Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: **Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board**

FROM: **Atlantic Striped Bass Advisory Panel**

DATE: **December 12, 2024**

SUBJECT: **Advisory Panel Recommendations on Updated Projections and 2025 Management Measures**

The Atlantic Striped Bass Advisory Panel (AP) met via webinar on December 9, 2024 to discuss AP recommendations on the Technical Committee Report with updated projections and 2025 management options. The following is a summary of AP members' recommendations.

AP Members in Attendance

Bob Humphrey (ME for-hire)
Dave Pecci (ME for-hire/rec)
Peter Whelan (NH recreational)
Patrick Paquette (MA recreational)
Craig Poosikian (MA commercial)
Andy Dangelo (RI for-hire)
Peter Jenkins (RI recreational)
Toby Lapinski (CT recreational)
Kyle Douton (CT for-hire/tackle shop)
Bob Danielson (NY recreational)
Julie Evans (NY for-hire, commercial)
Eleanor Bochenek (NJ rec, fisheries scientist)
Tom Fote (NJ recreational)
Leonard Voss (DE commercial)
Charles (Eddie) Green (MD for-hire/rec)
Dennis Fleming (PRFC rec/processer/dealer)
Will Poston (DC recreational)
Bill Hall (VA recreational)
Kelly Place (VA commercial)
Jon Worthington (NC recreational)

Three AP members on the call provided comments after the meeting due to technical issues. Their comments are incorporated into this summary.

ASMFC Staff: Emilie Franke, Katie Drew, Madeline Musante, Toni Kerns

Approximately 90 members of the public were also in attendance.

What level of reduction should the Board implement in 2025, if any? What level of risk is the Board willing to accept?

8 AP members support no reduction in 2025 (status quo) for the following reasons:

- More reductions will put the industry out of business, including particular concerns about the future of the commercial industry and for-hire businesses.
- Current regulations have only been in place for one year, and additional reductions should wait until the performance of current regulations can be determined.
- The projection scenarios are not statistically different. Taking a reduction may have no impact on the stock.
- Reducing fishery removals does not address the underlying issues of environmental conditions, pollution, predation, etc. The potential value of hatcheries should be considered, especially in the context of poor water quality and suboptimal environmental conditions the stock is currently facing.
- The economic risk of taking a reduction would outweigh the potential reward since it is not clear that taking a reduction will have a meaningful impact on the stock. The economic risk is significant with large potential impacts on for-hire and tackle businesses, in particular. The number of days needed for a closure and the potential economic impacts would be much riskier.
- If there is a reduction and effort shifts to other species, there is a risk those other species may not be able to withstand the additional pressure.

1 AP member emphasized the importance of evaluating the statistical uncertainty around the different projection scenarios to understand how similar the scenarios are regarding the estimated spawning stock biomass in 2029.

9 AP members support taking a reduction in 2025 for the following reasons:

- All data point to a declining fishery, including recruitment failure low young-of-year indices in producer areas. With a declining stock, the fishery must be managed to a smaller level. Fewer fish are being produced due to environmental conditions, and management needs to respond to a shrinking fishery by controlling effort and reducing mortality.
- A reduction should be taken now to avoid a larger reduction down the road.
- Not taking a reduction would be the greatest amount of risk and would be a disservice to the fishery.
- Some AP members noted the reduction should be the full 14%, others noted it should be at least 10%.
- Given the uncertainty in the projections, the Board should be conservative, especially considering recruitment failure and concerning environmental conditions. The Board should increase the probability of rebuilding to have more fish available for the future.

1 AP member noted support for either status quo (no reduction) to get one more year of data, or up to an 8% reduction as specified by the scenario 1A(2) in the TC report.

For any reduction, how should the reduction be split between the recreational and commercial sectors?

5 AP members support equal percent reductions for both sectors noting that all sectors should share the burden equally.

3 AP members support no reduction for the commercial sector noting the reductions would put some fishermen out of business, especially following the quota reduction in 2024.

3 AP members support each sector taking a reduction based on sector contribution to total removals[1].

1 AP member noted the overall reduction is the most important aspect to consider and does not have a preference on how the reduction is split to get there.

1 AP member noted the importance of considering which sector is contributing to the excess fishing mortality with the commercial sector under-harvesting their quota and the recreational fishery increasing over time.

For recreational measures, should the Board change size limits?

No AP members support changing the recreational size limit in 2025. 1 AP member noted size limit changes could be considered after 2025 instead of considering season changes. 1 AP member noted the science seems to indicate that harvesting an immature fish would be problematic, and 28" minimum should the minimum size to allow fish to spawn at least once.

For recreational seasonal closures, should the Board implement no-harvest closures or no-targeting closures?

9 AP members would support no-harvest closures instead of no-targeting closures (some noted strong opposition to no-targeting closures), if a reduction were implemented, for the following reasons:

- Many anglers could still participate in the fishery if catch-and-release is allowed.
- Impacts on businesses from a no-harvest closure would be less severe than the impact from a no-targeting closure.
- There are no other species available to target if a no-targeting closure were implemented, especially in New England.
- No-targeting closures are unenforceable and not practical given the overlap and similar fishing techniques for other species (e.g., bluefish).
- 1 of the AP members noted they are comfortable with no-harvest season as an incremental step toward an eventual no-targeting season, which would ideally not be a mid-season closure but instead would be a later start date and/or earlier close date.

[1] I.e., commercial sector contributes ~11% to total removals so the commercial sector would take 11% of the required 14% reduction, which would be a 1.5% reduction.

5 AP members support implementing no-targeting closures, if a reduction were implemented, for the following reasons:

- If a reduction were implemented, all parts of the fishery should be part of the closures. Allowing the catch-and-release component to operate while the harvest component was prohibited would not be equitable.
- No-targeting closures would be shorter as compared to no-harvest closures.
- Any closure should be during a time with the warmest water temperatures and highest release mortality rate to maximize the benefit of the closures.
- 1 of the AP members noted that shore anglers, in particular, should be able to harvest a fish. Often these anglers are part of minority groups which are underrepresented in the management process.

Several AP members expressed concern about the regional breakdowns presented in the seasonal closure options. The proposed regions are too large and result in one or two states in a region taking the vast majority of the reduction. States within the proposed regions have different timing of peak season. Closures should be evaluated state-by-state to determine the most equitable approach, so all states take the same reduction.

1 AP member noted the fishery is not ready to comply with no-targeting closures, and it will take time to work toward a no-targeting closure. Closures should not take place during the middle of the season but should instead have a later opening date and/or earlier closure date at either end. For example, a closure in Massachusetts at the end of the season may be desirable because there are other species to target. But a closure at the beginning of the season in the spring may address when the most catch-and-release pressure on smaller fish is occurring. Public education and outreach are an important part of this process.

Other Topics

AP members identified additional topics of concern during the discussion:

- Question about whether the stock assessment can identify the spawning origin of fish and concern about the accuracy of stock assessment data. Staff noted the stock assessment model currently assesses the population as one coastwide stock and cannot differentiate between fish spawned in different areas. Genetics studies provide snapshots of the population and consistently indicate a majority of fish are Chesapeake Bay-origin fish.
- Continued concern that the for-hire mode is grouped as part of the recreational sector.
- Noted the use of hatcheries in the 1970s and 1980s to supplement striped bass production and noted hatcheries may need to be considered again to support the stock. Research is also needed on environmental conditions and to address the issue of chemical impacts on striped bass (e.g., impacts on male fish).
- Concern about the number of fish being handled/released in the current narrow slot.
- Discussion about why commercial quota is being underutilized. Some AP members noted the limiting factor to catching the quota is regulation, not fish availability. The quota could be caught, but the harvesters are limited by regulations, not lack of fish.