



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

July 16, 2019

To: Tautog Management Board
From: Tautog Advisory Panel
RE: Advisory Panel Review of Commercial Harvest Tagging Program

Attendees: Greg Jackson (DE; Commercial), Wes Blow (VA; Recreational), John Mihale (NY; Commercial), Craig Weedon (MD DNR; public)

Staff: Caitlin Starks, Dustin Colson Leaning, Kirby Rootes-Murdy

The Commission's Tautog Advisory Panel (AP) met via conference call on Wednesday July 10 to review the draft Commercial Tagging Program Guidelines and provide comments to the Board.

Commercial Tagging Program

ASMFC Staff presented background specific to Amendment 1 and the different parts of the guidelines from the initial biological metric to determine the number of tags through to tag reporting and accounting, as well as tag expiration. The draft guidance document is intended to promote consistency in applying the tagging program across the management unit, while allowing the states flexibility to align their program with the needs of their unique fisheries.

In reviewing the guidance document, AP members had the following comments (organized below by category):

Tag Application

- Concerns were raised about the tags that will be used are based on NY study. In general, concerns centered on how successful applying the tags will be and potential mortality to tagged fish before they are brought to market given the study was conducted in a very controlled environment. For example, all the fish were caught in pots and not by rod and reel, and some contend that stress induced by catching the fish via fishing rod and then tagging may increase mortality rates.
- Trying to apply the tags to fish will be very challenging at sea and there may be many tags broken, damaged, or lost.
- Additionally, in reference to the study, smaller fish from shallower water have a better retention/survival rate; a number of fish used in the study were below the current legal size limit for all states. These smaller fish may have a different survival rate than larger, legal size fish caught in deeper water.

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- In some states such as Delaware, Commercial permit holders do occasionally take trips with recreational anglers on their boats and differentiating between commercial caught fish vs recreational caught fish will be important as the current guidelines implies all Tautog on the vessel must be tagged. States will need to determine how best to enforce these scenarios.
- One AP member indicated that applying the tags in sequential order may be too difficult.
- One AP member indicated that state agencies should conduct outreach to demonstrate proper tagging techniques and potentially tag fish for commercial harvesters during the first year of the tagging program.

Tag Accounting and Distribution

- One AP member suggested that partial allocation of tags could be distributed to harvesters for the beginning of the year before the harvester turns in their old tags. The remaining allocation would be distributed to the harvester once they turned in their remaining unused tags.

Tag Expiration

- Some AP members remained confused on the need for a tag expiration date.
- In NY, the commercial bag limit is 25 fish from April 16-January 25. Harvesters/dealers are holding fish until mid-February. There is more demand in February (bad weather, less fish, higher price) so they hold the fish until then. Tagging fish along the calendar year- starting January 1- will likely create challenges for law enforcement to keep track of fish tagged the previous year vs the current year, especially during these months (January-February).

Penalties

- Regarding penalties, questions were raised on what penalties would be applied to recreational anglers and for-hire captains who attempt to sell their catch without a commercial permits; some AP members expressed concern this sector may attempt to illegally sell Tautog.
- Illegal harvest for sale (by recreational anglers and other unlicensed fishermen) remain an issue in this fishery and while the guidance document outlines how the tagging program will modify the commercial fishery, it doesn't address illegal sale.
- It was recommend that there be severe penalties for recreational and unlicensed sale of untagged fish.

Other

- There is a greater demand in the commercial market for Chinese New Years for fish smaller than the current minimum size limit.
- One AP member suggested that under the tagging program states should consider moving away from bag limit and season closure as the tags could become the limiting factor for the commercial fishery.
- Selling fillets of Tautog to restaurants may be challenging for keeping tags with the fish through to final sale.