



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

April 8, 2020

Tautog Technical Committee Meeting Summary

Attendees: Coly Ares (RI; Chair), Sam Truesdale (MA), Dave Ellis (CT), Sandy Dumais (NY), Lindy Barry (NJ), Alexei Sharov (MD), Alexa Kretsch (VA)

Staff: Kirby Rootes-Murdy and Katie Drew

The Commission's Tautog Technical Committee (TC) met via conference call on Tuesday, April 7 to review a Conservation Equivalency Proposal from Rhode Island (RI) for the Party/Charter sector and discuss current timeline of the next stock assessment update. The following is a summary of the group's discussion.

Summary

Overview of Conservation Equivalency Policy and Rhode Island Proposal

ASMFC Staff provided an overview of the Commission's Conservation Equivalency (CE) Policy, highlighting criteria the proposal should be evaluated against by the PRT; process for a CE proposal to be considered; and which committees beyond the PRT could provide feedback on a CE proposal.

Next, ASMFC Staff presented the Rhode Island proposal. The proposal outlined a request to allow for a separate bag limit by fishing mode, specifically a seasonally higher bag limit for the Party/Charter sector. The requested revision is highlighted in the summary of current and proposed regulations below.

Summary of Proposed Measures

Current Recreational Fishery Regulations in the MARI Region

Size Limit (inches)	Possession Limits (number of fish/person/day)	Open Seasons
16"	MA & RI: 3 fish (up to 10/private vessel)	March 1 – May 31 Aug 1 – October 14
	MA: 1 fish	June 1 – July 31
	RI: 0 fish	
	MA & RI: 5 fish (up to 10/private vessel)	Oct 15 – Dec 31

Proposed Recreational Fishery Regulations in the MARI Region

Size Limit (inches)	Possession Limits (number of fish/person/day)	Open Seasons
16"	MA & RI: 3 fish (up to 10/private vessel)	March 1 – May 31 Aug 1 – October 14
	MA: 1 fish	June 1 – July 31
	RI: 0 fish	
	MA: 5 fish (up to 10/private vessel)	Oct 15 – Dec 31
	RI private/shore: 5 fish (up to 10/private vessel)	
RI party/charter: 6 fish		

The rationale cited for the proposal is that the RI Party/Charter sector has been negatively impacted by the measures implemented under Amendment 1, specifically the sector’s ability to competitively market fishing trips during the fall season. Prior to implementation of Amendment 1, RI recreational measures allowed for a 6 fish bag limit for the Party/Charter sector in the fall season. Additionally, the proposal indicates the Party/Charter sector makes up a small percentage of the total RI recreational catch, ranging from <1% to 4% of RI’s total recreational harvest from 2014-2019.

Updated Analysis

Using a combination of final 2014-2018 and preliminary 2019 data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), the RI proposal outlines that average landings for the RI Party/Charter sector during the fall season in 2014-2017 with the previous 6 fish bag limit regulation was 5,456 fish; with the current regulation in place, 2018 fall harvest for the Party/Charter sector was 2,280 fish and preliminary fall 2019 data shows a harvest of 1,482 fish. Based on this information, the proposal indicates the anticipated increase in the Party/Charter fall harvest could be approximately 3,176 fish (difference between avg 2014-2017 harvest and 2018 harvest), and that this increase would be less than 1% of RI’s total recreational harvest in 2018 (330,373 fish).

Additionally, the proposal compares the projected harvest increase in RI with estimates of the harvest occurring in Massachusetts during June/July, when MA is at a 1-fish limit and the RI fishery closed. These estimates range from 114 fish in 2018 to 318 fish based on preliminary 2019 data (in both years a 1-fish limit was in place). Due to uncertainty with data in 2018, the average harvest from 2014-2017 assuming 100% compliance with a 1 fish bag limit was calculated (6,228 fish) to estimate what harvest could have been if the 1 fish limit was in effect from 2014-2017.

Regarding the impacts of the proposed measures on the resource at the regional level, the proposal highlights that the regulatory change will likely have a minimal impact on the regional fishing mortality (F). Since the MARI region was not experiencing overfishing, no action was needed per Amendment 1 to lower F (0.23) as it was below the target (0.28) and threshold (0.49) on the 2016 SPR reference points.

Lastly, the proposal does not include another regulatory revision in RI meant to offset this projected harvest increase. If approved, the measures would be implemented this year.

TC Review of RI Proposal

In evaluating the analysis outlined in the proposal, it was pointed out that mandatory reporting is a requirement of the Party/Charter sector and a question was raised as to why this data wasn't used. RI staff indicated that the requirement has only been in place for 1 year and that it only provides trip level reporting for effort and harvest (no discards/live releases).

It was highlighted that in considering whether any additional data should have been analyzed, a comparison of Massachusetts Party/Charter trips to Rhode Island Party/Charter trips may have been helpful; in the revised analysis, total MA recreational trips targeting Tautog during June-July were compared against Rhode total recreational trips during October 15-October 31.

In discussing the potential impacts, the TC provided feedback on changes to harvest and potential regional impacts. Specific to how the proposed measures will increase harvest, TC members disagreed on the extent to which a 1 fish bag limit may increase participation and effort in the RI Party/Charter sector. It was noted that when similar differences in bag limits were implemented between New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, that these changes had affected not only angler behavior but also in which states Party/Charter boats based their operations. In particular, if the proposed measures were to be implemented there would be a 3 fish bag limit difference between RI, CT, and NY. One TC member highlighted that this discrepancy in measures could be a significant reason for people to shift effort out of the Long Island Sound to RI during the fall season. If this were to happen, it could result in an economic impact on CT and NY Party/Charter businesses.

That being said, there was concerns raised about how much changes in harvest could be tied specifically to regulatory changes and normal inter-annual variability. The fact that anglers could target other species at the same time, such as black sea bass and summer flounder, may potentially increase effort, but it's unclear if that would ultimately result in significantly higher harvest. As noted by TC in previous analysis, MRIP data on Tautog is highly variable, with PSEs varying significantly year to year. One TC member expressed skepticism that a 1 fish bag limit increase would not significantly motivate participants on Party/Charter boats to increase harvest.

Specific to the potential impact of the regulatory change to the regional F, the TC was in agreement that given the stock is considered to not be experiencing overfishing nor is overfished at the regional level based on the 2016 SPR reference points, the proposed regulatory change does not pose a significant threat to changing the stock status. In considering the potential change to regulations for the next stock assessment update and whether this would complicate analysis of the 3 year average of (F) it was highlighted that given the current challenges in conducting the MRIP survey due to work disruptions from COVID-19 this spring, data from 2020 will be difficult to evaluate overall and that the regulatory change will likely have a less significant impact on assessment than the disruptions to data collection this year.

Conclusions

Overall, the TC agreed that the analysis was acceptable and that the proposal contained enough information to effectively evaluate it. As mentioned, there was discussion about the extent to which harvest would increase under the proposed measures and that while the analysis was appropriate, it is

difficult to predict how accurate the estimated increase in harvest will be given the high PSEs associated with Tautog harvest. This is further compounded by adjusting measures at the fishing mode level and evaluating data at that scale, which increases the uncertainty in the estimates, ultimately making it difficult predict the changes in harvest.

A number of TC members noted they did not see the proposal as truly 'conservation equivalency' given there was not corresponding adjustments to season length, size limit, or bag limit at other points in the season to offset the likely harvest increase. Given this, the group was in agreement that the proposal was not 'conservation neutral'.

Discussion of the Assessment Update in light of current events

Next, the TC discussed the timing of the Assessment Update and whether the current COVID-19 pandemic is affecting fishery dependent and independent data collection. Overall, the states indicated that with the exception of the commercial tagging program, many of the fishery independent surveys will be carried out at some point this year, but that many spring survey schedules have already been adjusted; more details can be found below. A number of states are still attempting to carry out ageing work as well. The biggest impact so far appears to be the collection of MRIP data, as staff at the state level across the coast are currently not allowed to intercept anglers or boats. This work disruption will likely have a significant impact on data from 2020, though the extent is unknown currently. Additionally, data from 2019 will likely not be available by May 2020, which will affect the timeline for data submission. In spite of the potential issues with MRIP data in 2020 and work challenges due COVID-19, the group was in agreement with maintaining the current plan for the assessment update to be completed in 2021, with data through 2020. ASMFC Staff will develop an assessment timeline and plan to circulate it in the summer, including a revised date for when data would need to be submitted.

Regarding potential SAS membership, the following TC members have indicated they will participate as SAS members for the 2021 Assessment Update:

- Sam Truesdell (MA)
- Coly Ares (RI; TC Chair)
- Lindy Barry (NJ)
- Alexei Sharov (MD)

Staff: Katie Drew and Kirby Rootes-Murdy

David Ellis indicated that Jacob Kasper (UCONN)- who participated in the previous assessment- may be available and interested in being a part of the assessment update. ASMFC staff will follow up with him to verify.

State Updates on Current Data Collection and Tagging Programs

MA: no MRIP update, no FI indices been cancelled, but nothing confirmed; no update on commercial tagging

RI: not enforcing tagging requirement until May 1; tags issued by mail; MRIP is still running; surveys are still going forward; commercial landings for other species completely tanked

CT: no MRIP sampling, LISTS cancelled for April, likely May; implemented tagging program with mail-out tag distribution; no surveys for another month

NY: tagging program suspended; still accepting orders; MRIP suspended; no FD sampling; FI sampling on hold; P/C industry non-essential, but P/R still can go; closed until April

NJ: tagging implemented in Jan, tags already distributed; no MRIP sampling; FI & FD sampling on hold; expect landings to remain low with lockdown

MD: FD tautog sampling completed; MRIP suspended; FI fieldwork suspended

VA: tagging program implemented; considering suspending enforcement of program; no MRIP sampling, no FD sampling; monitoring effort at dealers, sites; interest in acquiring tags, but questions about where/who they'd sell to