



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Small-Mesh Multispecies Committee and Advisory Panel

Webinar
August 19, 2021

The Small-Mesh Multispecies Committee and Advisory Panel (AP) and Committee met on August 19, 2021 by webinar to:

- Receive a Fishing Year 2020 Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) and management recommendations from the Whiting Plan Development Team (PDT), including catch accounting for FY 2020, an update of economic trends, and a survey biomass update
- Decide whether management adjustments are needed at this time
- Develop 2022 management priority recommendations
- Discuss other business, as necessary.

Documents for this meeting are posted on the meeting [web page](#).

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Rick Bellavance (Chairman) Eric Reid, Peter Aarrestad, Scott Olszewski, Jay Hermsen (NMFS), and Dan Farnham, Sr. (MAFMC) (Committee members present) and Mark Alexander; Katie Almeida (AP Chair), Dan Farnham Jr., Bonnie Brady, David Goethel (AP members present); Andrew Applegate, Naresh Pradhan, Chris Kellogg, and Janice Plante (NEFMC staff); Others: Shannah Jaburek, Kevin Collins, and Dan Caless (GARFO staff), Kelly Whitmore (MA DMF).

KEY OUTCOMES:

The committee and advisors agreed with the PDT recommendation to postpone the post-season Accountability Measure (AM) for the southern red hake catch overage in fishing year 2020, because of uncertain effects of Framework 62 and the 2021-2023 specifications, unusual uncertainty in the discard estimates, and transitory effects of the covid pandemic on commercial and recreational fishing activity. Postponing the AM would allow collection of more information during fishing year 2021 before taking action.

The committee and advisors thought it is premature to account for recreational catch in the Annual Catch Limit (ACL) accounting and instead recommended some deeper investigation into the causes of and reliability of the recreational catch estimates.

The committee and advisors developed recommendations for 2022 management priorities, focusing on impediments to full utilization of the whiting resource.

AGENDA ITEM #1: ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT FOR FISHING YEAR 2020

Presentation: Annual Monitoring Report and PDT Recommendations

The PDT chair presented a summary of the draft Annual Monitoring Report to the Committee and Advisors. It was a scaled back version of previous annual reports, focusing on fishery performance for fishing year 2020, trends in survey biomass, and economic trends for 2020. The uncertainty of the catch estimates were unusually high due the effects of the covid pandemic on sampling the commercial and recreational fisheries. Commercial catch of southern red hake exceeded the ACL by 33%, but due to the higher uncertainty and the uncertain effects of Framework 62 and the 2021-2023 specifications, the PDT recommended that the TAL trigger not be adjusted for the 2020 catch overage.

Trends in survey biomass could not be updated for 2020, because there were no 2020 bottom trawl survey data. Thus the strong year class of southern red hake first detected in 2019 could not be corroborated with 2020 data.

Although commercial landings and effort were down slightly from 2019, average price and total revenue for silver hake and whiting were up.

In the report, the PDT recommended that:

- The Council should postpone the automatic action to reduce the southern red hake TAL trigger by 33%.
- That recreational catch should be counted against the specifications going forward because the new specifications for 2021-2023 account for exploitation caused by all fishing, commercial and recreational

Discussion

Advisors thought that the increase in whiting prices during 2020 reflected changes in imports affecting US markets and included some other comments that will be included in the final report. Advisors noted that more boats were targeting Illex squid, instead of Loligo squid or whiting in 2020 due to changes in abundance. They agreed with the PDT recommendation to not adjust the southern red hake AM, but questioned the recreational catch estimates. The advisors also supported an identification and causes that keeps whiting catches well below the ACLs.

The AP and Committee asked for more details about the recreational catch estimates and questioned the reasons why the red hake catches have increase in 2019 and 2020. Advisors noted that the discard and recreational catch estimates had increased without an indication from the survey biomass index that the stock was increasing. It appeared that the MRIP catch

estimates by mode were greatest for the private angler mode or the mode estimate was affected by a relatively few and possibly mis-reported outliers. Some people thought that the charter/party mode should have higher catches than private angler trips, because party boats often targeted red hake and sea bass in the Mid-Atlantic. They also questioned the effect of the changes in the MRIP estimation procedures on the catch time series. Mr. Farnham Jr. was worried that inclusion of the recreational catch in the ACL accounting could cause the uncertain recreational catch to make it a choke species for the commercial fishery.

Before accepting the PDT recommendations, the AP and Committee thought that further investigation of these influences on the catch estimates would be warranted. They pointed out that the higher catch estimates could be overly influenced by an outlier or species mis-reporting, which someone should look into. Mr. Applegate said that he would ask the assessment scientist, Toni Chute, to understand what recreational catch data were used in the base period for the assessment and how it was applied.

1. MOTION: REID/FARNHAM SR.

That based on the PDT and AP recommendations in the Annual Monitoring Report, the Council should advise the Regional Administrator to not make the automatic adjustment to the southern red hake TAL trigger because of 2020 catch overages. This would leave the 40.4% TAL trigger in place and allow for additional data collection for fishing year 2021.

Rationale: Uncertain discard estimates, transitory effects of the covid pandemic measures; unknown effects of Framework 62 and the 2021-2023 specifications.

Discussion on the Motion:

Last year, the Regional Administrator deferred the automatic overage adjustment for southern red hake based on the PDT's recommendations and rationale. This year's recommendation is similar, with the addition of unusual uncertainty in the discard estimation. Mr. Hermsen reported that GARFO will look into the procedure and report back to the Council meeting on how they would like to proceed. The committee thought that a motion or consensus statement would be useful for the Council meeting, when a broader discussion would occur in front of the full Council. Mrs. Jaburek thought that a solid statement in the form of a committee motion would be helpful for the Council discussion. Mr. Reid opposed doing further evaluation of the MRIP data for red hake catch, because there are bigger issues in the MRIP data that should be addressed.

MOTION #1 CARRIED BY CONSENSUS WITH Mr. Hermsen abstaining.

AGENDA ITEM #2: AGENDA ITEM #1: ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT FOR FISHING YEAR 2020

PRESENTATION: CURRENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Mr. Applegate listed the initial priorities that are related to the specification cycle and are a holdover from last year's AP and Committee recommendation, which was not approved by the Council for 2021 because it came to them as a tasking and had not been identified as a

management priority. Mr. Applegate commented on the difficulty to justify a management action without experimental fishery data to loosen the exempted area regulations, expanding or adjusting the boundaries and/or seasons.

Discussion

The advisors and committee find the annual monitoring reports to be an important source of information and supported direct delivery to the AP and Committee. They thought that changes in the fishery could happen too quickly to rely only on a SAFE Report prepared every three years, coinciding with the specifications cycle.

As they did in 2020, the advisors and committee supported an evaluation and analysis of the various causes behind the low silver hake resource utilization. Beside changing the exemption area boundaries and seasons, Mr. Farnham Sr. thought that an evaluation of the pros and cons of increasing the small-mesh possession limits should be done. Mrs. Brady suggested that the PDT also look into the effects of fish prices in alternative fisheries that were a potential cause to keep whiting landings down.

Mr. Applegate pointed out that some of these reasons are technical fishing knowledge, market infrastructure and demand, and regulations (exemption areas and seasons). He confessed that experimental fishing data could be needed to justify expanding the exemption areas and season, but data to support doing so is currently lacking. He reported that MA Division of Marine Fisheries conducted a two-year experimental fishery that except for haddock catches met the 5% standard, but did not show a reduction in the groundfish bycatch rate and would be difficult to justify a management action using the criteria that the Council established under Amendment 13 (see presentation).

2. CONSENSUS STATEMENT: REID

To recommend the following priorities for 2022:

- Analyze causes of bycatch in the small-mesh multispecies fishery and identify potential measures to reduce bycatch and recommend any changes as necessary.
- Analyze the validity and impacts of current small-mesh multispecies regulations and exemption area boundaries on achieving optimum yield and recommend any changes as necessary.

Rationale: Identify the problem before trying to fix it.

Discussion on the Consensus Statement:

This evaluation and analysis by the PDT and advisors would identify the causes and potential solutions to increase resource utilization. Mr. Farnham Jr. supported the consensus statement because it is worth investigating the causes and collecting relevant and necessary data. He thought it would be necessary to investigate why the boundaries were chosen and potentially adjust them for recent changes in distribution and seasonality, many of the fish moving to deeper water to stay in cooler water.

AGENDA ITEM #1: OTHER BUSINESS

Mr. Goethel asked for someone to explain how his whiting trips are categorized by fishery, because due to a trip declaration to retain herring, the trips are probably categorized as a herring trip despite the target and most of the catch being whiting.

Mr. Caless explained that the trips are categorized as a herring trip under the binning rules to estimate bycatch. He reported that in 2020, there were 59,000 lb. of whiting landings that were categorized as herring fishery trips. Mr. Applegate pointed out that for the annual monitoring report, the total catch is summed across the fisheries and that for the economic and other types of analyses, the trips were considered as a targeted trip if they landed equal or more than 2000 lb. of whiting or 400 lb. of red hake. Mr. Applegate said that he would send a copy of the GARFO binning rules for discard estimation to Mr. Goethel.

The Whiting AP and Committee meeting adjourned at approximately 12:50 p.m.