Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

March 18, 2025

Tautog Technical Committee and Stock Assessment Subcommittee Meeting Summary

Attendees: Craig Weedon (MD, Chair), Coly Ares (RI), Sandra Dumais (NY), Dave Ellis (CT), Shakira Goffe (VA), Elise Koob (MA), Colt Williamson (DE), Conor Davis (NJ), Margaret Conroy (DE), Ben Wasserman (DE), Jess Gorzo (NJ), Kelli Mosca (CT), and Alexei Sharov (MD)

Staff: James Boyle, Katie Drew, and Samara Nehemiah

The Commission's Tautog Technical Committee (TC) and Stock Assessment Subcommittee (SAS) met via conference call on Wednesday, March 18th to discuss changes or issues with 2021-2023 assessment data, review the state-by-state ageing structures and updates since the last assessment, and review the results from the NY study on potential alternative commercial tags.

2021-2023 Data Overview

The TC discussed the recommendations from the 2023 ASMFC Quality Assurance/Quality Control Fish Ageing Workshop, which discouraged using opercula and encouraged the use of otoliths and spines for determining ages of tautog. Older paired samples (age 11+) should be added to the collection in the future if available.

DelMarVa Region

- VA:
  - No changes that the TC member was aware of to the ageing protocols or structures (VA has historically used opercula to age tautog but use information from paired otoliths to assign the final age); will follow up with ageing lab to confirm
  - No new FI surveys for tautog
- MD:
  - All ages provided for the assessment are from opercula
  - Interested in exploring non-lethal ageing techniques, but concerned about the amount of funding and training it would require to transition over to spines.
  - SAV Habitat Survey (2015-present) has been estimating juvenile tautog relative abundance in the coastal bays and should be considered as a recruitment index in the next benchmark stock assessment
  - MD had concerns about the 2021 MRIP shore harvest estimate and will investigate the intercept data to explore that issue further

- DE
    - All ages provided for the assessment are opercula, but DE has started collecting paired samples of opercula, otoliths, and fin spines
    - The pot survey initiated in 2018 has been seeing good numbers of tautog and will be eligible to be considered for inclusion in the next benchmark assessment
    - DE also had concerns about some of the MRIP numbers, particularly the variability in catch estimates from year to year (e.g., high 2023 catches followed by a drop in 2024); there have been no regulatory changes since 2018, so that is likely not driving those changes
    - Spot-Lock has become more widely used in the region, which may be causing an increase in effective effort, but there is not a good way to incorporate that into the assessment framework right now
    - DE noted an increase in effort generally during and after the pandemic, although the large bluefin tuna run last year may have displaced some tautog effort

NJ-NY Bight/Long Island Sound Region

- NJ
    - All ages through 2022 used opercula, but in 2023, NJ switched to otoliths to age tautog, with some paired samples
    - This was due to the Ageing Workshop results and the fact that NJ sees more agreement with otoliths than with opercula; NJ does not collect commercial samples currently, so there is no concern with damaging the fish to collect hard parts
    - NJ samples are primarily from racks provided by party/charter boats, with some samples from the reef fish survey; this year there has been some difficulty in contacting a captain that has been helpful in providing racks in the past, so sample size may be lower, but that does not impact the assessment time series
    - NJ noted that the reef fish survey is successful at catching small fish and so may be a useful source of lengths to fill out the ALK; the SAS will provide some length cut-offs for NJ to target to fill gaps
    - The reef fish survey has had consistent catches of tautog and should be explored as an index for the next benchmark assessment
- NY
    - All of NY's ages are from opercula, but NY has been collected paired spines and otoliths as well based on the results of the ageing workshop and the fact that newer ageing staff do not like working with opercula; NY anticipates transitioning to otoliths fully in the future
    - For 2023, the ages were all assigned with opercula, but paired otolith samples were used to inform some ages for opercula, which were hard to read or had disagreements
    - NY noted, as MD had, that the location of the cut for fin spines could affect the ability to age the spine and lead to disagreements or uncertainty about the first annulus
    - Since 2021, NY has had a dedicated biosampler on staff to increase consistency and volume of biosamples for all species, including tautog; currently visit 3 markets every week and 1 market every other week

    - There has been less cooperation with the head boats to obtain racks, however
    - Most of the samples come from the LIS region, less from the NJ-NYB region, which has always been the case
    - Now calculating area-swept for beach seine surveys with GPS to get YOY per m^2
- CT
    - No survey issues reported; Long Island Sound Trawl Survey (LISTS) was able to operate as usual
    - All age data from LISTS, which sees a good range of older ages but few YOY/age-1s
    - Age data from opercula only for the whole time-series
    - Paired samples have been collected, and CT is considering moving to spines, but their agers are very comfortable with opercula
    - A new nearshore survey involving non-trawl gears including pots, seines, and light-traps has been initiated this year, which may be able to capture YOY tautog

MA-RI Region

- RI
    - In 2022, RI collected paired fin spines and opercula and used spines to assign ages
    - In 2023, RI switched to fin spines only for collection and ageing
    - Also have plans to collect stomach content data and maturity from existing survey programs
    - A pot survey was initiated in 2021 that has some potential for the benchmark
    - A TC member asked about the changes in MA-RI regulations restricting harvest to only one trophy size fish exceeding 21-inches. RI reported that was historically less than 1% of total harvest, so unlikely to see an impact from that
- MA
    - From 2017, ages provided from fin spines and otoliths (paired samples)
    - In 2023, MA switched to fin spines only
    - Trawl survey recently stopped collecting maturity data onboard, allowing for increased samples of hard parts for ageing
    - Trawl survey saw reduced crew sizes for 2021 due to COVID, which may impact sample collection/processing for that year; in 2024, the start of the fall survey was delayed but the southern leg was completed in the traditional time-frame and should not have a big impact on the index for that year
    - In 2021, the ventless trap survey dropped the upper third of sites in Buzzards Bay; seeing less tautog in the survey but hard to tell if that's due to distribution changes, survey changes, or decline in abundance

<u>Assessment Update Timeline and Tasks</u>

K. Drew reviewed the assessment timeline (Table 1) and the current SAS membership (Table 2). The first task for the SAS will be to evaluate the age data by region to compare the precision and agreement of different structures collected by each state and to compare the length-at-age estimated from different structures and states within the same region. In regions where ages are taken from multiple different structures, the SAS will need to decide which ages to use for age-length keys. As part of the assessment process, the TC/SAS can discuss the recommendations from the 2023 QA/QC workshop about tautog ageing structures and provide their own recommendations.

K. Drew will make the state biosample data available for the SAS on the ShareFile site and will ask the SAS representatives for each region to volunteer to collate their region's data and begin the age comparisons. A call will be scheduled for late April or early May, and before the 2024 data deadline, to review the results and make a recommendation for the age-length keys.

	Milestone	Date
✓	TC planning call	January 8, 2025
✓	2021-2023 Data Submitted	March 1, 2025
✓	TC/SAS call to review data submission, assign tasks	March 18, 2025
	SAS call to review age decisions	Late April/early May
	2024 data submitted	May 12, 2025
	ASAP runs with final data completed	July 14, 2025
	Rough draft of assessment report to SAS	August 4, 2025
	SAS call to review/approve draft assessment report	Week of August 18, 2025
	Draft assessment report distributed to TC	September 1, 2025
	TC call to review/approve draft assessment report	Week of September 15, 2025
	Final assessment report to Board materials	October 13, 2025
	Assessment update presented to Board	Week of October 27, 2025

Table 1.
Additional calls will be scheduled between milestones as needed.

Table 2: Tautog SAS member assignments by region.

Region	SAS Members
MA-RI	Elise Koob (MA), Coly Ares (RI)
LIS	Kelli Mosca (CT), Samara Nehemiah (ASMFC)
NJ-NYB	Jess Gorzo (NJ), Katie Drew (ASMFC)
DMV	Alexei Sharov (MD), Ben Wasserman (DE)

NY DEC Commercial Tag Feasibility Study Results

S. Dumais presented the findings of NY's study of potential alternative commercial tags following the Board's request. The initial tags considered were T-Bar, strap, and Petersen disc tags. The strap tag is a smaller version of the current commercial tag that was previously studied in 2016 prior to the implementation of the tagging program. After initial consideration, the Petersen disc was eliminated from contention due to the difficulty of application.

NY tagged 20 fish in total, ten with the T-Bar tag and ten with the strap tag, and the fish were held for 30 days. Afterwards, they were examined for damage and for signs of an infection around the tag. There was no conclusive evidence of any infections forming for either tag type, although some fish showed redness around the insertion point for both types. Challenges with the T-Bar tag were the inability to determine if the tag was inserted properly and a lower tag retention rate, as well as a significantly higher cost for both the tags and applicator when compared to the current tag. The strap tag created similar, albeit smaller,

wounds to the current tag, but it is unclear that it would prevent the reported issues. Although, the smaller strap tag and its applicator are considerably cheaper than the current versions. **Given the results and the costs, NY did not recommend any of the tags as a viable alternative to the current tag.** The TC discussed the possibility of further testing but did not provide any new tag types to evaluate, and NY noted the funding and staffing challenges to continue to pursue additional studies.