



## **Bluefish Fishery Performance Report June 2016**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission) Bluefish AP on June 25, 2016 via webinar to develop a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) for consideration during the bluefish specification cycle. Advisors reviewed the Fishery Information Document for Bluefish and developed the 2016 Bluefish FPR based on advisor perspectives on catch and landings patterns and other trends in these fisheries. **Please note:** Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

### **Attendance**

**Council Advisory Panel members present:** Noel Angelucci (NJ recreational), Arnold Leo (NY commercial/East Hampton Baymen's Association), Greg Hurley (VA recreational), Greg DiDomenico (VA commercial/Garden State Seafood Association), Phil Langley (recreational for-hire), Thomas Roller (NC recreational for-hire).

**Commission Advisory Panel members present:** Don Swanson (NH recreational).

**Council SSC members present:** John Boreman (Chair), Mark Holliday, Dave Secor, Doug Lipton.

**Others present:** José Montañez (Council staff), Max Appelman (Commission staff), Chris Batsavage (NC Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources and Council member), Liz Scheimer (GARFO staff).

Because of the localized nature of AP members' observations, remarks under each heading are attributed to the states represented on the AP.

### **Recreational Fishery Issues**

**NH** – Availability to the recreational fishery appeared to be down at the start of the year in 2014 but as time went on, it turned out that the fish were being encountered in different than usual places and under different patterns. The abundance was high and a very broad range of sizes was caught, including very large fish.

**NY** – Charter boats reporting better than average season; wide range of sizes landed/caught. Bluefish fishery not interfering with striper fishing. Bluefish came in somewhat earlier than in prior seasons (first week of May). Charter and commercial fishermen have reported that large amounts of menhaden is believed to be holding bluefish inshore.

**NJ** – This year, party boats have fished for bluefish in the estuaries and bays, due to the unusually large amount of large fish in those areas, as opposed to their normal offshore spots where they

typically fish. Party boats have not been doing well farther offshore as in the previous years because fish stayed inshore in large amounts and for a longer period of time compared to typical seasons. Shark boats have reported large amounts of bluefish offshore (>30 miles) but party boats do not go that far to fish for blues. In addition, large amounts of forage fish have also been reported near beach areas (menhaden and sand eels).

**NC** – Bluefish appear to have become more important as a target species to the recreational and for-hire fisheries in recent years, perhaps due to the lack of availability of state managed species. In the last few years, it seems that bluefish schools are smaller and a little less available. While bluefish are on average smaller in North Carolina compared to northern states, typically an early run of large fish is seen in May and early June, but this was not the case in the last couple of years. In 2015, it seemed that the schools look much better and larger than in prior years. In 2016, the trend continues but are not seen larger fish.

**VA/NC/MD** – Need to be cautious even though abundance seems to be larger this year. AP members do not want to see bluefish targeted heavily now that bass or other species are down.

**NY/VA/NC/MD** – The high recreational discards of bluefish (particularly small fish in VA/NC/MD) could be an issue. The Council and Commission should consider measures to address this.

**NY/NC/VA/MD** – The use of treble hooks causes significant damage to the fish. AP members indicated that using single hook gear may be less damaging to fish that are released. The AP members discussed that this could be addressed by implementing educational and outreach programs to highlight the benefits of using single hook gear in the bluefish fishery.

### **Commercial Fishery Issues**

**NY** – The bluefish run has been better than normal; it began somewhat early (first week of May, when large ones arrive, but has been comprised of all sizes of fish as the season progressed). Fishermen have reported high abundance of bluefish in areas of the Peconic Bay and near Montauk Point, and all along the south side of Long Island. The high availability of bluefish is likely associated with huge runs of Menhaden, which are extremely abundant again this year.

**NJ** – Strong recruitment events last few years. Large size of fish represented in the landings/catch. Fishermen have observed strong recruitment events as indicated in the data from the NEFSC.

**NY** – In past several years, commercial landings have been above the allocation to the state, and the state had to get transfers from states that do not land their entire bluefish quota. The lower overall commercial quota for 2016 and higher recreational landings in 2015 will limit the availability of state to state transfers [and potentially cause states to exceed their quota].

### **Market / Economic Issues**

**NJ** – While the bluefish price on a costwide basis is about \$0.74 per pound, it varies depending on where you are. Prices tend to fluctuate drastically depending on a variety of reasons such as amount

landed, gear type used to land fish, and where they are caught (typically, lower landing quantities produce higher product quality, and higher prices). Sometimes vessels avoid caching large quantities of fish to insure good product quality.

**NY** – This year (2016) the *low* price has so far been around \$0.20 per pound (where as in 2015 the *low* price was around \$0.25 per pound). So far in 2016, prices have ranged from \$0.20 to \$1.00 per pound and averaging about \$0.60 per pound.

**NC/MD** – Recreationally, the for-hire sector has seen less large bluefish in the spring. On average they see smaller fish than in the northeast. Bluefish are becoming increasingly important to the recreational fishery, especially to the for-hire sector due to the decrease in abundance of other nearshore available species.

### **Environmental Issues**

The AP members did not indicate any specific environmental issues at this time.

### **Management Issues/Fishery Regulations**

**NY** –The stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring according to the last benchmark stock assessment. The quotas may be too cautious considering the size/abundance of the stock [Council’s Risk Policy is too strict].

**MD/NC/NY** – The current 15 fish bag limit was considered to be excessive. Few recreational fishermen are likely to keep more than 10 fish. AP members would like to see a reduction in the recreational bag limit. Reducing the bag limit (to 10 fish) will likely have minimal impacts on anglers, and would be more in line with state-specific bag limits.

**VA** – While the average angler may not want to land 15 bluefish, some ethnic groups fishing on party boats may not go fishing if they cannot land a good amount of bluefish (subsistence fishery).

**NC** – Recreational anglers do not keep a lot of bluefish. They throw back a mix of sizes depending on the individual. Need to protect the abundance in the fishery, this is very important for the viability of the recreational sector.

**NC** – While the commercial discards are considered to be insignificant in the assessment, there is some localized bycatch discards in some commercial fisheries (beach seine, different trawls, and ocean drop net, and estuarine flounder net fisheries) and not zero.

**NY** – Commercial discard rates are very low or near zero.

**NY/NC** – Discard issues in the recreational fishery could be improve by implementing educational programs to minimize post-release fish mortality, to promote the phrase “catch what you are going to eat,” and to stress the use of single hook and circle hook gear (e.g., inline), and its benefits.

## **Research Issues**

Investigate public stake holder perception of the recreational bluefish fishery in order to identify how the public would like this fishery to look like in years to come. Bluefish is an important recreational fishery and it is important to ask the recreational fishing community to investigate how they perceive this fishery in the future.

Need to better understand the dynamics between the inshore and offshore populations. More specifically, during the spring migration, there is another component of the stock that stays way offshore and does not appear to be the same as the fish taking part of the spring migration. This offshore component of the stock seems to miss the Mid-Atlantic Bight during the migration up north (towards Montauk). It is important to investigate this migration event in order to better understand the dynamics of the stock. What are the differences between the offshore and inshore bluefish populations?

## **Other Issues**

Biological characteristics of bluefish life history need to be considered when developing catch and landings limits recommendations for this species. There is evidence that as bluefish migrates along the coast during the spring and summer there may be multiple spawning events. With a species as productive as bluefish, that matures early, and has the potential for multiple spawning events increases the possibility for recruitment and availability for this species.