

## INTERSTATE FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

### *Tautog*

#### Species Range

Outer coast of Nova Scotia to Georgia

#### Management Unit

Massachusetts through Virginia



#### Stock Status

[The 2021 Regional Stock Assessments Update](#) updates the [2016](#) Regional Benchmark Stock Assessment and [2017](#) Assessment Update. The four regions currently used for management are: Massachusetts-Rhode Island (MARI), Long Island Sound (LIS; Connecticut and New York waters north of Long Island), New Jersey-New York Bight (NJ-NYB; New Jersey and New York waters south of Long Island), and Delaware-Maryland-Virginia (DelMarVa). The 2021 Update found improvements in most regions.

Stock Region	Spawning Stock Biomass (in millions of pounds)			Fishing Mortality			Stock Status
	Target	Threshold	2020 Estimate	Target	Threshold	3-year Average	
<b>MARI</b>	10.09	7.57	14.90	0.28	0.49	0.23	Not overfished; overfishing not occurring
<b>LIS</b>	14.83	11.12	14.70	0.26	0.38	0.30	Not overfished; overfishing not occurring
<b>NJ-NYB</b>	14.45	10.78	10.54	0.19	0.30	0.26	Overfished; overfishing not occurring
<b>DelMarVa</b>	9.90	7.40	9.66	0.17	0.27	0.06	Not overfished; overfishing not occurring

Based on regional stock structure, the MARI stock is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. Spawning stock biomass (SSB) for this region is estimated to be 14.90 million pounds, above the SSB target of 10.09 million pounds. The three-year average of fishing mortality (0.23) is below the fishing mortality target (0.28) and the threshold (0.49), meaning overfishing is not occurring.

The LIS stock is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. SSB is estimated to be 14.70 million pounds above the SSB threshold of 11.12 million pounds and just below the SSB target of 14.83 million pounds. The three-year average of fishing mortality (0.30) was found to be below the threshold (0.38), meaning overfishing is not occurring. A strong year class has contributed to increasing trends in SSB in the region.

The NJ-NYB stock remains overfished and but is not experiencing overfishing. SSB is estimated to be 10.54 million pounds below the SSB threshold of 10.78 million pounds. The three-year average of fishing mortality (0.26) is below the threshold value (0.30). While the SSB remains below the threshold, it has been trending upward since the last assessment update.

The DelMarVa stock is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. SSB is estimated at 9.66 million pounds, above the SSB threshold of 7.40 million pounds and but below the SSB target of 9.90 million. The three-year average of fishing mortality (0.06) is below both the fishing mortality target value (0.17) and below the threshold value (0.27).

### **Involved States and Jurisdictions**

MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, DE, MD, VA, NMFS

### **Active Boards/Committees**

Management Board, Technical Committee, Stock Assessment Subcommittee, Plan Development/Review Team, Advisory Panel

### **Chairs**

Board, Chair – Justin Davis (10/2023); Vice-Chair – Vacant

Technical Committee, Chair – Craig Weedon (12/2021); Vice-Chair – Sam Truesdell

Advisory Panel, Chair – Vacant

### **Staff Lead**

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### **Current Management Overview**

Tautog is managed in four regional stocks (MARI, LIS, NJ-NYB, and DelMarVa) with a minimum size limit of 14". Regions can use trip limits, possession limits, seasonal closures, or quotas as best meets their needs to meet the target F. States may use conservation equivalency to propose regulations that differ from regional management measures.

### **Management Plan History**

#### **[Fishery Management Plan for Tautog \(April 1996\)](#)**

The Fishery Management Plan for Tautog required a 13" and 14" size limit for 1997 and 1998+ respectively, to increase the spawning stock biomass and yield to the fishery. It also set a fishing mortality rate of 0.24 to rebuild the stocks and to prevent overfishing. Additionally, the FMP allowed states to reduce landings by less than the average coastwide reduction if they demonstrated a fishing mortality rate below the coastwide average.

### [Addendum I \(May 1997\)](#)

The Board developed Addendum I because several states had difficulty meeting the FMP's compliance schedule due to data deficiencies. These states expressed concerns that the plan did not allow adequate time to determine state-specific fishing mortality rates. Further, the original FMP contained a compliance schedule that required states in the northern range to implement management measures prior to states at the southern extent of the species range. Some of the members of the Management Board were concerned that the compliance dates should be consistent for states throughout the range of the species.

Specific measures of Addendum I required all states to implement management measures to reach the interim fishing mortality target  $F = 0.24$  and 14" size limit by April 1, 1998. It extended the date for states to meet the fishing mortality target  $F = 0.15$  to April 1, 2000. *De minimis* requirements were established and several typographical errors from the original FMP were corrected.

### [Addendum II \(November 1999\)](#)

The Board developed Addendum II to adjust the compliance schedule and develop a list of issues to be considered in subsequent addenda or amendments. Addendum II further extended the compliance schedule to meet  $F_{\text{target}} = 0.15$  until April 1, 2002. It also listed a variety of issues, including (1) the chosen plan target of  $F = M$ , (2) clarification of the fishing mortality targets in the FMP with respect to individual state management program flexibility, (3) monitoring requirements in the FMP, and (4) data requirements to analyze management options by fishing modes within commercial and recreational fisheries.

### [Addendum III & Technical Addendum I \(February 2002\)](#)

Addendum III revised the plan target and compliance requirement from  $F = 0.15$  to  $F = 40\%$  of spawning stock biomass ( $F_{40\% \text{ SSB}}$ ). This addendum also required states to make reductions to meet ( $F_{40\% \text{ SSB}}$ ) in the recreational fishery only. Addendum III also updated information pertaining to tautog habitat and the data collection compliance requirements under the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics and Tagging Programs. Technical Addendum I corrected a typographical error in Addendum III to the FMP.

### [Addendum IV \(January 2007\)](#)

Addendum IV established spawning stock biomass reference points and lowered the fishing mortality target rate to  $F = 0.20$ . Establishing biomass reference points allows management to determine if the stock is overfished and if overfishing is occurring in order to adjust regulations accordingly. Fishing mortality rate was lowered to rebuild the stock in response to SSB being well below the target and threshold levels. Under Addendum IV, states can only get credit for reductions taken in the recreational fishery to meet the target  $F = 0.20$ . States are only required to implement restrictions that are sufficient to reach the target fishing mortality level if they can provide evidence, at the same level of precision as most recent assessment, of fishing mortality rates below those indicated in the assessment.

### [Addendum V \(August 2007\)](#)

Addendum V allows states to achieve  $F_{\text{target}} = 0.20$  by reducing  $F$  in the recreational and/or commercial fishery as best meets that state's needs. This addendum was necessary to undo the provision in Addendum IV that required reductions to meet  $F = 0.20$  to be made in the

recreational fishery only. Addendum V was initiated because, as states developed proposals to achieve the required  $F = 0.20$ , it became apparent that there were exceptions to the 90/10 harvest split. As an example, one state comprised close to 40% of total harvest in 2005. To achieve reductions to meet  $F = 0.20$ , that state would have had to reduce their recreational harvest by 53%. Several other states expressed interest in additional flexibility in achieving the  $F = 0.20$  target.

#### [Addendum VI \(April 2011\)](#)

In order to end overfishing and initiate stock rebuilding, Addendum VI lowers the  $F$  target to 0.15 and requires states to implement measures to achieve a 39% reduction in exploitation by January 1, 2012. The Technical Committee recommended implementing the  $F$  target at 0.15 or lower to stop overfishing and improve chances of rebuilding. Tautog's slow growth rate, late maturity, and spawning behavior makes it particularly susceptible to overfishing and limits stock rebuilding. The Technical Committee advised that SSB will not increase under the current  $F$  (0.26).

Addendum VI requires all states to prohibit the possession of undersized tautog in excess of bag and possession limits. The measure is intended to deter illegal harvest of tautog for the live market. The Board remains concerned about the illegal live harvest and will continue to work with the Commission's Law Enforcement Committee on ways to reduce it.

#### [Amendment 1 \(October 2017\)](#)

Based on the results of the 2015 Benchmark Stock Assessment and the 2016 Regional Stock Assessment, Amendment 1 delineates the stock into four regions due to differences in biology and fishery characteristics, and limited coastwide movement: Massachusetts–Rhode Island, Long Island Sound, New Jersey–New York Bight, and Delaware–Maryland–Virginia. The Amendment includes new regional biological reference points, fishing mortality targets, and stock rebuilding schedules. Each region will implement measures to achieve the regional fishing mortality target with at least a 50% probability. Commercial and recreational management measures are determined individually by the four management regions in response to the 2016 Stock Assessment Update. If the current fishing mortality exceeds the regional threshold, the Board must initiate corrective action within one year.

Additionally, Amendment 1 addresses the increasingly pervasive issue of illegal harvest of undersized and unreported tautog by establishing a commercial harvest tagging program. All states were to implement the tagging program by January 2020.

### **Annual Events**

- Tautog Compliance Reports are due May 1<sup>st</sup>
- Fishery Management Plan Review is presented to the Board in late summer or fall

### **Other Items of Interest**

An illegal live tautog market has developed in the New York City and Philadelphia Chinatowns over the last 15 years. Called *way-bah*, the Chinese consider fresh tautog to be a delicacy. To address this Amendment 1 outlined a Commercial Tagging Program to combat illegal harvest and trade. Most of the states implemented the tagging program in 2020; only New York and Connecticut did not implement the program due to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. All states within the management unit (MA-VA) have implemented the program in 2021. In August 2023, the Board received feedback from the Technical Committee (TC) and Law Enforcement Committee (LEC) on reported damage to the fish and the impact of the tagging program on illegal harvest. The Board tasked the TC with evaluating potential alternative tags and will review possible changes to the program.