MEETING SUMMARY
Monkfish Research Set-Aside Working Group Meeting
Webinar
June 5, 2023

The Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Working Group met via webinar on June 5, 2023 at 1:00 PM to
1) review the work plan, timing, and objectives of the working group; 2) discuss the 2019 Program
Review of New England RSA Programs; 3) discuss the challenges and opportunities to improve the
Monkfish RSA program; and 4) discuss other business.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Kelly Whitmore (Working Group Chair), Jenny Couture (NEFMC staff), Jason
Didden (MAFMC staff), James Dopkin (Monkfish Advisory Panel member), Libby Etrie (NEFMC
Monkfish Committee member), Jon Grabowski (researcher), Peter Hughes (MAFMC Monkfish
Committee member), Ted Platz (Monkfish Advisory Panel member), Ryan Silva (GARFO RSA), James
Sulikowski (researcher), and Spencer Talmage (GARFO Sustainable Fisheries Division). In addition, one
other Council staff member and about seven other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:
• On the benefits of the Monkfish RSA program, the work group liked the improved efficiency not
being restricted by days-at-sea, the collaborative nature of researchers partnering with the fishing
industry and learning from each other, and the ability to conduct science to address Council
management needs.
• On the challenges of the Monkfish RSA program, the dependability of the funding source, the
overall economics of the monkfish fishery, and lack of program management to provide oversight
on the execution of the project are all hindering the success of the program. Other challenges
were also discussed as detailed below.
• On the potential solutions to the Monkfish RSA program, the work group suggested allowing the
ability to flip to an RSA DAS while at sea, allocating all the RSA DAS at the beginning of the
project (versus at the beginning of each fishing year) and extending the project to four years with
a one-year extension, and streamlining the exempted fishing permit process as ideas to further
explore. Other ideas were also discussed as detailed below.
• Regarding next steps, the working group agreed to identify pros, cons, and concerns that would
be addressed for each potential improvement to the Monkfish RSA program, as identified during
the first working group meeting. The pros and cons will be discussed during the next working
group meeting (July 24th).

AGENDA ITEM #1: INTRODUCTIONS, APPROVAL OF AGENDA, TIMELINE
The Chair introduced the working group, welcomed attendees, and sought approval of the agenda. There
were no agenda changes. The working group goal, objectives, and timeline for this work were also
reviewed.
**AGENDA ITEM #2: RSA PROGRAM BACKGROUND INCLUDING BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM**

Staff reviewed the Monkfish RSA program including how research funds are generated, the overall performance of RSA day-at-sea (DAS) over time, and research topics of previously funded RSA projects. The benefits of the current program and the recommendations from the 2019 RSA program review and the 2022 Monkfish Fishery Performance Report were also discussed, with a particular focus on the recommendations applicable to the Monkfish RSA Program.

**Discussion**

Several members of the work group discussed the increased efficiency and improved profitability from not being restricted by DAS when participating in the RSA program. Efficiency could be further improved by flipping to an RSA DAS while at sea. A few members noted the program allows industry to pay for research and the science that is needed to improve fishery management given the fishery is data poor. There is also an opportunity to focus on specific issues based on Council priorities. Overall, the program promotes information sharing, collaboration, and networking in a meaningful way between researchers and the fishing industry. More specifically, industry gains knowledge on the biology of monkfish and are involved early in cooperative research while researchers gain a more thorough understanding of the fishery. One member suggested expanding the RSA program to other fisheries, namely winter skate.

There is an overall interest in retaining the Monkfish RSA program and making it successful in the long-term.

**AGENDA ITEM #3: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE MONKFISH RSA PROGRAM**

The working group chair and Council staff sought overarching feedback on the challenges of the program to start the discussion. Staff then reviewed the ideas of potential measures to consider to improve the Monkfish RSA program. These ideas were developed by NEFMC staff based on a review of the summaries of prior Monkfish AP and Committee meetings, conversations with individual fishermen, the 2019 RSA Program Review report, the 2022 Fishery Performance Report, and final reports of prior RSA projects from 2007 – 2018 (final reports of recently completed projects are not yet available). Staff reiterated that these ideas can be revised, added to, or removed. Several questions were also raised for the working group to consider when evaluating potential measures to consider.

**Discussion on challenges of the program**

The work group identified dependability of the funding source and the overall economics of the monkfish fishery as the biggest challenges of the monkfish RSA program. The group thought that there should be more deliberate management and accountability of the program to help ensure selected projects are not duplicative, the research is funded, and the research is incorporated into management and subsequently communicated to stakeholders for if and how the RSA project data are used. Without consistent and certainty in funding, projects are not able to meet objectives and management cannot be improved.

Several members commented on the need for clear discrete program goals that everyone can agree on.

Additional challenges identified included:

- Research that is scientifically interesting but not relevant to management. A member recommended these projects find a different funding source (e.g., not industry-funded). Similarly, the project results are not being folded into the management process.
- Industry has limited input on project selection and any input is diluted through the Council and GARFO RSA project selection process. One work group member explained that GARFO solicits proposals more broadly based on Council priorities and that there is both a technical and management review process for advising which project(s) are selected.
- Too many projects are being funded without sufficient oversight.
- Final reports not available and distributed to the appropriate stakeholders. The GARFO RSA member noted that the administrative authority for the RSA program recently shifted from NEFSC to GARFO and additional staff are being hired to improve communication on the project status, etc.
- Limited pool of applicants given the funding is determined by selling their RSA DAS or via cooperative research. This limits the competitiveness of the program.
- Many universities do not allow participation in this type of funding source and if they do, the additional work and reporting burden on researchers and administrative staff may deter potential applicants.
- A substantial learning curve that is also resource intensive for researchers to sell RSA DAS.
- Regarding the Northern Fishery Management Area, there are net limit regulations, which hinder participation in the RSA program due to the reduced flexibility relative to the Southern Fishery Management Area. There is an overall need to remove constraints in the fishery and a need to differentiate between day-setting and smaller net sizes. It is possible to create an exemption program for RSA participation like what was done for the Northeast Multispecies sector program, however, this type of exemption was denied for the Gulf of Maine cod fishery. The work group member pointed out this is likely an issue for the Monkfish Committee.
- NOAA does not track RSA DAS use in a transparent manner.
- Lack of funding for the fishing industry’s time and intellectual capital. The GARFO RSA member explained that NOAA is not allowed to compensate the fishing industry for their time for reviewing RSA projects and other alternatives should be explored to get industry input.
- Inability to extend projects until all RSA DAS are sold. This would help alleviate any decline in monkfish price in a given year (thus, decline in demand for RSA DAS), assuming the proceeding year(s) are higher prices.

Public Comment:

- **Emerson Hasbrouck**: Emphasized that project applicants should plan for generating their own funding via selling their RSA DAS as part of their work plan. Interacting with industry helps build collaboration. He suggested ranking project proposals based on the ability to sell RSA DAS to generate sufficient funding for their research. An auction to sell RSA DAS was tested in the MAFMC and had some issues; market economics dictate the value of RSA DAS. To successfully do cooperative research, researchers need to understand how the fishery works and how the fishing industry operates and re-evaluate objectives based on that and the ability to sell RSA DAS. Mr. Hasbrouck thought it would be helpful for NOAA to track DAS use and catch and share this information with researchers.

  GARFO staff informed Mr. Hasbrouck that DAS and catch are reported weekly so there might be a communication issue.

- **Tara McClintock**: Stated that she tracks DAS and catch for Cornell RSA projects, DAS tracking is not done weekly, and that she’s noticed discrepancies in interactive voice response (IVR) and landings data. From her perspective, the challenges include: adding the fishing industry to exempted fishing permits (EFPs), completing confidentiality waivers, iterating with the industry in multiple states with waiver requirements at different steps of the process, and ensuring that projects do not exceed DAS allocation. The process should be streamlined overall. She also noted that the requirement to sell DAS and to keep track of number of DAS sold is challenging.

  GARFO staff will look into the structure of these waiver requirements and see if any improvements can be made to streamline the process.
• **Bonnie Brady**: National Fisheries Institute auctions were successful previously in terms of generating funds, however, there were qualifiers. The key is to make sure that the agreed upon price is known to industry and help ensure industry can make money.

Some of the work group members briefly discussed the auction as an idea, with one member noting that fishermen buy RSA DAS seasonally based on need so the auction would prompt industry to either over-buy in anticipation of needing a certain number of days or would create a secondary market to sell any unused RSA DAS. The seasonal expectations of DAS are constantly in flux and differ amongst fisheries. For example, in the spring skates are available more nearshore versus in the fall when both skates and monkfish are further offshore; different fishermen participate in each season and require purchasing of RSA DAS by season, thus, an auction held at the beginning of the year would not make sense. A member suggested a portion of the money generated via an auction could be used to compensate the industry for their time. The GARFO RSA member explained that the idea of an auction has been discussed previously and that it is not legally possible given NOAA cannot generate funds directly. The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council held auctions previously, though the RSA program was suspended in 2014 due to vulnerability to abuse through under-reporting and non-reporting of catch and whether the science produced justifies the costs of the program. A ‘DAS store’ versus an auction would be helpful given fishing business plans change so may need to sell or buy additional DAS as needed throughout the year.

• **Emerson Hasbrouck**: Liked the idea of a ‘DAS store’ given there is little interest in buying DAS at a high price. He explained that a few years ago when the DAS price were very high but the monkfish price plummeted, he brought up this issue during the Monkfish AP and Committee and was able to reduce the RSA DAS price such that it was economical for both industry and researchers.

**Discussion on the 2019 Program Review recommendations**

There was no specific discussion on this topic.

**Regarding potential solutions**

The work group had several comments on the suggested improvements drafted by Council staff; these are listed below. In addition, the work group thought it would be helpful to include if and how project results are incorporated into the assessment process and management; Mr. Didden volunteered to do this.

- **Allocate RSA quota using a specific weight vs. 500 DAS**: The GARFO RSA member thought this would simplify how the program functions from a grant perspective and wondered if this would alleviate the interest in flipping to an RSA DAS while at sea.

- **Enable the flexibility to flip to a Monkfish RSA DAS while at sea**: One member thought this might impact the ability to track DAS while another member thought this would improve the efficiency and profitability of fishing. There was a concern regarding enforcement for trips that have both RSA and non-RSA catch. One member noted that this was part of the reason the MAFMC compensation fishing program was suspended.

- **Use the first six months of a project to recruit fishermen to buy DAS**: A work group member thought that project applicants should be mindful of the risk they are undertaking in generating funds to support their research. He did not want to over-regulate the process.

- **Equally distribute DAS and pound allocation across projects**: Different projects require different amounts of funding, thus, requiring equal distribution of DAS would undermine the selection process.

- **Provide sufficient financial incentive for fishermen to participate in the RSA program by ?**: The work group thought it was important to distinguish between RSA compensation fishing and
selling the DAS given some fishermen want to participate in the research and management process while others do not.

- **Create a third-party broker between the researchers and the fishing industry**: A couple of members thought it would be helpful if there was an independent broker or if NOAA was able to sell RSA DAS. There was a desire to make it easy for fishermen to access RSA DAS. A couple of members suggested an RSA program manager either from NOAA or the Council to track execution of the RSA projects from a management perspective.

- **Requiring data sharing and report-outs of RSA projects each year, possibly in conjunction or similar to the Scallop RSA share day**: Several work group members liked this idea and commented that something like this was done several years ago by Crista Bank when she was with Univ. of Massachusetts School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST). The annual meeting was focused on monkfish RSA projects that brought together active participants and any other interested parties. This was seen as very productive for gathering industry input, a networking opportunity to introduce industry to science to help them better participate in the management process and for researchers to understand how the fishery operates. One person suggested requiring researchers to participate in Monkfish AP, Committee, or share day meetings as part of the grant. Assessment scientists should also be involved.

- **Requirement in the RFP to include letters of interest from the fishing industry**: This is not required currently, though most researchers already include these letters of interest. One work group member thought this would create an unnecessary hurdle while another emphasized that some fishermen are only interested in compensation fishing and not partaking in the research.

The work group discussed other ideas as well:

- Advertisement and/or communication for when/where RSA DAS can be bought (e.g., NOAA Navigator, Commercial Fisheries News, NOAA bulletins, etc.).

- Allow multi-year RSA projects such that RSA DAS are allocated in one year but can be used throughout the duration of the project until all RSA DAS can be sold (up to four years with a one-year extension for example). RSA DAS would not be allocated for each fishing year, which is current practice, rather, RSA DAS would be allocated one time at the start of the project and could be used throughout the award period (up to five years). This would help researchers sell their RSA DAS in years when monkfish price is high and help provide stability for years with poor economic conditions when monkfish price is low. This would also help RSA DAS from expiring which is an issue for both researchers (who want to sell the DAS that will expire first) and the fishing industry (who want to purchase the newest DAS so they have time to fish the DAS before expiring). Currently, there are two-year awards with a one-year extension. The Scallop RSA program is proposing to operate on a longer award period to help with planning longer-term surveys (two-year awards are currently in place).

- Streamline the EFP process given EFPs are issued for a given fishing year with 500 RSA DAS allocated across the fishery each fishing year. With grant extensions, this means that the same project would have two EFPs.

- Limit RSA DAS awards based on what the fishing industry can support (250 – 300 DAS versus the allocated 500 RSA DAS). As the fishery and fishing participants declines over time then it might make sense for the Monkfish RSA program to reduce its allocation accordingly.

- Similarly, only solicit projects once all RSA DAS for current projects have been sold. The work group did not want projects to compete for selling their RSA DAS. This could mean that some years only one project may be funded versus several; this could help the one funded project to be successful, for example. The GARFO RSA member noted that project proposals are solicited in years where there is interest; proposals were not solicited in 2021.

- Create a management body to oversee execution of the Monkfish RSA program. This body would work with researchers and the fishing industry to oversee the RSA program and active projects and take a proactive approach for any issues that develop.
- Track RSA DAS such that there is not an overage in landings and a deficit of DAS used given one RSA DAS is equal to 4,072 lb of whole monkfish, which is not how the DAS used is being calculated. This suggestion was provided by a work group member prior to the meeting.

Public Comment:

- Tara McClintock: Supported extending the RSA awards to 4-5 years and keeping the DAS active throughout the entire period (e.g., no expiration date) to help alleviate the challenges in selling RSA DAS. Regarding quarterly RSA progress reports, any problems encountered such as ability or inability to sell RSA DAS, number of DAS sold, total landings, etc. can be communicated with the RSA program. It is the responsibility of the researchers to raise any red flags to GARFO and for GARFO to be flexible.

Regarding the questions posed by Council staff

- What is the current RSA DAS price? - $400/RSA DAS for the past several years
- Do multiple projects compete for selling RSA DAS? – there is not enough demand for 500 DAS.
- Can the RSA RFP require researchers to share their RSA data (make publicly available)? – there is a data sharing policy in place and the work group should specify the goal of sharing the data. The scallop survey working group’s report recommendations may offer relevant considerations on data sharing as examples to investigate. One work group member thought that fishermen should be able to access the data that they purchased from buying an RSA DAS. Another member thought researchers are interested in sharing their results and thus would be best suited to share their findings with the appropriate stakeholders.
- What is the purpose of progress report check-ins with the RSA program? – Semi-annual progress report requirements are a condition of the grant to evaluate the projects relative to research objectives and DAS use, though these are not distributed broadly. One work group member suggested researchers work together given fishermen participate in multiple projects and there could be a need to help each other.
- Are final reports standardized? – There is no standard format for final reports (only for progress reports); the projects go through a peer review to evaluate whether objectives are met. A couple of members thought a suggested format for final reports would be helpful.
- How are RSA final reports provided to the Council, public? – GARFO is currently resurrecting the previous online RSA database to share the reports more broadly. A work group member thought it was important to alert Monkfish Committee members when new reports are available and suggested building in an automated system for stakeholders to sign up for alerts to the online RSA database to be notified of any new information.

Council staff reviewed next steps for the work group including a request for each member of the group to identify pros and cons for each suggested program improvement discussed during the initial meeting. Staff will send the group a table to complete. The next work group meeting is scheduled for July 24th and the final meeting is scheduled for August 21st. In the interim, staff will also reach out to the NEFSC assessment scientists to understand any improvements that can be made for how to share RSA project results and if it makes sense to invite an assessment scientist to join our next meeting for further discussion.

AGENDA ITEM #4: OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed.

The meeting adjourned at 4:45 pm.