

ASMFC

FISHERIES *focus*

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ASMFC Increases Conservation for Summer Flounder in 2001 States Agree to 17.9 Million Pound TAL and Commit to Participate in Facilitated Consensus-driven Discussions

On April 3, 2001, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission revised its total allowable landings (TAL) limits for the 2001 summer flounder fishery to 17.9 million pounds, down from 20.5. It also committed to participating in facilitated discussions with the National Marine Fisheries Service, recreational and commercial fishing constituents, and the environmental community to reach accord in the short- and long-term management of summer flounder.

The Board's action was based on a number of factors, including the states' desire to achieve equity among state and federal summer flounder permit holders. "The Board still believes that it took the correct action last November, consistent with its legal responsibilities and the real conservation needs of the sum-

mer flounder resource, when it set the total allowable landings at 20.5 million pounds," said John H. Dunnigan, the Commission's Executive Director. "But some things have changed. The federal government was getting ready to take action that would have severely hurt the fisheries and put the states and federal agencies hopelessly at odds. This decision will allow us to take a step back with all of the stakeholders involved and develop a longer-term approach to summer flounder management that will allow us to manage the fishery, and to take account of some new developments we expect in the science."

The Board heard from officials of the National Marine Fisheries Service, who indicated that without this action a closure in the federal fishery could be im-

minent. "The Board recognized that there would be significant impacts on fishermen," said Preston P. Pate, Chair of the Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Management Board. "We know this is going to be tough on fishermen. But given the way things have developed, it is the best action for the states to take."

"The Board's action represents a major step toward developing an effective, mutually agreed upon management program for summer flounder," Mr. Pate stated. "This action affirms the commitment of the Atlantic coastal states to work with its partners in the federal government and the fisheries constituencies to manage these fisheries consistent with the needs of the resource and the fishermen."

The states will now need to recalculate their commercial and recreational fishing measures for 2001. The revised measures will be reviewed by the Summer Flounder Technical Committee and approved by the Board or the ASMFC Executive Director by the end of April. In addition, the states and the federal government will be moving forward expeditiously to begin facilitated discussions with the recreational and commercial fishing constituencies and environmental groups to develop a process for long-term management of summer flounder. For more information, please contact Robert Beal, Fisheries Management Plan Coordinator, at (202) 289-6400 ext. 318.

**ASMFC 2001 Spring Meeting
April 23 - 26, 2001**

**Quality Hotel & Conference Center
1200 North Courthouse Road
Arlington, Virginia
(703)524-4000**

See final agenda beginning on page 6

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as a deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and anadromous species. The fifteen member states of the Commission are: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Upcoming Meetings

4/23 - 26:

ASMFC Meeting Week, Quality Hotel & Conference Center, 1200 North Courthouse Road, Arlington, Virginia; (703)524-4000.

4/22 - 25:

57th Annual Northeast Fish and Wildlife Conference, Sheraton Saratoga Springs, Saratoga Springs, New York. For more information, please contact Art Newell at ajnewell@gw.dec.state.ny.us

5/2 & 3:

New England Fishery Management Council, Holiday Inn, Peabody, Massachusetts.

5/8 - 10:

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Carousel Hotel, 118th Street, Ocean City, Maryland; (410)524-1000.

6/ 13 & 14:

New England Fishery Management Council, Providence Biltmore, Providence, Rhode Island.

6/18 - 22:

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Radisson Ponce de Leon, 4000 US Highway 1 North, St. Augustine, Florida; (800)333-3333.

6/26 - 28:

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Radisson Hotel Hampton, 700 Settlers Landing Road, Hampton, Virginia; (757)727-9700.

7/15 - 19:

Coastal Zone 01, Cleveland, Ohio; www.csc.noaa.gov/cz2001/ or contact: Jan Kucklick at the NOAA Coastal Services Center (phone 843-740-1279); email: Jan.Kucklick@noaa.gov

7/16 - 19:

ASMFC Meeting Week, Quality Hotel & Conference Center, 1200 North Courthouse Road, Arlington, Virginia; (703)524-4000.

7/24 - 26:

New England Fishery Management Council, Holiday Inn, Portland, Maine.

8/7 - 10:

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Sheraton Society Hill, One Dock Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; (215)238-6000.

CARA Lives!!

Or, whatever we want to call it. "Name-calling" is an art in Washington. One of the issues that the CARA coalition assumed throughout this winter was that we would need a new name for our "assured-funding-for-state-conservation-and-resources" program. The term "CARA" was just too loaded with the leftover detritus of last year's political battle. Well, we have not come up with a new name yet. And, Congressmen Young, Dingell, Hansen and Miller have reintroduced the Conservation and Reinvestment Act, even getting it the same bill number as last year – H.R. 701. Whatever we call it, there are a number of inescapable facts about CARA. What the Congress passed last year was not CARA; not even a weak substitute for it. The need for CARA is as strong as ever. And the broad coalition that supported CARA is still together, still growing, and still committed to secure and assured, long-term funding for conservation.

You have probably heard the term, "CARA-Lite." This is often used to describe the language contained in the Interior and Commerce appropriations bills last year. Don't be fooled. Don't even use the term. Many members and staff on Capitol Hill are under the impression that, by the action in the appropriations bills last year, Congress dealt with CARA, and are surprised that the CARA coalition is still looking for more. We are being characterized as greedy, as unwilling to settle for anything less than a full loaf. But when you realize just how far last year's legislation fell short, and just how little funding was made available for coastal resource programs, the picture becomes quite understandable. Do we appreciate the funding that was made available for state marine fisheries law enforcement programs and for Atlantic coast observers? Of course. But state coastal programs all together received only 25 percent of the funding that they would have had under the Senate committee bill; and only 20 percent of what was in the House-passed bill. Roughly the same percentages apply to stateside Land and Water Conservation funding and state wildlife conservation grants. The legislation also severely shortchanged state historic preservation funding and state urban park and recreation funding. And last year's funding was only provided for fiscal year 2001. We all know that investments in these programs

need to take place over time; and that states cannot initiate effective activities for a year only, without some sense that follow-on funding will be available.

So, last year's legislation did not fund the broad spectrum of CARA programs, did not provide long-term assured funding, did not focus on conservation, did not target state and local programs, and only included half of what CARA was all about (for only one year). Although there will be some wonderful things happening as a result of last year's funding, it cannot be characterized as CARA, or even CARA-Lite. We must continue to carry the message: America needs CARA. The problems of fishery conservation and management, recovering species, coastal erosion, maintaining public lands, preserving historic sites, building parks and protecting open spaces are becoming increasingly acute. Investing funds derived from nonrenewable resources makes sense. This is not a new precedent: 50 percent of the funds derived from onshore drilling is shared with the state where it occurs. Why shouldn't this be done with funds from offshore drilling as well? State governments are uniquely positioned to invest these funds wisely in conservation programs that work – that meet the needs of the local resources and the people who depend upon them. Is CARA expensive? Maybe three billion dollars sounds like a lot, but consider that it is considerably less than one percent of the projected surplus, using the conservative analysis of the Congressional Budget Office, and only about two percent of the proposed tax cut. Aren't our valuable resources worth this?

If I am perhaps preaching to the choir here, let me take it another step. As I said, the national coalition of over 5,000 organizations is still solidly behind CARA. We on the coastal side of the coalition need to do a better job this year than we did in the 106th Congress. Part of the story of what the real resource conservation needs were never got told in last year's debate. And we did not have a strong coastal organization presence within the CARA coalition. Land and Water Conservation Fund issues,

continued on page 4

From the Executive Director's Desk (continued from page 3)

wildlife issues, historic preservation and urban parks all became focuses for getting CARA support. But the coastal issues were nebulous, and the support from coastal constituencies was not as strong as it needs to be. That is true for the marine and coastal fisheries constituencies as well as the broader coastal community. We need to do a better job of that this year.

So do what you can to help get the word out. CARA was

not dealt with last year. The funding that Congress made available for 2001, while appreciated, does not fulfill the promise of CARA. The need for CARA is more apparent than ever. Proper stewardship requires secure and assured funding over time, focused on conservation, invested in state and local programs. CARA is the best way to safeguard the public trust and our treasured heritage.

Live on, CARA!

ASMFC Seeks Public Comment on Potential Management Actions for Horseshoe Crab, American Lobster and Spiny Dogfish

Atlantic coastal states from Maine through North Carolina have been conducting public meetings during the latter part of March and the beginning of April to gather public input on potential management measures for three important interjurisdictional species -- horseshoe crab, American lobster and spiny dogfish. All three Management Boards will be meeting during the Commission's Spring Meeting Week to review public comment and potentially take action on the proposed measures. Following is a brief summary of the issues being addressed.

Horseshoe Crab

From March 26 - 29, 2001, the states of Massachusetts, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia conducted public meetings on the Draft Addendum II to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Horseshoe Crab.

The purpose of Addendum II is to provide for the voluntary transfer of harvest quotas between states to alleviate bait shortages on a biologically responsible basis. The Draft Addendum II identifies a series of management options and procedures for reviewing and approving state-to-state quota transfers.

There are currently no provisions under the FMP for quota transfers. Consideration of quota transfers is complicated by recent findings that the horseshoe crab population along the U.S. East Coast may be comprised of more than one discrete population (stock). Transferring quota from a region with a large horseshoe crab population to a region with a small population could threaten the smaller stock. It is for this reason that quota transfers should occur within a population and must be predicated on a stock delineation and estimates

of stock size. Quota transfers should also be evaluated for their impact on competing uses, especially shorebird populations and the biomedical industry.

The Draft Addendum also includes procedures for Technical Committee and Management Board to review and approve quota transfers on a case-by-case basis. It is proposed that each request for quota transfer be evaluated based on the amount of each quota transfer, stock delineation, and the impacts of the quota transfer on the horseshoe crab population, migratory shorebirds, and the biomedical industry.

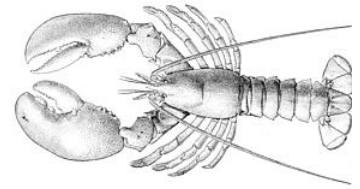
Public comment on the document will be accepted until April 13, 2001 and should be forwarded to Tom O'Connell, Horseshoe Crab Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Fisheries Service, Tawes State Office Building, C-2, 580 Taylor Avenue, Annapolis, Maryland, 21401; or via email at comments@asmfc.org. Copies of the Draft Addendum II can be obtained from the Commission office or via the web site at <http://www.asmfc.org>. For more information, please contact Tom O'Connell, Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at (410) 260-8271 or toconnell@dnr.state.md.us.

American Lobster

From March 26 - April 4, that states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maryland, and New Jersey conducted public meetings on the Public Information Document (PID) to Amendment 4 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for American Lobster. The PID, which was approved by the American Lobster Management Board in early February, ad-

continued on page 5

ASMFC Seeks Public Comment on Potential Management Actions for Horseshoe Crab, American Lobster and Spiny Dogfish (continued from page 4)



dresses options for the use of conservation equivalency for the non-trap gear limits and v-notch possession restrictions of Amendment 3.

The concept of conservation equivalency is not a new one to the Commission and has been used in many of its fishery management plans. It provides states with the flexibility to adopt alternative management approaches, given that these approaches have been found to be conservationally similar to the required management measures. In the case of lobster management, alternative management measures will be required to meet the revised egg rebuilding schedule contained in Addendum II.

Public comment on the PID will be accepted until April 22, 2001, and should be forwarded to Heather Stirratt, American Lobster Fishery Management Plan

Coordinator, at 1444 Eye Street, N.W., Sixth Floor, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 289-6051 (fax); or via email at comments@asmfc.org. Copies of the PID can be obtained by contacting the Commission office or via the Commission's web site at <http://www.asmfc.org>. For more information, please contact Heather Stirratt at (202) 289-6400, ext. 301, or hstirratt@asmfc.org.

Spiny Dogfish

From March 26 through April 4, the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina conducted public meetings on the Public Information Document (PID) for Spiny Dogfish.

The PID addresses possible alternate management actions for the fishing year beginning May 1, 2001. Specific

options included in the PID are an extension of the current emergency action for another year; adoption of actions as specified in the federal plan; or implementation of management measures based on a constant harvest strategy.

Public comment on the PID will be accepted until April 10, 2001 and should be forwarded to Dr. Joseph Desfosse, Spiny Dogfish Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at 1444 Eye Street, N.W., Sixth Floor, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 289-6051 (fax), or via email at comments@asmfc.org. Copies of the PID can be obtained by contacting the Commission office or via the web site at <http://www.asmfc.org>. For more information, please contact Dr. Desfosse at (202) 289-6400, ext. 329.

States Take Emergency Action on 2001 Black Sea Bass Fisheries: New Trigger Level and Adjusted Possession Limits Set

On April 3, 2001, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission approved emergency action for this year's second, third and fourth quarter black sea bass fishery, establishing a new trigger limit and modified possession limits following the trigger.

Last August, the Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Management Board established possession limits for the 2001 commercial black sea bass fishery at 9,000 1,500, 1,000 and 2,000 pounds for the first (January – March), second (April - June), third (July – September), and fourth quarters (October – December), respectively. At yesterday's meeting, the Board estab-

lished a new trigger limit of 40 percent for the last three quarters of the fishery. Following the trigger being reached (i.e., 40 percent of the quarterly quota), the states will have the option of implementing a 150-pound daily possession limit or developing a management program that allows a weekly possession limit of up to 1,000 pounds.

The use of triggers and modified possession limits are intended to allow fishermen to harvest black sea bass throughout the entire quarterly periods. By allowing states to choose between daily and weekly possession limits, fishery managers can better meet the needs of the various commercial fishing sectors.

Black Sea Bass is jointly managed by the Commission, through its Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP), and the Council, through Amendment 9 to the Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass FMP. These plans manage the commercial black sea bass fishery through a quota that is divided among four periods – Quarter I (January – March), Quarter II (April – June), Quarter III (July – September), and Quarter IV (October - December). Commercial black sea bass landings are monitored weekly to ensure the timely closure of the fisheries once the quota

continued on page 8

ASMFC 2001 Spring Meeting Week
April 23-26, 2001
Quality Hotel and Conference Center
Arlington, Virginia

Final Agenda

Monday, April 23, 2001

8:00 AM – 10:00 AM Legislative Committee

- Review 106th Congress
- Issues for 107th Congress
- Appropriations
- Endangered Species/Marine Mammals
- Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
- Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act
- Conservation and Reinvestment Act

9:00 AM – 5:00 PM Committee on Economics and Social Sciences

- Review of ASMFC Special Report 47
- Review of ISFMP Socioeconomic Appointments
- Progress on Management Plans / Amendments / Addenda for 2001
- Development of Socioeconomic Sections for Red Drum Amendment 2
- Review of the Socioeconomic Pilot Study
- Update on Development of Fishing Communities Survey
- Review of Ex-Vessel Value Data Collection

10:00 AM – Noon Spiny Dogfish and Coastal Shark Management Board

- Update on Council actions
- Review public comments on Spiny Dogfish PID
- Recommendations to states for interim spiny dogfish management

1:00 PM - 5:00 PM Meetings Management Workshop

1:00 PM – 5:00 PM Law Enforcement Committee

- Striped Bass Report (March 2000-Feb 2001)
- ACFCMA Funding
- LEC members reports regarding fisheries management boards activities
- Reports of the National Marine Fisheries Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Coast Guard
- Guidelines for Resource Managers - status report
- Contract for LEC staff person
- Strategic Plan - GSMFC LEC
- Conservation Equivalency
- Where LEC fits into process
- Mid-Atlantic and Southeast States Law Enforcement Symposium summary
- Fine monies for resource recovery use aquaculture discussions - workshop possibilities

continued on page 7

ASMFC 2001 Spring Meeting Week Agenda (continued from page 6)

Tuesday, April 24, 2001

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM Atlantic Menhaden Management Board

- Review/approve draft Amendment 1
- Discuss formation of technical committee and advisory panel
- Elect Chair and Vice Chair

9:00 AM - 5:00 PM Management and Science Committee

- Report of Regulatory Discards Subcommittee
- Report of the Aquaculture Subcommittee
- Modifications to Commission's Peer Review Process
- Recommended Priorities for CY2001 Peer Reviews
- Report of the Power Plant Subcommittee
- Review of Florida Aquaculture BMPs
- Evaluation of Scientific Display/Permit Issues
- Report of the Protected Species Subcommittee
- Update on Multispecies Assessment Project
- Update on Commission Habitat Program and discussion of state habitat issues
- Updates on Commission Activities -- NEAMAP; ACCSP; Stock Assessment User's Manual and Workshops; Interstate Tagging Committee; Discussion of Ageing Issues
- Discussion of Possible CY2002 Activities

9:00 AM – 5:00 PM Law Enforcement Committee (continued)

9:00 AM – Noon Sea Turtle Workshop

Purpose: to raise awareness of sea turtle/fishery interactions along the Atlantic coast
Presenter: National Marine Fisheries Service

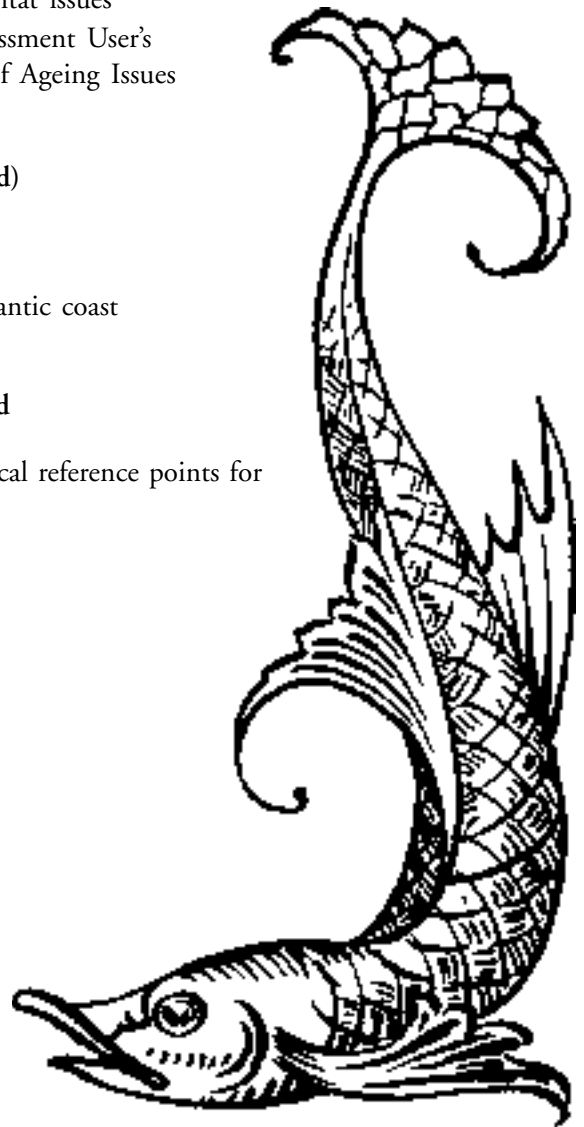
1:00 PM – 4:00 PM Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board

- Technical Committee presentation on and Board discussion of biological reference points for Amendment 6
- Discuss timeline for development of Amendment 6

4:00 PM – 5:00 PM Horseshoe Crab Management Board

- Report on State Annual Reports for 2000
- Report from Biomedical Adhoc Workgroup
- Review & approve/disapprove State Management Proposals for 2001
- Approve/disapprove Addendum II
- Update on the use of state challenge funds from Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey for horseshoe crab stock assessment Projects
- Update on NMFS horseshoe crab management activities
- Update on the formation of a Shorebird Technical Committee

6:00 PM - 8:00 PM Annual Awards of Excellence Reception



continued on page 9

States Take Emergency Action on 2001 Black Sea Bass Fisheries (continued from page 5)

for each period is landed. Both plans set out a series of trip limits that are designed to extend the quota throughout the quota period, thereby, maximizing the benefits of the available quota.

The Commission is finalizing the Emergency Rule, which should be available by April 20, 2001. According to its Interstate Fisheries Management Program Charter, the Commission is also required to hold at least four public meetings within 30 days of adoption of the emergency action. Information on these meetings will be released once it becomes available.

Copies of the Emergency Rule for 2001 Black Sea Bass Fishery can be obtained via the Commission's web site at <http://www.asmf.org> or by contacting Vanessa Jones, Administrative Assistant, at (202)289-6400 or vjones@asmfc.org. For more information, please contact Robert Beal at (202)289-6400.

The ACCSP Socioeconomic Pilot Study is Underway

For some time, the fishing industry has urged fisheries managers to give greater consideration to economic and social factors when forming and evaluating fisheries management policies. Although some of this information has been gathered in the past, it has usually been collected for one fishery at a time and limited to a specific time period. To respond to the industry's repeated call for greater consideration of economic and social factors, the ACCSP has initiated a pilot study.

The pilot study involves two very different fisheries: the blue crab fishery in Georgia, and the federal permit fisheries from Maine to North Carolina. More than 150 permit holders have volunteered to participate in the three-year study. The study of the blue crab fishery is in its second year of data collection, and this winter initiated the start of data collection in the federal permit fisheries.

Volunteers are interviewed once each calendar quarter during each of the three years of the study. There are three separate surveys - two for the vessel owner/captain and one for the captain/crew — as follows:

Vessel Owner/Captain Survey (fixed costs) -- annually asks for information about annual business costs that general re-

main the same each year, regardless of the number of trips taken or days spent at sea (i.e., insurance costs, interest on loans, and accounting fees). This survey lasts about 30 minutes.

Vessel Owner/Captain Survey (variable costs) -- asks questions about the cost of taking a particular trip (i.e., fuel, ice, and crew share payments). Four trips per year (one in each quarter) will be selected and the captain will be interviewed soon after the trip is completed. This survey takes about 15 minutes to complete.

Captain/Crew Survey -- will be given along with one of the trip surveys. All crew members on that trip will be asked questions such as their age, education, ethnic background, religious affiliations, and level of income. This survey lasts about 15 minutes per crew member.

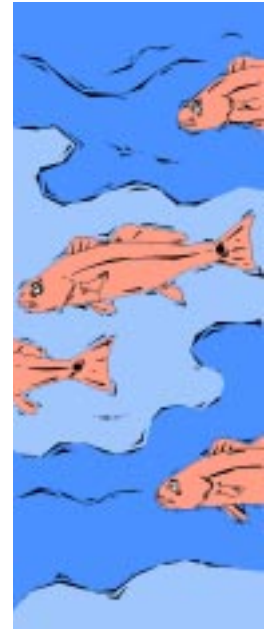
The fishing industry will have access to summaries of the data that will help them make informed business decisions. The ACCSP has already taken legal steps to ensure that detailed personal information will remain confidential.

The ASMFC's Committee on Economics & Social Sciences (CESS) provides technical expertise and oversight to the pilot study for the ACCSP. If these studies are successful, there will be better economic and social information for fisheries managers to use in making management decisions. The CESS will continue to work with the Interstate Fisheries Management Program to incorporate information from these types of studies into the management process. To help ensure that this is done and that the fishing industry's economic concerns are heard, fishermen need to participate in this and future studies, and to continue, as they have in the past, to insist that the information be used.

For more information about this study, please contact Darren Benjamin, Fisheries Research Specialist, at (202) 289-6400 or dbenjamin@asmfc.org.



ASMFC 2001 Spring Meeting Week Agenda (continued from page 7)



Wednesday, April 25, 2001

7:30 AM - 9:00 AM **Legislators and Governor's Appointees**

- Review Issues for Advisory Process
- General Review of Commission Progress and LGA Involvement
- Selection of Vice Chair for Legislative Section

9:00 AM - 10:00 AM **ASMFC Stock Assessment Training Seminar - Production Models**
Presenter: Joe DeAlteris

10:00 AM - 11:30 AM **A Perspective on Fishery Bioeconomics as a Tool for Policy Guidance**
Presenter: Dick Allen

1:00 PM – 5:00 PM **American Lobster Management Board**

- Update on Status of State Compliance
- Technical Committee Report on reference points, socioeconomic study, and effort reduction
- Board discussion on Amendment 4 PID
- NMFS Status Report
- Lobster Health Issues

1:00 PM – 3:00 PM **South Atlantic State-Federal Fisheries Management Board**

- Red Drum Technical Committee Report -- evaluation of red drum management options and preliminary report on croaker assessment
- Review/approve red drum PID
- Review Red Drum Advisory Panel composition
- SEAMAP update/review 2001-2005 Management Plan

5:00 PM – 6:00 PM **Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program Coordinating Council**

- Approval of the 2001 ACCSP Operations Plan
- Approval of 2002 Funding Priorities
- Approval of the ACCSP Funding Decision Document
- Discussion of ACCSP Strategic Planning Initiatives
- Massachusetts Optical Character Recognition (OCR) Project
- State Partner Conduct of the MRFSS Intercept Survey

Thursday, April 26, 2001

7:30 AM– 10:30 AM **ISFMP Policy Board**

- Committee Reports -- Economics and Social Sciences; Habitat, Law Enforcement, Management and Science

10:30 AM - Noon **Executive Committee**

- Report of the Administrative Oversight Committee -- approval of 2001-2002 budget
- Future Annual Meetings
- Litigation Update
- Reports of the Legislative Committee, Awards Committee and Management and Science Committee
- Appointment of Committees for 60th Annual Meeting

Noon – 1:00 PM **Business Session**

continued on page 12

Good News for Right Whales: Fourteen Calves Sighted in Southern US Waters

Fishermen and environmentalists alike have something to rejoice about with the recent sighting of 14 right whale calves. In late January 2001, the National Marine Fisheries Service reported that teams of biologists surveying ocean waters off Florida and Georgia have sighted at least 14 right whale calves in late 2000 and early 2001. This is more new right whales than the scientists observed in the previous three years combined. The right whale baby boom is extremely good news for a species whose chances for survival have been looking increasingly grim.

“Fourteen births is very good news,” said Phil Clapham, a whale expert with NOAA fisheries, the federal agency charge with developing a plan to protect the endangered whales. “There are only about 70 reproductively active females left, and they have been having calves less frequently than in the past, for reasons that are not clear,” he said.

Officials cautioned that the population increase is only one small step toward recovery of the highly endangered species. There are approximately 300 North Atlantic right whales left, and recovery efforts have been hampered by whale injuries and deaths caused by collision with ships and entanglement in fishing gear (see related article on page 11).

Scientists from a network of public and private agencies monitor the remaining North Atlantic right whales closely throughout the year. In the winter months, pregnant females migrate to the southern waters to give birth.

Survey teams found only five live calves in 1998. In 1999, only four calves were sighted, and last year there was only one confirmed sighting of a calf.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) survey team that covers the

southern most portion of the calving ground, has logged 22 right whale sightings this past January, compared with a single at the same time last year. “The teamwork and coordination between survey teams has resulted in extensive coverage of the calving ground, giving us an overall picture of the population,” said Cyndi Thomas, head of the FWC right whale conservation project. “We are also providing protection from ship strikes by immediately distributing our sightings to mariners in the area.”



The boom in right whale births may provide new evidence to scientists who have been trying to solve the puzzle of why right whale birth rates have been declining. Last spring, NMFS brought together a panel of whales experts and other scientists – including experts in reproductive biology of other endangered species – in an attempt to understand the declining birth rates. The possible explanations included diminishing food supplies, disease, the presence of biotoxins or other contaminants in the marine environment, or a genetic problem caused by inbreeding in a too-small population of animals.

“Most of the possible explanations are pretty discouraging,” Clapham said. “If the problem is inbreeding, it is quite likely that you are stuck with it.”

Likewise, disease or biotoxins are the types of difficult-to-solve problems that might well spell doom for the species.

But the reproductive successes this year may indicate that the past problems were something periodic, such as diminished food supply or perhaps an epidemic that may have left the females unable to reproduce.

“The food supply explanation is the only hypothesis for which there is any real evidence,” Clapham said, citing a recent blubber thickness study by Michael Moore and Carolyn Miller, scientists at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Moore and Miller found that female right whales have diminished

blubber thickness – raising the possibility that they were not healthy enough to have calves as often as they had in the past. In a different study, researchers at the Center for Coastal Studies in Massachusetts have suggested a link between food supplies and later reproductive success.

Not only is the nutrition hypothesis the only explanation supported by evidence, it is also the most hopeful scenario.

“These are long-lived animals,” Clapham said. “If the problem is a variation in food, the females should be able to survive year to year fluctuations and produce enough calves in good years to slowly rebuild the population – if we can reduce the deaths from entanglement and ship collisions.”

For more information, please contact George Liles at (508) 495-2378.

Second Confirmed Right Whale Death this Year

In late March, a specially trained and equipped team of experts examined the second confirmed right whale mortality to occur this year -- a 25-foot long carcass of a young male. The team took biological samples important to whale researchers, and collected evidence that may confirm what killed the whale.

“This was a challenging response given the remote location,” said Dana Hartley. Hartley is the regional coordinator of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network in the northeastern United States, and works for NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency that organizes responses to marine mammal strandings such as this one. “The Virginia Marine Science Museum staff did an excellent job pulling together people and equipment to document this event,” she said.

The animal was spotted by workers at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and reported to the Virginia Marine Science Museum (VMSM) in Virginia Beach. The Museum is the designated responder for marine mammal strandings in Virginia. Three NOAA Fisheries Enforcement special agents were also on scene, and are investigating circumstances leading to the death.

The National Marine Fisheries Service provides coordination and oversight for the marine mammal stranding network, but the operations themselves are conducted together with various partners in the network, most of whom are volunteers. This response operation included more than a dozen people representing eight different federal, private, and university organizations scattered along the United States eastern seaboard.

The U.S. Coast Guard provided equipment to help secure the carcass prior to the examination. Staff from the Assateague Island National Seashore (National Park Service) and the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) also provided support and equipment at the scene.

The carcass had several deep cuts consistent with injuries resulting from a boat's propeller. There was no immediate indication that entanglement in fishing gear contributed to the death. According to field reports, the wounds were deep enough to open the abdominal cavity and thus there was little information gathered from organs.

The response team measured blubber depth (an indicator of feeding success), took skin samples (for genetic studies, including possible identification of the parents), and recovered the skeleton and other hard parts of the animal. These samples and other observations may also confirm whether the external wounds are the cause of the death, or if there were other

contributing factors or causes. A final report of the examination will include any findings as to the cause of death.

North Atlantic right whales are among the world's most endangered large whale species, and number approximately 300. These whales are particularly susceptible to ship strikes and to entanglement in fixed fishing gear (such as gillnets and lobster pots), either of which can cause serious injuries and/or death. Right whales are listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Present federal regulations prohibit craft of any kind from approaching within fewer than 500 yards of right whales. Ship strikes are “takes” under the law and are to be reported. Reports can be made to the Stranding Network Coordinator at (978) 585-7149, or the U.S. Coast Guard. Anyone with information about events leading to this particular mortality can make a confidential report at (800) 853-1964.

ASMFC 2001 Spring Meeting Week Agenda (continued from page 9)

Thursday, April 26, 2001

1:00 PM – 5:00 PM Summer Flounder, Scup,
& Black Sea Bass
Management Board

- Discuss the next Amendment to the Black Sea Bass FMP
- Discuss timeliness of state fishery closures and trip limit changes

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
1444 Eye Street, N.W., 6th Floor
Washington D.C. 20005

Return Service Requested