



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Jonah Crab Technical Committee; American Lobster Management Board

FROM: Jonah Crab Advisory Panel

DATE: December 28, 2023

SUBJECT: Jonah Crab Advisory Panel Report

The Jonah Crab Advisory Panel (AP) met on Thursday, December 14 to review the recently completed benchmark stock assessment for Jonah crab, and provide input on possible market and economic indicators for the fishery.

AP Attendance: Sonny Gwin, Denny Colbert, Jon Williams, Brian Thibeault
Staff: Caitlin Starks, Jeff Kipp, Corinne Truesdale (RI DEM)

Staff presented a summary of the stock assessment and peer review reports. Additionally, the AP discussed market and economic factors that affect the fishery. This was in response to a request from the Technical Committee (TC). After accepting the benchmark assessment for management use, the Board tasked the TC with recommending possible management measures or other options to correct what appear to be deficiencies in the stock. To gather more information to help address this task, the TC requested input from the AP on market and economic factors that could help explain recent trends in catch and landings.

The AP provided some thoughts on why Jonah crab landings have been trending down in recent years, despite high market prices. Jon commented that before the decline, there was a fleet of vessels off Southern New England (SNE) landing huge amounts of Jonah crabs, but those boats now only target lobster. Denny commented that you can still catch the same poundage per pot and easily fill your boat, but the prices have gotten so high that the Jonah crab are not selling. Adding to the difficulty selling Jonah crab, they commented that the price of Canadian snow crab has gone down and taken over more of the market. Jon added that when prices are high, fishermen can catch less and make the same amount of money, so they may reduce their landings. He also stated that the prices are not solely driven by market demand, but also the processors. There has been a price war between processors, in which processors have had to raise the price they will pay for Jonah crab to keep the boats that are selling to them. The AP members indicated that all of these factors have created a perfect storm where despite the fishing being great, they are not able to sell the crab. Additionally, some processors have placed catch limits on the boats that sell to them because they can't sell large quantities, and this is also keeping landings lower. There are also fewer processors in New England now than in the 2010s.

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The AP members also indicated that catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) can be driven by a combination of market factors including price and the availability of other crab species and lobster. They emphasized that the market is controlling everything in the fishery. They think the decline in landings is not indicative of a stock collapse, but rather just due to the Jonah crab market being shut down, primarily because of the Canadian snow crab market. Brian added that because they are focusing on catching larger, higher quality crabs that can be sold in the live market by modifying their traps, the decreased CPUE that has been observed is really because of intentional selectivity by the harvesters. It was also mentioned that it can be difficult to interpret the CPUE data from trip reports, because on multi-day trips some boats will focus on Jonah crab for specific days, and lobster for other days; on these trips the target species can change from day to day.

Another topic raised by the AP was the impact of acoustic surveys for wind development on Jonah crab. Two AP members observed a correlation between the decline in landings and the acoustic surveys for wind development. They said the surveys did not impact their access to bottom, but sometimes they were asked to move gear or not haul it to avoid interactions. During the time of the surveys, they said they observed that previously productive areas were not as productive. They suspect that the Jonah crabs were digging into the mud and not moving. Brian said in the inshore SNE area where some of the initial acoustic pounding was occurring, before the surveys he could catch fifteen pounds per trap, and then when the acoustic boats came in for the initial pass through, the crabs disappeared. He said he could hardly catch any crabs when the survey boats were there, but about an hour or two after they left, the catch per trap increased again. Additionally, the crabs caught after the surveys had mud stuck under their claw pocket, suggesting they had hunkered down in the mud. The AP agreed that this should be studied further to understand the impact of the acoustic surveys and wind farms on the crab behavior and catchability.

Commenting on the information provided in the assessment about the Canadian Jonah crab fishery collapse, two AP members mentioned that the fishery in Canada is strong right now, and they are selling Jonah crab for 40 cents a pound. In particular the fishery is concentrated just north of the Maine border in areas 34 and 35.