Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

May 16, 2023

Tautog Technical Committee (TC) Meeting Summary

TC Attendees: Craig Weedon (MD, Chair), Sam Truesdell (MA, Vice Chair), Lindy Barry (NJ), Sandra Dumais (NY), Josh McGilly (VA), and Coly Ares (RI)

Staff: James Boyle, Katie Drew, and Kurt Blanchard

Other Attendees: Rachel Sysak (NY DEC), Jesse Hornstein (NY DEC), and Jason Snellbaker (NJ DEP)

The Commission's Tautog Technical Committee (TC) met via conference call on Tuesday, May 16th to discuss the following items:

1) Review state survey results regarding tautog commercial tagging issues.
2) Develop Recommendations to the Tautog Board regarding the results of the commercial tagging survey.
3) Review stock assessment update timeline.

Background

The primary purpose of this Technical Committee meeting was the continued discussion of reported live market fish quality and mortality issues presumably associated with the commercial tagging requirements. During the previous Technical Committee meeting on April 3, a list of survey questions targeted at harvesters and dealers were developed. Prior to the May 16th meeting states surveyed fishery stakeholders using this list of questions; summarized responses from the states helped guide the meeting discussion. In addition, the TC discussed the recent Policy Board approval for NY to tag tautog in various locations on the fish for the commercial season, and to conduct tagging experiments with different tags. The best practice recommended for tagging tautog in the left operculum was included in the Technical Guidance Document but not mandated in the FMP. Furthermore, the TC noted that a previous study, conducted before the implementation of the tagging program, evaluated a smaller version of the current tag. The current tag was chosen to accommodate the amount of unique identification numbers that are required.

1. Review state survey results regarding tautog commercial tagging issues.

The TC was briefed on the survey results from NY, MA, NJ, RI, MD, CT, and VA. The results showed that each region was experiencing varying levels of problems associated with fish that had been tagged in the operculum. The most concerning problems were associated with the live market in NY, although stakeholders in other states reported similar issues. Tagging

injuries have been reported to cause external wounds, that manifest over time and reduce the value of the fish, sometimes resulting in mortality. The severity of the wounds was associated with longer holding time periods in captivity, mainly greater than two weeks.

New York

The NY survey received responses from 20 tautog dealers and 83 harvesters, 52 of whom utilize live storage. 61 harvesters and 14 dealers reported issues with the tags, including lesions (42 harvesters and 12 dealers) and mortality (48 harvesters and 12 dealers). When asked to provide the percentage of fish that were damaged or died due to tagging, the most common response was 10-25% for both harvesters and dealers. Other reported issues included the tags falling out and the applicators deteriorating from use in saltwater.

Massachusetts

MA received 42 responses from harvesters and two from dealers. 32 harvesters had issues with the tags, with 25 reporting excessive damage and 15 reporting mortality. When asked to provide the percentage of fish that were damaged or died due to tagging, the most common responses were 11-25% were damaged and 4-10% died. Other reported issues included the tags falling out and the applicators deteriorating from use in saltwater.

New Jersey

NJ received responses from seven harvesters, five of whom use live storage and reported issues with the tags, including lesions (two harvesters), excess damage (3 harvesters), and excess mortality (3 harvesters). The most common excess damage and mortality rates were 10-25%. Other reported issues included the tags falling out.

Rhode Island

Rhode Island received 22 harvester responses and one dealer response. Three harvesters utilize live storage. Six harvesters reported issues with the tags, four of whom reported mortality. Two of the four reported more than 75% of their fish died from the tags. Other reported issues included the tags falling out and the applicators deteriorating from use in saltwater.

Maryland

Due to confidentiality, the MD survey results are not shown.

Connecticut

CT received 12 responses from harvesters, four of whom use live storage. Three harvesters reported damage on 10-100% of fish, and four reported mortalities on 5-20% of fish.

Virginia

VA received 10 responses from harvesters. One harvester utilizes live storage and was the only one to report issues with the tags. The harvester reported a 5-8% mortality rate from the tags and excessive damage to the fish. Other reported issues included the tags falling out.

2. Develop Recommendations to the Tautog Board regarding the results of the commercial tagging survey.

A range of recommendations were discussed from eliminating / pausing the tagging program, different tags for the live market, and tradeoffs between the security of the tag design and

identifying the most workable tag. The merits of the program were also discussed. It was noted that NY landings have increased recently, which may be due to better reporting. The TC quickly reached a consensus opinion that the tagging program must remain in place, and various new studies to focus on changing the tagging locations, tag size, or tag type may provide relief to the harvesters. New York is planning a study that will assess injury and survival rates for a suite of tags, building upon a previous experiment in 2016, prior to the implementation of the tagging program, that tested a National band strap tag by holding fish for 30 days in flow-through storage tanks. The study will be conducted over three phases. Phase one will evaluate the feasibility of a cinch tag around the tail of the fish, as well as the current tag and its smaller version in the fin rays and caudal peduncle. The feasibility study will be done on a sample of 10 fish, with all 10 receiving the cinch tag and the others receiving different combinations of national band tags in the caudal peduncle and fin rays. These fish will be held for 10 days in a cage anchored to a dock at a marine pier. Phase Two will be a replica on the initial 30-day study. The tags and locations that appear feasible through phase one will be progressed to the 30-day study either in a cage anchored to a pier or the original study facility with flow through systems. Finally, the tag and location with the best result will be tested in live markets and with commercial fishers in the fall/winter of 2023. Markets and commercial fishers who demo the tag will be required to fill out a check-in survey to collect standardized information on tag performance. **The TC recommends that these results be replicated in other states, especially those with a strong live market.**

3. Review stock assessment update timeline.

K. Drew presented the stock assessment timeline. Tautog was last assessed in 2021, with only one region (NJ-NYB) found to be overfished and no regions experiencing overfishing. The next assessment update was tentatively scheduled for 2024; however, the Commission assessment schedule is extremely heavy in 2024, with 3 benchmarks and 4 assessment updates for other species already scheduled for completion, and adding another assessment to the schedule would increase the burden on Staff and TC/SAS members that are involved in the other assessments. **The TC recommends targeting 2025 for the next stock assessment update and 2028 for the next benchmark stock assessment.** Although recreational removals along the coast have increased in 2021 and 2022, relative to the 2018-2020 average, the TC felt that postponing the assessment update by one year would not have significant negative consequences, given tautog's life history. Conducting a benchmark assessment in 2028 will permit the inclusion of some new fishery independent recruitment surveys, such as Maryland's SAV Habitat Survey, New York's Juvenile Recruitment Survey, NJ Ventless Trap Survey, and the Delaware Reef Trap Survey. In addition, the models would likely be transferred from ASAP to WHAM to keep up-to-date with the next generation of stock assessment model frameworks.