associated with the state waters sub-component, meaning there is no payback if the state waters sub-component is exceeded since this is outside of the federal multispecies plan. The federal output control system requires an assumption of state water catches to estimate the sector quotas. Table 1 displays the state subcomponents for both the GOM and SNE/MA stocks were adjusted to reflect average catch for the years 2017-2021. In the case of the GOM state sub-component this represents a 20% decrease, and for the SNE/MA state sub-component this represents a 10% decrease.

Table 1. GOM and SNE/MA Specifications and State Sub-component Average Catch.

Stock	Groundfish Sub-ACLs		State Sub-component		
	FY22 (mt)	FY23 (mt)	FY22 (mt)	FY23 (mt)	2017-2021 average catch (mt)
GOM	281	607	194	153	151.4
SNE/MA	288	441	21	19	17.2

Technical Committee Recommendations

The TC did not recommend any changes to the state waters specifications for the 2024-2025 fishing years. The commercial and recreational measures listed in Tables 2 and 3 have been in place since 2014. The TC discussed whether any adjustments were needed to regulations for the GOM and SNE/MA stocks separately.

For the GOM stock, the TC noted that the exploitation rates were still low, but there was an increase at the end of the time series in most of the independent indices. However, TC members stated it would be irresponsible to be reactionary to any potential sign of improvements in the stock and that any increases in catch may be detrimental to the stock's

potential recovery. The TC did not want to encourage targeting of winter flounder at this time, which might result from liberalizing the current management measures in the GOM. The TC felt that one or two years of increases in the indices does not provide strong enough evidence to justify liberalization of management measures.

For the SNE/MA stock, the TC was in agreement that management measures should remain status quo due to the poor state of the stock. TC members from all of the SNE/MA states highlighted the continued low landings and fishing effort in their respective states and low abundance in all of their surveys. Several TC members also noted they had not heard any interest from commercial or recreational fishermen in their states to liberalize measures. The TC agreed that environmental factors, not fishing mortality, are the major drivers of this stock at this time. A TC member noted there will be a research track stock assessment in 2026 that will incorporate environmental data, is expected to be an improvement upon current assessment methods, and recommended that management in the SNE/MA stock should remain status quo until results are available from this assessment.

Lastly, it was noted by the TC that the current management system of both SNE/MA and GOM winter flounder stocks inherently has some challenges. This is because the federal fishery is managed through output controls (e.g., ACLs) which were implemented in 2010 through Amendment 16 while ASMFC state inshore component being managed through effort controls (i.e., the current state waters management measures). The federal output control-based management requires accounting for all removals. Therefore, assumptions on state water removals are made to estimate the ACLs in the federal groundfish fishery. The NEFMC's Groundfish PDT makes an initial estimate what state water fishery catch is likely to be in the future (state sub-component) for the specifications, but because the PDT does not know what potential changes ASMFC will make before the Board meeting, they have been basing their recommendations on the average of recent catches in state waters with the assumption that trends in recent harvest will continue. The underlining assumption is that there will be little change in current state waters measures, leading to no substantial changes in state water catch. As a result, the state sub-component has continued to decline with declining state waters harvest, despite the recent increases in the sub-ACL on the federal side due to the results of the recent 2022 management track assessments. To help account for this, the Groundfish PDT used a 5-year average of catch to include several years of higher harvest in the average when recommending the state waters sub-component for fishing years 2023-2025 in Framework 65.

Table 2. Commercial Fishery Winter Flounder Regulations.

State	Stock Unit	Size Limit	Trip Limit	Seasonal Closure (dates inclusive)	Min. Mesh Size
Maine	GOM	12"	500 lbs	May 1 – June 30	6.5"
New Hampshire	GOM	12"	500 lbs	April 1 – June 30	6.5"
Massachusetts	GOM	12"	500 lbs	Open all year	6.5"
	SNE/MA	12"	50 lbs	Open all year	6.5"
Rhode Island	SNE/MA	12"	50 lbs	Open all year	6.5"
Connecticut	SNE/MA	12"	50 lbs or 38 fish	March 1 – April 14	6.5"
New York	SNE/MA	12"	50 lbs	June 14 – Nov 30 (for all gear besides fyke nets, pound and trap nets)	6.5"
New Jersey	SNE/MA	12"	38 fish	June 1 – Nov 30 (all gear except for fyke nets) Feb 20 – Oct 31 (Fyke net)	6.5"

Table 3. Recreational Fishery Winter Flounder Regulations.

State	Stock Unit	Creel Limit	Size Limit	Seasonal Closure (dates inclusive)
Maine	GOM	8	12"	Open all year
New Hampshire	GOM	8	12"	Open all year
Massachusetts	GOM	8	12"	Open all year
	SNE/MA	2	12"	January 1- February 28
Rhode Island	SNE/MA	2	12"	January 1 – February 28
Connecticut	SNE/MA	2	12"	January 1 – March 31
New York	SNE/MA	2	12"	May 31 – March 31
New Jersey	SNE/MA	2	12"	January 1 – February 28
Federal Waters	GOM & SNE/MA	Unlimited	12"	Open all year