

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

**Atlantic Striped Bass Advisory Panel**

*October 19, 2010*

*Warwick, Rhode Island*

**Draft Meeting Report**

**Overview**

The Atlantic Striped Bass Advisory Panel (AP) met to elect new leadership, review the draft 2009 Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Review and the public comment received on Draft Addendum II to Amendment 6, and develop management advice.

**Attendance**

Panel Members: Ed Cook (RI, rec), Bob Fjelstad (VA, rec), Rodney Gray (ME, rec), Arnold Leo (NY, com), Ed O'Brien (MD, charter), Dave Pecci (ME, charter), Kelly Place (VA, com, chair), Al Ristori (NJ, charter, via phone), Peter Whelan (NH, charter), and Riley Williams (NC, com)  
Guests: George Allen (RI saltwater angler, Portsmouth), and Stephen Medeiros (RI Marine Fisheries Council/RI Saltwater Anglers Association, Coventry)  
ASMFC Staff: Nichola Meserve

**Advisory Panel Leadership**

Kelly Place's position as chair was due to expire at this meeting with Bill Donovan succeeding him; however, Bill recently resigned from the AP. The AP voted to extend Kelly's chairmanship for another two-year term, and approved Peter Whelan's nomination of Dave Pecci as vice-chair.

**Fishery Management Plan Review**

The AP was provided with a presentation of the draft 2009 FMP Review, which the Board is due to review and approve on November 9. Based on the information presented, the AP developed the following management advice for the Board:

1. The AP remains concerned about the accuracy of discard and discard mortality estimates for striped bass. The AP stressed the importance of the states addressing the recommendations in Addendum I to Amendment 6 that seek to improve these estimates, as well as reduce discard mortality.
2. The AP continues to stress the importance of surveying the recreational fishery during wave 1 in order to develop reliable harvest estimates, especially in Virginia and Maryland. This fishery targets concentrated populations of wintering large striped bass. The AP was disappointed that the ACCSP Recreational Technical Committee proposal for wave 1 data collection in the states of New York through North Carolina ranked 19 out of 21 proposals and was well below the funding cut-off. The AP believes that funding may have been available if the proposal had specified the use of shore-side intercept survey methodology rather than random digit dialing survey methodology, and requests the proposal be modified and reconsidered for funding by the ACCSP Coordinating Council.
3. The AP questioned the validity of the spring trophy fishery harvest estimate for 2009. The 90,000-plus fish harvest estimate, largely attributed to private anglers based on MRFSS

data, raised eyebrows given the decline in recreational catch and harvest elsewhere along the coast. The AP suggested some verification of the estimate.

4. The AP finds enforcement of and compliance with striped bass regulations to be inadequate, and reminds the Management Board that Amendment 6 requires of each state law enforcement capabilities adequate for successfully implementing a state's striped bass regulations. In order to increase compliance with regulations, the AP recommends that the states increase fines for violations in state waters (similar to how ASMFC has recommended that the NMFS increase fines for violations in federal waters) and also consider implementing tip lines for fishermen to anonymously call-in and report observed violations. (A tip program in Maine was reported as being highly effective and may serve as a good example for other states.)
5. The AP strongly recommends that the Board (or Technical Committee or Law Enforcement Committee) develop some manner of estimating poaching for use in stock assessment and management, if poaching can not be eliminated or significantly reduced. The AP finds it to be a double-standard that the Board accepts the uncertainty in the MRFSS harvest estimates and uses them for management, yet is apparently unwilling to develop any poaching estimates, albeit with uncertainty, for use in management.

#### **Draft Addendum II for Public Comment**

The AP was given the public hearing presentation of Draft Addendum II, which proposes to increase the coastal commercial quotas and revise the definition of recruitment failure. The AP then reviewed a summary of the approximately 2,203 public comments received.

#### **Develop Advice for the Management Board**

Regarding the proposed coastal commercial quota increase, the AP was unable to form a consensus opinion. Seven AP members supported status quo management, two AP members supported a 30% quota increase, and one AP member abstained from voting.

Regarding the proposed change in the recruitment failure definition, the AP was able to form a consensus opinion and supported the Technical Committee recommendation to revise the definition.

#### Discussion

Dave indicated that the Maine fishery has basically collapsed and that the charter industry has had a 25-60% decline in clientele. Given the stock decline, he can find no justification for increasing the coastal commercial quotas until the reasons for the decline are known. Peter also reported a 50% decline in the stock in New Hampshire based on catches. Ed O'Brien reported that the charterboat fleet in Maryland is largely sitting on the dock, partly due to economy, and that he does not believe the high recreational harvest estimates from MRFSS. He sees the MRFSS estimates as giving a false indication of striped bass abundance.

Arnold Leo noted that striped bass's prey species are abundant, meaning fish may be less interested in plastic, which may explain some of the recreational catch decline. Dave countered that Maine has one of the only viable river herring fisheries, and if the striped bass were coming into the river for the bait, they would see them, especially because the industry is using fresh bait now, in addition to improved technology and fishing harder.

Dave thought that regardless of the reason for the stock decline, which is documented in the stock assessment, this is no time to increase mortality on the stock. Arnold responded that we shouldn't be comparing the present state to the peak in 2004, which represents an unusually high, albeit fortuitously high, level of abundance. He felt the stock is declining to a more normal, sustainable level based on the regulatory framework. He also raised the concern that an "overabundance" of striped bass may have detrimental effects on other species' population sizes.

Peter indicated that, in addition to the stock decline, he is concerned about the age structure of the fish being caught in New Hampshire. He finds gaps in the age structure of his catch and a narrower range of year classes than in recent years, which spells trouble for the future of the fishery. Dave agreed and reported that he caught fish of the 2003 year class almost exclusively the last year.

Ed O'Brien noted his concern with the declining trend in the young-of-year, which has resulted in a lack of smaller fish. The result is a lot of pressure being put on the adult population. He viewed the pressure on the adult fish during the winter intercept fishery off VA and NC as particularly troubling, as well as the excessive and unaccounted for poaching of striped bass. He said he may have supported the quota increase a few years ago, but could not now due to his concerns about juvenile recruitment, the intercept fishery, and poaching. Bob Fjelstad agreed that he could have supported the increase a few years ago too. Ed also noted that he is not as worried about mycobacteriosis as some others; he sees a lot less of it on the water than in the news, and noted that no fish kills have been seen despite reports that the disease may increase natural mortality.

Riley Williams said that in the case of North Carolina, a lot of the fish are staying offshore in the EEZ, hence the quota underages in his state. Dave thought that it is not a matter of striped bass staying in the EEZ in Maine, as charter and private boats go out there to fish for bluefish and other species, and he doesn't hear anything about them catching striped bass. Arnold said that he hears anecdotal evidence that striped bass are abundant, such as the picture of a feeding blitz off New York that he passed around.

Arnold stated that he sees the proposal as addressing a fairness issue. He finds it unfair that the recreational fishery is managed in a flexible manner and can respond to stock changes, while the commercial fishery can not. He recommended a 30% increase to the quota as a means to improve upon the fairness issue, since a recreational quota has yet to be proposed. He would alternatively support an annual total allowable catch that is allocated among the sectors based on historical harvest. He thought the allocation was roughly 50/50 in the 1970s. Several people noted how difficult it would be to select the historical harvest (years and data source) to base such an allocation scheme on. Ed O'Brien also noted that the number of recreational anglers now is much greater than in any period that might serve as a reference period for determining allocation.

Peter said that there is no reason that New York or any other state with a commercial fishery can't try to increase its commercial quota via an equivalent reduction in its recreational harvest. Arnold and Riley found this to be an unrealistic option. Arnold noted that other fisheries are based on the strength of the year classes coming in, but not the coastal commercial fishery for

striped bass. Riley said that an increase would also help with the problem that there are many more people that like to eat striped bass than can actually go out and fish for them. He also agreed that poaching is an issue.

Dave also disagreed with the timing of this addendum because there are a number of other issues that he feels are more important to striped bass management (for example, the recommended studies in Addendum I, developing reliable wave 1 estimates, and evaluating the effect of mycobacteriosis on the stock). He said that completing a number of the Board's own priorities would lead to better management of the stock and fishery, such as identifying the reason for the abundance decline. He thought that question should have been answered before the Board considered any increase in mortality.

Riley thought a mistake in the draft addendum for public comment was leaving out specific percent increase options for the quota. He thought that some members of the public might have read it and thought the Board could have implemented a quota increase to equalize the commercial and recreational fisheries' harvests. Bob questioned if the draft addendum had said anything about how the quotas, if increased through the addendum, might be modified if the stock continues to decline. It did not. Several AP members suggested that if a quota increase is approved, the quotas should also be the first thing cut if the stock continues to decline.

Ed Cook reported that he could not support any quota increase at this time, because the angler reports of declining harvest and catch are like the canary in the coal mine.

### **Other Business**

No other business items were brought up at the meeting. The AP did not recommend any other management changes for the Board's consideration.

### **Adjourn**