

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

Weakfish Advisory Panel

October 20, 2009

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Meeting Summary

Participants

Tom Lewis (PRFC, com)

Bill Mandulak (NC, rec)

Fred Kinard (SC, rec)

Russ Allen (NJ DFW, TC Chair)

Nichola Meserve (ASMFC)

Overview

The Weakfish Advisory Panel (AP) met to review results of the 2009 benchmark stock assessment, Draft Addendum IV and the public comment received to date, and a proposal from Florida for alternative management. The AP developed management advice to be delivered to the Management Board on November 3.

Attendance Level

The AP members in attendance were dismayed with the low turnout for the meeting, particularly given the extent of the management measures under consideration. The AP requests staff to confirm the AP membership list and to seek nominations for replacements as necessary.

2009 Stock Assessment Results

The Technical Committee Chair presented an overview of the stock assessment. The results support on-the-water observations reported by AP members in Virginia and North Carolina north of Cape Hatteras or Cape Lookout, although were thought to be less representative of southern North Carolina. In South Carolina, weakfish were reported as being rarely targeted. Given the influence of natural mortality on recent stock dynamics, the AP questioned whether studies were ongoing or planned to explicate the underlying cause(s) of the estimated increase. Recognizing that overfishing is not the cause of the depleted biomass but that fishery removals further jeopardize the stock and that total mortality must decline for the stock to rebuild, the AP members in attendance agreed that some level of harvest reduction was warranted.

Draft Addendum IV

Staff provided an overview of the draft addendum and a summary of the public comment received to date. The AP will receive a full copy of the public comment record after the comment period closes on October 30.

The AP members in attendance developed the following recommendations on the options in Draft Addendum IV:

Biological Reference Points – Consensus recommendation for Option 3 (percentage-based reference points). This selection reflects support for the Technical Committee's recommendation.

Recreational Fishery –

Tom Lewis – Option 2b (one fish creel limit) with an increase to a 13” minimum size limit in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida. This selection reflects support for a level of harvest reduction that will increase the likelihood of stock rebuilding while allowing for a minimal bycatch. Knowledge of the stock’s status and restricted harvest allowance should limit directed fishing by most anglers and the one fish creel limit will reduce unnecessary waste for deep hooked weakfish that suffer a high post-release mortality rate. The estimated harvest reduction is roughly equivalent to the harvest reduction expected from the commercial option supported.

Bill Mandulak and Fred Kinard – Option 4 (moratorium), based on the severely depleted stock size and need to rebuild the stock. This option provides the best chance of success. Only a harvest moratorium can discourage directed fishing. A moratorium for both fisheries is equitable.

Commercial Fishery –

Tom Lewis – Option 2.1b (100 lb trip limit) and Option 2.2b (100 undersized fish allowance for finfish trawls). This selection reflects support for addressing the stock decline with a significant harvest reduction while minimizing unnecessary waste from discarding and without risking protections implemented under earlier management revisions. It was noted that directed fishing would likely occur in certain fisheries, although undesirable. The estimated harvest reduction is roughly equivalent to the harvest reduction expected from the recreational option supported. There was some concern with the allowance for several states’ pound net and haul seine fisheries to land fish less than 12 inches, and at least one AP member supported eliminating this exception to the minimum size limit.

Bill Mandulak and Fred Kinard – Option 5 (moratorium), or if necessary, Option 4 (bycatch limit) with no more than a 50 pound limit. The commercial harvest today is already a minute fraction of what it was in previous decades, and this selection reflects discussions held with harvesters within their jurisdictions. This option provides the best chance of rebuilding the stock and promoting economic sustainability. Should there be a need to provide a bycatch allowance for incidental catch, it should be no more than 50 pounds per boat (regardless of the number of commercial licenses represented) to minimize regulatory discards but not encourage a directed fishery.

Monitoring Requirements – Consensus recommendation for Option 2 (suspend sampling requirements), but it should be stressed that states are still recommended to sample at existing levels.

Other Issues:

- Implementation Date – Desired date of January 1, 2010.
- Research Recommendations – More research to determine cause(s) of the increase in natural mortality (e.g., dogfish stomach content analyses, tagging studies).

Florida Proposal for Alternative Weakfish Management

The AP members in attendance supported Florida’s proposal to restrict the weakfish management area to include just the northern section of the state where pure weakfish are known to occur. They found the proposal to be a practical method to address the hybridization issue and consequent enforcement problems. Implementation of the proposal was not perceived as presenting a risk to the resource, especially given the state’s limited landings of weakfish.

Adjourn