

Weakfish Advisory Panel Report

October 5, 2005

The Advisory Panel (AP) held a conference call on October 3, 2005. Below is a summary of that call.

Participants

Advisory Panel Members

Leslie Daniels (NC - comm)
Billy Farmer (NC - comm)
Fred Kinard (SC – rec)

Bill Mandulak (NC – rec)
George Scocca (NY – rec)
Dick Weisberg (CT – rec)

Technical Committee Members

Jim Uphoff (MD), Chair
Rob O'Reilly (VA)

ASMFC Staff

Brad Spear

Nomination of a Chair and Vice Chair

Currently, the Chair and Vice Chair positions of the AP are open. Several suggestions were expressed regarding the nomination for these positions. One was to postpone nominations and elections until a later date because only six panel members were on the call and some did not feel comfortable electing someone who they knew nothing about. Another suggestion was to move forward with electing members in the interest of providing leadership for the group and representing the AP at the Board meeting. Billy Farmer offered his willingness to take the Chair position but that we would be unable to attend the November 2nd Board meeting. If no other panel members expressed interest in the position, he would be willing to assume the role after this fall fishing season. In the meantime, the call participants agreed that it would be acceptable to have ASMFC staff speak for the AP at the next Board meeting.

Comments on the Weakfish Fishery

Panel members reported in North Carolina that commercial fishermen often have nets full of dogfish when it's not the target species. They suggest opening up the dogfish fishery and the weakfish will recover. Unsteady and low weakfish landings have led to a closing of the market for weakfish that was filled with croaker. NC fishermen note that it will be hard to get weakfish back on track until landings are higher and more consistent. On the other hand, panel members reported they are seeing lots of recreational catch south of Cape Hatteras. The general sense from the southern representatives is the southern stocks appear to be fine and that the fishermen should not have to take another for the lack of weakfish up north. Little information was provided on the fishing conditions in the mid-Atlantic and north. However, it was suggested that since the latest assessment was coastwide, dealing with the problem needs to be coastwide.

Recommendations for Weakfish Management and Research

Half of the AP members on the call supported status quo for both commercial and recreational measures in draft Addendum I. Support for this recommendation includes: fishing mortality is low with current regulations so keep them in place, and since low abundance appears to be caused by natural mortality, further restrictions won't have an impact. One member on the call supported a moratorium on the commercial and recreational fisheries. Support for this view includes: doing little or nothing will accomplish nothing with regard to stock recovery, and it is the most fair (with regard to commercial versus recreational) and effective at achieving a conservation benefit. Two AP participants reserved their recommendations for after their state public hearing.

Another recommendation that came from half of the members was to maintain the bycatch allowance because bycatch is not a problem in North Carolina. In reference to the recreational season, one member suggest that if the Board required a season he would prefer a late season (i.e August through December). One recommendation in reference to biological sampling was to not penalize the industry by shutting down a fishery (Option 1 of Ramifications of 'non-compliance') for something that the state controls.

There were a few recommendations from AP participants that were beyond the scope of draft Addendum I. It was recommended that the Technical Committee look more closely at the interaction of weakfish with dogfish, and that the ASMFC liberalize the dogfish regulations to increase weakfish abundance. Some members present recommended a liberalization of the striped bass regulations for the same reason. A minority of the AP opposed this latter view. A couple panel members also recommended exploring more closely the connection between menhaden and weakfish abundance. Southern panel members recommended a north/south split in the regulations, while representatives from the north did not support this recommendation.