



New England Fishery Management Council

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Eric Reid, *Chair* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Skate Advisory Panel and Committee

Webinar

September 1, 2022

The Skate Committee and Advisory Panel (AP) met on September 1, 2022, at 9:00 AM via webinar to discuss: 1) the 2022 Northeast Skate Complex Annual Monitoring Report (for FY 2021), 2) Council priorities regarding skates, and 3) other business.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Committee: Mr. Scott Olszewski (Committee Chair), Mr. Mark Alexander, Ms. Elizabeth Etrie, Mr. Dan Farnham, Dr. Jay Hermsen, Mr. John Pappalardo, Mr. Dan Salerno, and Ms. Kelly Whitmore; Advisory Panel: Mr. John Whiteside (AP Chair), Ms. Sonja Fordham, Ms. Andrea Incollingo, Mr. Jeff Kneebone, Mr. Dan Nordstrom, and Mr. Ted Platz; Council staff: Dr. Rachel Feeney (Plan Development Team (PDT) Chair), Ms. Jenny Couture; NMFS GARFO staff: Ms. Cynthia Ferrio; and NOAA General Counsel: Mr. Mitch McDonald. The Council Chair, one member of the Skate PDT, and one member of the public attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- On the 2022 Northeast Skate Complex Annual Monitoring Report (for FY 2021), the Committee concurred with the changes made to catch accounting, specifications, and in-season monitoring.
- On the Council priorities regarding skates, the Committee recommended developing FY 2024-2025 specifications including consideration of expanded possession of recently rebuilt stocks and additional PDT tasks to support the 2023 stock assessment, thorny skate rebuilding, and improvements to data quality.

AGENDA ITEM #1: INTRODUCTIONS, APPROVAL OF AGENDA, AND TIMELINE

The Committee Chair introduced the AP and Committee, welcomed attendees, and sought approval of the agenda. There were no agenda changes. Staff reviewed the timeline for skate work in 2022 and Fishing Year (FY) 2022 fishery performance based on weekly quota monitoring reports.

AGENDA ITEM #2: 2022 NORTHEAST SKATE COMPLEX ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT (FOR FY 2021)

Staff presented the requirements for the skate annual monitoring report and described the changes to methods for catch setting, specifications, monitoring, and accounting that the PDT completed to better

account for known sources of catch. The stock status for the seven skate species was presented; thorny skate remains overfished, with no species experiencing overfishing. The FY 2021 in-season skate monitoring, year-end annual catch limit accounting values, and changes to other fishery management plans impacting skates were also discussed. The PDT recommends considering additional management measures that would foster rebuilding of thorny skate and continuing to improve dealer data quality, re-examining stock assessment methods to ensure that all catch components are included in the 2023 assessment, and considering expanding the possession limit for barndoor skate and allowing possession of smooth skate (rebuilt as of 2018).

Discussion: An adviser asked for more information regarding the recreational catch including the region caught, mortality rate, and the proportion of skate caught and released versus kept. The AP Chair agreed with wanting more information and pointed out that recreational catch is not insignificant and accounts for upwards of several million pounds.

Several Committee members also wanted additional information on the recreational skate catch and how the value was calculated given that this catch has increased over time. In addition to the AP's suggestions for information to include, Committee members also wanted information on if there was an area or time component of recreational catch, species identification, if skates are being targeted versus caught as bycatch in other recreational fisheries, the extent to which the new Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) methodology is contributing to the increase in recreational landings over time, etc. Understanding more detailed information on recreational fishing will be helpful to understand if thorny skate is being caught (to aid in thorny skate rebuilding) and if skate biomass declines in the future. Staff will plan to provide more information on the recreational skate fishery during the September Council meeting.

A Committee member asked for clarification on how landings are classified if a vessel participates part of the year in the federal fishery and then drops the federal skate permit to fish in state waters the rest of the year. Staff noted that in year-end accounting, under the revised methods, having a federal skate permit on the day of landing indicates participation in the federal skate fishery and without one indicates participation in the state skate fishery. The difference in landings between the old method (having any federal permit on day of landing) and the new method (having a federal skate permit on the day of landing) includes vessels that dropped their federal skate permit and continued to land skate from the state fishery and also the vessels that had a federal skate permit but had a federal permit in another fishery at some point in time. Another Committee member asked why state landings are calculated on a calendar year basis. The other catch components used in the specification setting process are on a calendar year basis, thus, the PDT thought it would be consistent to calculate state landings that way as well.

One Committee member asked for an update on the Catch Accounting and Monitoring System (CAMS). GARFO and Council staff noted that this will be completed soon, though could not provide more specific information.

An adviser reiterated the importance of rebuilding thorny skate given the low biomass level, importance to the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) region, and the limited time remaining in the rebuilding timeline (six years left out of 25-year rebuilding schedule). She recommended delving into both discards and habitat condition that could be causing the species' decline. A Committee member agreed with prioritizing thorny skate rebuilding.

A Committee member asked about the recommendation to consider expanding the barndoor possession limit and allowing possession of smooth skate, given the fishery is only harvesting about half of the annual catch limit. He pointed out that it might be important to wait until after the 2023 stock assessment to make any changes to possession of these species given the results could fluctuate. Staff agreed, noting that final action on specifications would come after the 2023 assessment.

COMMITTEE CONSENSUS STATEMENT

The Committee concurs with and commends the PDT on the comprehensive approach developed, and implemented with the assistance of NOAA Fisheries, for assembling the data used for setting reference points, in-season quota monitoring and year-end catch accounting.

Discussion of the consensus statement: An adviser asked whether this consensus statement applies to both the wing and bait fisheries, which staff stated that this statement is comprehensive of both fisheries.

The Committee agreed with the above consensus statement. Staff encouraged the AP to discuss fishery performance to help the Committee understand factors influencing fishing activity, but the AP had no comment.

AGENDA ITEM #3: 2023 COUNCIL PRIORITIES

Staff presented progress on the 2022 priorities and the PDT recommendations for 2023 including corresponding rationale. Staff gave an overview of NOAA Fisheries draft *Action Plan to Reduce Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch in Federal Large Mesh Gillnet Fisheries*, noting the AP and Committee could recommend and action in 2023 to address the bycatch concerns.

Discussion: A Committee member pointed out that the timeline for setting and implementing specifications next year will be tight given the summer assessment, assessment review in the fall, and a review and recommendation provided by the Scientific and Statistical Committee shortly after. Staff noted that the timeline is condensed, however, this is not unusual (e.g., this is currently being done for the monkfish fishery in setting specifications for FY 2023-2025).

A few Committee members discussed whether to include an evaluation of recreational catch and sturgeon bycatch recommendations as part of the priority list. An evaluation of recreational catch can be included as part of next year's specifications. Regarding sturgeon bycatch, one member suggested proactively evaluating the degree to which the skate fishery interacts with sturgeon and the location of bycatch occurrence in the form of a white paper given there is limited skate data and information (no skate declaration, hard to determine the trips targeting skates, etc.). GARFO staff noted that the sturgeon action plan is mostly focused on gear-specific recommendations in certain areas, which would include skates. There are some uncertainties regarding what will be included in the final plan (to be finalized this fall) and there will also be opportunities for public input before any regulations are finalized and implemented. Staff and the Council Chair also commented that there are ongoing discussions on what a Council action might look like to address sturgeon bycatch reduction which could either be a joint action with the Mid-Atlantic Council, an omnibus action across New England fishery management plans, a mini-omnibus action for the skate and monkfish fisheries, etc. Given the uncertainty in this sturgeon work and any regulation changes prompted by work of the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team regarding right whale interactions in gillnet gear, the Committee decided to wait before making any recommendations.

Lastly, one Committee member asked if there was any recent analysis on where thorny skates are being discarded (in the skate fishery and other fisheries) as this information would help direct efforts to support thorny skate rebuilding. One adviser spoke about an ongoing analysis that he and others are working on that shows thorny skate bycatch by fishery with a hotspot analysis for where thorny skate incidental mortality is occurring throughout the species' range. The adviser will share this work when it is finalized either towards the end of 2022 or early in 2023.

1. COMMITTEE MOTION: SALERNO/PAPPALARDO

1. Management actions

- a. Develop FY 2024-2025 skate specifications. With smooth skate and barndoor skate rebuilt, consider measures that would allow for expanded possession by the fishery.

2. Other PDT tasks

- a. Support the 2023 management track stock assessment for skates.
- b. Develop a white paper on potential approaches to support thorny skate rebuilding.
- c. Support improvements to fishery data quality controls.

Rationale: Specifications are a required action. The other PDT tasks are helpful in furthering the goal and objectives of the Skate FMP. Addressing the issues in the sturgeon action plan is a wider Council task.

Discussion of the motion: No other discussion on the motion.

Motion passes unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM #3: OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed.

The Skate AP and Committee meeting adjourned at about 11:15 a.m.