



New England Fishery Management Council

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Monkfish and Northeast Skate Complex Fishery Management Plans

Monkfish and Skate Fishery Improvements Listening Session Summary

**Stafford Township
Manahawkin, NJ
May 5, 2026, 4pm**

Meeting Officer: Scott Olszewski, Skate Committee Chair

Other Council Members: Lisa Wooleyhan (MAFMC)

Council Staff: Jenny Couture (Monkfish Plan Coordinator), Jason Didden (Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Monkfish Staff)

Attendance: Jeff Brust (NJ Marine Fisheries), Robert Elsey, Sr, Robert Elsey, Ryan Kelly, Richard Luidtke, Chris Rainone, Chuck Solon, Mike Tarch, Kevin Wark, Roger Wooleyhan, and Doug Zemeckis; a couple of other members of the public also attended.

The meeting began at 4:00 pm. Chair Olszewski welcomed the audience and opened the meeting with some brief comments. This was the fourth of five listening sessions being held to solicit comments from the public regarding improvements to monkfish and skate fishery management. A report out of the listening sessions and all comments received from April 20th through May 18, 2026 will be provided to the New England Council during its June meeting in Mystic, CT and to the Mid-Atlantic Council during its August meeting in Philadelphia, PA. Council staff provided a brief presentation including background information on the monkfish and skate fisheries, discussion questions, and information on how to provide public comment.

Two main concerns that meeting participants focused on were sturgeon abundance and poor market conditions. Participants did not support pursuing an individual fishing quota (IFQ) program.

Interaction between Monkfish and Skate Fishing. One participant asked how monkfish fishing is distinguished from skate fishing when evaluating whether fishermen are targeting monkfish vs skates for any data analysis. They were concerned that any analysis does not account for fishery changes over the years; for example, skates used to be discarded for many years and used to be closer to shore so that they were easier to avoid when targeting monkfish. Now, skates are being targeted as part of a directed fishery. Elasmobranchs are found everywhere and taking over the ecosystem, and fishermen cannot catch monkfish without also catching skates, even further offshore. Monkfish landings have crashed and now fishermen are trying to survive on skate

fishing. He further stated that management is reactive versus proactive and that the Council should be focused on managing the change in the ecosystem and fisheries. Staff explained that for some of the analyses in 2025, performance of skate limits were evaluated first and then monkfish landings were compared against the trip limits. The meeting chair also explained that the joint analyses from 2025 were used to try to maximize the trip limits for both monkfish and skates and the data showed that the market seems to be the driver for lower southern monkfish catch. One participant stated that he would go fishing for monkfish more if he didn't have to deal with skates clogging the nets.

Protected Resources: Atlantic Sturgeon. Several meeting participants emphasized that the sturgeon stock is healthy and that the various sturgeon-related Council and state measures are putting fishermen out of business. There are only a dozen monkfish gillnet boats off New Jersey, and the fleet is aging out without anyone new entering the fishery. It does not make sense that this small effort would substantially affect the sturgeon population. A participant wanted sturgeon to be removed from the endangered species list to help improve monkfish landings. The new sturgeon gear requirements in the monkfish fishery have lowered monkfish landings, catch a similar number of sturgeon, and are costly (\$10,000 for new gear in one year). If fishermen avoid the areas in which the new sturgeon gear requirements are in place, fishermen must go further offshore: however, fishermen are fearful of having their gear pulled up by draggers in the Mud Hole area. This is also an added expense for fuel, and fishermen are not willing to fish that far offshore. There was a preference to fish closer to shore (10-12 miles), though this would require the new gear.

Staff explained that the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission is working on a new sturgeon stock assessment that will be completed in 2028 and that the Commission has asked for input on any additional data sources to include. There is a lengthy process for potentially delisting a species from the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A few members of the public reiterated that sturgeon have recovered; previously, fishermen targeted sturgeon in a directed fishery in the 1980s and that is partly how fishermen learned how to catch monkfish. When there was a sturgeon fishery, only a dozen Monkfish days-at-sea (DAS) were allocated for monkfish fishing. Everything has changed: the sturgeon population is booming though there is no directed sturgeon fishery; substantially higher Monkfish DAS allocations but monkfish are not available to be caught; and environmental changes, namely warming waters, resulting in species shifting from the Mid-Atlantic region to New England. All the prior sturgeon gear research is now outdated; the environment is not the same, nor is the sturgeon population, thus the findings from the gear research are no longer relevant.

The timing for these Council sturgeon measures overlaps the prime fishing period, specifically six weeks in the spring and six weeks in the fall for skate fishing; another person said that the monkfish fishery only operates for 3.5 weeks for the season. One fisherman explained that the fishing industry is the endangered species, not sturgeon. Halloween used to be the start date for the monkfish fishery, but it now begins after Thanksgiving, if not later. Another participant asked about the previous monkfish bycatch event in the scallop fishery and the shift from starting to fish for monkfish in the third week of October to now around Christmas time. One industry member commented that sturgeon are strong swimmers and are found closer to shore in the springtime due to cooler water temperatures; fishermen would have to fish further offshore to

avoid sturgeon, which is an added expense. Dynamic management with rolling closures was one suggestion to allow fishing until fishermen start to interact with sturgeon and then close the fishery for a week or so until sturgeon move further offshore. This type of approach could extend fishing by a couple of weeks, which would be helpful for providing monkfish landings to restaurants. The sturgeon measures for the spiny dogfish fishery are also detrimental, especially given the decreasing price paid over time for this species.

Council staff asked if there is a less damaging way to the fishing industry to address sturgeon take. There was a brief discussion on tagging sturgeon, which is not permitted even by state agencies due to federal regulations for endangered species. A fisherman said that their approach is to show observers where the sturgeon are located. Staff explained that both NEFMC and MAFMC requested additional tagging of sturgeon from the NEFSC, though there is insufficient funding available. Meeting participants suggested providing fishermen tags for vessels so that any sturgeon caught can be tagged; re-evaluating closure times; providing fishermen pingers; etc.

The magnitude of latent fishing permits is also a concern as it relates to protected species and incidental take permits more broadly. One person on the Take Reduction Team explained that the risk reduction is focused on the modified gear. Outside stressors such as protected species measures, environmental conditions, etc. have reduced the ability to harvest monkfish and it is unclear whether any of these changes will revert in their lifetime. They explained that people stopped fishing because it is no longer as good economically and reiterated that changes in both fisheries need to be kept in mind for any future changes in management.

Protected Resources: Harbor porpoise. Harbor porpoise was another species of concern discussed during the meeting. A harbor porpoise closure was created in the 1990s, shutting down the fishery from April 1- 20; this closure is now outdated as harbor porpoise have shifted further north. One person thought that zero porpoise were caught last year. Off Maryland, the harbor porpoise closure is earlier in February through March, and there is also a turtle closure; taken together, various closures result in limited fishing opportunities. A few industry members did not think it was efficient to fish for a couple of weeks in the spring when monkfish were closer to shore and then haul gear in from April 1-20 to then have to haul gear back out offshore before the sharks become prevalent later in May. Another fisherman explained that he must sleep with his nets overnight to be able to pull up nets first thing in the morning in state waters, which does not make sense. The MAFMC member suggested the Councils make a recommendation to NMFS to remove the April 1-20 harbor porpoise closure for a year to see what happens. Another person suggested requiring observers and pingers instead of closures so that they can keep fishing.

Market. One person explained that he used to catch multiple boat's worth of day-at-sea (DAS) limits because the prices were good (\$3/lb for monkfish tail and \$0.60-0.70/lb for skate wing); now there are only three buyers and an unwillingness to pay this higher price. The low prices are unsurvivable. The remaining buyers control the market and the price, and any increase in margins goes to other parts of the supply chain (truck driver, vendor, packing house, etc.), not to fishermen. The only thing left in the ocean are trash fisheries with underutilized species that have very low economic value and low consumer demand. One person explained that he has been forced to become a skate fisherman because he is unable to catch enough monkfish due to low

market prices and overabundance of skates clogging up their gillnets. Another member of the public commented that the market cannot handle higher trip limits and that effort controls should not be increased, otherwise price will continue to decline. He wanted to err on the side of caution and try to rely on domestic processors. There was a lengthy discussion about whether possession limits should be reduced, but this only seemed to make sense if there were more processors and buyers to have greater competition for price. Availability and willingness of crew to cut skate wings is another factor; the gillnet fishing fleet off NJ are responsible for cutting skates and processing a variety of species, unlike boats out of New Bedford, according to one member of the public.

Overall, there is a lack of domestic market for monkfish. Restaurants sell imported fish and are unwilling to take a chance to sell products like monkfish. The poor market conditions do not incentivize new people to enter the fishery; one person commented that fishermen cannot sell their boats and any new blood entering into the fishery would not survive. The loss of the Korean export market (due to the aging Korean population who were willing to pay higher prices for monkfish) was mentioned as a substantial impact to prices. Better monkfish marketing was suggested as one way to improve prices. Several people spoke about ways to promote underutilized fish like monkfish by selling to schools (like what is being done in RI), selling to prisons, social media campaigns, dockside sales, working more closely with states (such as the NJ Department of Agriculture, which previously promoted various agricultural products, though funding ended); improved communication and advertisement by the Councils; increased competition among the buyers for a more fair price; improved marketing of domestic products in grocery stores; etc. The Committee Chair described the RI Seafood brand to denote locally-caught seafood. One person said it is challenging for people in the US to consume anything beyond the top five species (scallops, shrimp, etc.).

One person summarized the conversation such that there is a need for better marketing but that it is also not worth catching monkfish because there are too many skates to deal with; he wanted to better understand how to rectify these opposing statements. A member of the public said that more people would participate in the fishery if the monkfish prices were around \$1/lb and the boats were solvent and they would view skates as just a nuisance and worth dealing with. Another participant thought that the skate market has expanded and filled the void left by fewer monkfish landings. There was a desire to have a consistent and stable market of domestic fresh seafood. Monkfish need to be available throughout the year for restaurants, grocery stores, etc. to carry the product.

A Mid-Atlantic Council member noted that it does not feel like fishermen are integrated as part of America's supply chain like it is for agricultural products as fishermen do not receive subsidies, farm to table marketing, etc. They stated that food security is national security, and if there are ways the Council can influence NMFS and Department of Commerce to help fishermen through fuel subsidies, gear and boat upgrades, and general support for infrastructure, that would be helpful. The Committee Chair noted that Councils can share this message, but it is likely more impactful if fishermen reach out to their state and federal representatives directly given the Council is not permitted to lobby Congress. Staff mentioned the new USDA Office of Seafood, which could be an opportunity to address some of these ideas. The Council member explained that in other countries, school children grow up eating seafood as part of their school lunches and

something like that at a young age in the US would be beneficial. There was also a suggestion to write comment letters encouraging schools, prisons, etc. to receive a tax break to purchase seafood or to have prisoners process skate wings, for example.

Latent effort. A participant noted that it is hard to come up with a management scheme to make businesses survive, though would be good to get rid of the several hundred latent permits. The Committee Chair asked how addressing latent effort would help improve low monkfish fishery performance. A couple of people were opposed to removing any permits in case there is opportunity to fish in the future.

Individual Fishing Quota. Individual fishing quota program was briefly discussed, with comments that this was discussed previously and perhaps relevant historically but now there are other issues. There are too many questions related to eligibility criteria, removing permits, and consolidation concerns (akin to the scallop fishery) to pursue an IFQ program.

Effort Controls. A couple members of the public suggested status quo management unless the situation with protected species and markets change. Increasing possession limits and Monkfish DAS are no longer relevant given no one is catching their limits. Weekly aggregate quota for skates was discussed as one option, like what is being done in RI state waters; however, a few people were against this idea because of protected species concerns and a few bad actors that could jeopardize stabilizing landings and price. Suggestions for Council action included managing monkfish and skates in the same fishery management plan and keeping status quo effort controls.

Other. Other items that are likely outside the scope of the Council include: addressing the recovered sturgeon population by reconsidering the ESA listing for sturgeon and addressing the monkfish and skate market pricing issue where there are few fish buyers and potentially a “price fixing” scheme without sufficient competition to determine prices.

With no additional comments, the Chair closed the meeting at about 6:45 pm.