



Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel Fishery Performance Report for Dolphin Created April 2022

On April 20-21, 2022, the Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel (AP) of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) reviewed fishery information for dolphin and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR will be provided to the Council to assist in their discussions on the need for management actions and potential implications of such actions.

Advisory Panel Members present:

Chris Burrows, NC (Chair)

Jonathon Reynolds, FL (Vice Chair)

Timothy Scalise, SC

James "Chip" Berry, SC

Glenn Hopkins, NC

Michael Plaia, CT

Rom Whitaker III, NC

Jay Kavanaugh, NC

Dan Owsley, GA

Richard DeLizza, FL

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the dolphin fishery was presented in a fishery information application (<https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>) intended to provide an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report. The fishery information application presents data from 2000 through 2020.

Observations on Stock Abundance, Catch Levels, and Seasonality

In much of the South Atlantic, there was general agreement that dolphin abundance is lower than it used to be and the size of schools is smaller. It was also noted that recently fishing was often more "hit or miss" and anglers had to work harder to catch fish than in past years. While this viewpoint was somewhat shared by AP members from the Outer Banks in North Carolina, it was also noted that the same trend has been exhibited by other species such as yellowfin tuna and white marlin. For the Outer Banks specifically, it was noted that May and June are typically the prime months for dolphin but there have been "nice bailers" in recent years with large schools of fish in the 6 to 8 pound range present in the late summer and early fall. Overall, the number of large "citation" sized fish has decreased.

In New England, the fishery typically starts in July and ends by September. Dolphin, particularly larger specimens, were usually caught near the edge of the continental shelf ("in the Canyons") and not near shore. In the last few years, larger dolphin have been found closer

to shore (in the 15-20 mile range) often around lobster pot buoys. Nearshore dolphin are typically 10 pounds or less while canyon fish (often caught incidentally when fishing for tuna) tend to be larger and can be in the 20 to 40 pound range.

In South Florida (including the Florida Keys), dolphin could be caught almost year round (including December and January) but this isn't consistently the case anymore. It was noted that dolphin were being caught in relatively warmer water (83/84 degrees) than they were previously found.

Observations on Fish Size

AP members generally agreed that the average size of dolphin landed has decreased in recent years. The notable exception was in New England where generally larger fish have been seen in the near-shore fishery.

Observations on Effort Shifts and Discards

Generally there has been an increase in recreational effort and technology, particularly for the private recreational component of the sector. In New England, dolphin typically were not targeted, but there has been a developing fishery in recent years focusing on dolphin nearshore (15 to 20 miles). It was noted that several private vessels in this region have started particularly targeting dolphin in August and September. Nearshore anglers are sight fishing dolphin under lobster pot buoys, often using lighter gear (typically spinning gear) to cast to fish and employing both natural and artificial bait.

In Southeastern North Carolina and South Carolina, there has been more effort targeting dolphin inshore of the continental shelf at times using different techniques such as employing the use of a planer. These "inshore" fish tend to be smaller. Overall it was noted that increased access to information, technology, and improved vessels have increased access to dolphin fishing and made it easier to identify likely fishing spots (especially temperature breaks), leading to increased targeted recreational effort.

Observations on Price and Demand

Overall recreational demand has been very strong for dolphin across the board, for both private recreational and charter trips. In the Outer Banks, it was noted that demand for dolphin on charter trips has been increasing, with one of the reasons being a lack of yellowfin tuna in May and June. Dolphin is the most important species for trip satisfaction and the number one reason for booking charter trips. The fish are good to eat and customers are willing to spend money on processing and vacuum sealing dolphin caught on charter trips. In Georgia, dolphin have become more popular as a target species, particularly with access to better technology such as temperature charts and mapping. Anglers enjoy pursuing the species for both harvest and sport. It was also noted that dolphin fishing is highly weather-dependent due to the very long runs offshore that are required. In South Florida dolphin are very important to the charter fishery and there has been strong demand for the species. The species is integral to tourism and very important to the local economy.

Overall commercial demand for dolphin has been very strong from fish houses and restaurants and the ex-vessel price has been high. It was noted that recent prices were much higher (\$5 to \$7 per pound) than the price information presented to the AP (approximately \$2.90 to \$3.40 per pound). For longline vessels, prices for other Highly Migratory Species (HMS), such as

tunas and swordfish, have also been elevated recently so vessels have often targeted these species instead of dolphin. It was noted that it was important for restaurants to be able to advertise locally caught seafood and restaurants can easily sell out of all locally caught dolphin. In South Florida it was noted that restaurants rely on rod and reel caught fish and many restaurants have requested to reinstate for-hire bag limit sales of fish.

Observations on Changes in Infrastructure, Community Importance, and Adaptation

It was noted that dolphin are among the best species to help introduce children to offshore fishing. In Southeastern North Carolina, an AP member felt that Wilmington had become a “dolphin city” with a notable number of people interested in the sport, beauty, and culinary aspects (recreationally and commercially harvested) of the fish. In South Florida the species is culturally iconic and an important part of the community and economy.

In the Outer Banks, navigation of inlets has impacted access (especially in the past 4 or 5 years). This particularly limits larger vessels (over 45 ft). There are also not as many boat ramps in the Outer Banks as elsewhere in North Carolina. Generally, from the commercial perspective, there is a lack of infrastructure. Waterfront property is at a premium and fish houses are selling property for other uses. From the Outer Banks to South Carolina it is becoming tough to find a place to tie up a larger fishing vessel to stock up on supplies, fuel, and ice. Overall, infrastructure is generally better for recreational fishing than for commercial fishing. In South Florida, there has been increased access for private and charter vessels with more marinas and private residences on the water. Overall, the price of access has increased notably as well and many fishermen are getting priced out of dock space.

When asked how fishermen and communities have adapted to changes in the dolphin fishery, AP members noted that recreational fishermen have adapted to using technology to target dolphin (temperature charts, satellite phones, etc.). It was also expressed that boats have gotten more reliable and faster, making it easier to cover large expanses of water. In Southeastern North Carolina and South Carolina, a lot of people have relocated from the New England area and many of these people like to go fishing. This has led to additional anglers jumping into the recreational dolphin fishery. For South Florida, it was noted that anglers needed to travel further offshore and get away from the crowds to find better fishing.

Environmental and Habitat Observations

In South Florida there has been a large amount of *Sargassum* in recent years that holds fish that may prey on small dolphin and dolphin eggs (almaco jacks, triggerfish, filefish, etc.). There has also been an abundance of other debris floating up the Gulf Stream in the fall. Some AP members felt that harvest notably impacts future recruitment. It was noted that the number of smaller dolphin showing up in recent years along the Outer Banks in the late summer and fall provides hope for the future of the fishery. While there was not a major change in the species caught with dolphin, the lack of yellowfin tuna in the Outer Banks has led to increased targeting of dolphin.

Recent changes expressed for the fishery in New England were centered around changing environmental conditions. There has been a fair amount of *Sargassum* in the canyons but not much further inshore. Occasionally, anglers fishing this region need to get away from *Sargassum* when trolling. Overall, fishermen are happy to see water temperatures at or above 70 degrees. The highest water temperature observed recently was 74 degrees, which is

unusual.

In South Florida, larger specimens were typically found in deeper water further offshore and smaller fish in shallower water. There were also several fish aggregating devices (FADs) seen in recent years in 400-700 feet of water that held some fish, including wahoo. It was thought that these FADs floated in from the EEZs of other countries and were not from domestic fisheries. Some fishermen recently targeting swordfish have run into large schools of dolphin (500-1,000 fish) very far offshore. In South Florida it was noted that water temperatures did not get below 77-78 degrees in the Gulf Stream in recent years, whereas temperatures used to drop lower during the winter in years past.

In the Outer Banks, the *Sargassum* has tended to be scattered recently. Summer temperatures are about the same, but winters are not getting as cold so there is a longer period of warmer water. Summer water temperature have been the same or only slightly higher than average. Winter water temperatures have been significantly higher than in the past 10 years. Overall fishermen are seeing 75 degree or warmer water closer to shore for a longer period of time. In recent years, there have been big schools of dolphin in the “nice bailer” range but these fish have been well offshore (in over 100 fathoms). Overall, there have been more dolphin in deeper water than in shallower water on or near the shelf.

In South Carolina, there has been increased focus offshore for dolphin fishing with faster boats that have access to improved technology. Vessels can make a trip to the ledge (180 feet) and catch some dolphin but the overall focus is further offshore than what it used to be. A lot more *Sargassum* has been seen in recent years although it tends to be scattered. In Georgia, fishermen used to go to the ledge (30 fathoms) first thing in the morning for wahoo and some dolphin, but dolphin have not been prevalent as on the shelf edge (the “ledge”). Now anglers typically stop at the ledge for wahoo and then head east to find dolphin.

Overall, it was noted that an increase in the population of many shark species is having an impact on the dolphin fishery as well as many other fisheries in the South Atlantic. This is causing increased mortality on dolphin and other prized species. Sharks are preying upon fish that are hooked and anglers are at times needing to change tactics to avoid losing fish and gear to sharks.

Observations on Management Measures

General

Several AP members felt that Amendment 10’s vessel limit reduction did little to nothing as a conservation measure for the dolphin stock. Some AP members felt that there could be a better “happy medium” for regulations. Other AP members felt that the vessel limit reduction in Amendment 10 was sufficient and should remain in place before further regulation changes are considered.

Some AP members voiced their support for reinstating the bag limit sale of dolphin on dually permitted (charter and commercial) vessels, provided all fish were reported electronically and that those fish would count against the recreational ACL. This issue has been brought to the Council multiple times by the AP.

Recreational

Bag and Vessel Limits

There were differing sentiments regionally on the effectiveness and appropriateness of management measures. It was mentioned that the goal of management should be a reliable and steady fishery through workable and effective measures. AP members from South Florida felt that vessel limits were too high at 54 dolphin per vessel. It was expressed that current management measures don't seem to be effective. There were concerns over the stock and lack of changes to regulations. Several AP members noted that the fishery, once thriving, has gone downhill. It was mentioned that the charter industry in Florida is interested in a 10 fish bag limit and 30 fish vessel limit while private vessels could have a 5 fish bag limit.

Conversely, it was noted that recreational harvest is not reaching the annual catch limit so reductions in the bag or vessel limit may not be appropriate. If there is a perceived decline in biomass, then it is the duty of the Scientific and Statistical Committee to recommend and set sustainable catch levels. From a for-hire perspective it was noted that potential catch is very important for marketing trips to customers. A restrictive vessel limit would notably impact the charter fleet, which tends to carry multiple anglers on each trip. AP members from the Outer Banks expressed that higher limits were generally more important for charter vessels in North Carolina compared to South Florida. In the Outer Banks, charter businesses depend heavily on trips targeting dolphin. The number of for-hire vessels is not greatly increasing and consideration of a regional approach to dolphin regulations is appropriate if further management changes are made.

Minimum size limit

There was a split opinion on whether there should be changes to the size limit for dolphin. Those from states where a 20" minimum size for dolphin is already in place widely supported the expansion of the size limit northward throughout the range of the species. This concept met stiff resistance in discussion from those operating charter boats in North Carolina, as it would have a damaging effect on the "bailer" dolphin fishery, which supports these operators through the summer season. Arguments offered by AP members **in support** of extending the 20" minimum size limit north of the NC/SC state line:

- Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina are allowing more dolphin to get to spawning size by releasing fish under 20".
- The minimum size limit is a marginal but preventative conservation measure. It allows the fish to attain maturity and potentially spawn before being harvested.
- There is not much meat yield on a dolphin less than 20". Allowing the fish to grow larger before being harvested would be a better use of the fish.
- A minimum size limit discourages targeting of very small fish.

Arguments offered by AP members **against** extending the 20" minimum size limit north of the NC/SC state line:

- Will imperil the NC charter boat fleet during the summer; clients will lose interest and less trips will be booked. Also will add a potential reason to receive a ticket if a "short" fish accidentally ends up in the fish box.
- Florida takes the majority of the recreational/for-hire catch of dolphin, even with a 20" minimum size.
- Not much is known about the potential mortality of released "short" dolphin. It is perceived that keeping a shorter one could be less harmful to the stock than "culling"

- through “short” fish to get to a particular length of fish of legal size.
- Even with the directed “bailer” fishery in the for-hire sector in NC, the average length of a dolphin landed is still 23”. There is self-policing that minimizes small fish that are harvested, particularly for charter boats.

It was noted that a minimum size limit would likely have little to no effect on the commercial fishery since the hook sizes and the gear typically used limits the number of smaller fish that are caught.

Commercial

There was a consensus that non-HMS permitted longline vessels have been pushed into the dolphin fishery by closures and other restrictions on Snapper Grouper Complex species and other fisheries. There was the opinion within the AP that these so called “Council Boats” are having a negative effect on the recreational fishery, most notably the for-hire sector in North Carolina.

Several AP members that are active in the for-hire sector used the term “localized depletion.” While this can be difficult to quantify, this is an issue that needs to be examined at the Council level soon. In years past, longline vessels and charter vessels worked together spatially to avoid fishing the same areas but this has not been the case recently. It was suggested that limiting longline vessels only to those with the HMS “tri-pack” permits could help alleviate this problem. Alternatively, some AP members expressed concern about limiting entry into the fishery. Several AP members voiced their displeasure about the issue being tabled during Amendment 10. It was noted that there is an unequal playing field for “Council boats” compared to HMS permitted vessels fishing pelagic longline gear, although there was a decrease in the number of active “Council boats” in the last couple of years. Participation in the Council boat fishery often increases when the fishing is good and decreases when dolphin are not as prevalent.

The concept of a 2,000-pound trip limit (20 boxes) on commercial dolphin trips was discussed briefly. This concept had been brought up by several fishery stakeholders in the online public comment forum that accompanied the meeting. An AP member who operates a fully HMS permitted longline vessel out of Wanchese, NC was the sole attendee at this meeting representing strictly commercial interests (several AP members participate in multiple sectors) and reminded the Panel that the commercial sector recently gave up 3% of the total ACL allocation in Amendment 10 and now only gets 7% of the total ACL. Rising fuel costs and higher costs associated with other aspects of the industry would mean a trip limit would quickly imperil his and other similar businesses as well as lead to regulatory discards. Additionally, it is very important to the viability of longline vessels to have a variety of species that can be targeted depending on seasonal availability and market conditions.