



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

**SMALL MESH MULTISPECIES COMMITTEE
and
WHITING ADVISORY PANEL**

August 29, 2018

**Hotel Providence
139 Mathewson Street
Providence, RI 02903**

The Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting) Committee met jointly with the Whiting Advisory Panel on August 29, 2018 in Providence, RI.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Vincent Balzano (Chair), Matt McKenzie, Eric Reid, Mike Ruccio, Peter Aarrestad, Peter Kendall, Laurie Nolan, and Scott Olszewski (committee members); Andrew Applegate (NEFMC staff and PDT chair); Peter Burns (NMFS GARFO staff); and Dan Farnham (Chair), Vito Calomo, David Goethel, Hank Lackner, and Katie Almeida (Whiting advisors). Also attending the meeting were Russel Sherman and Dan Farnham, Jr, both whiting boat owners.

Meeting documents were posted at the following location: <https://www.nefmc.org/calendar/aug-29-2018-joint-whiting-committee-and-advisory-panel-meeting>.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- The advisors and committee reviewed the staff regulation review, presented at the April and June Council meetings. GARFO staff reported that some of the recommendations would need further Council action to change, but had no problem with the issues raised in the review. An additional groundfish regulation that prohibits vessels from transiting Closed Area II with small mesh was identified by the Advisors and recommended to be included in the recommendations.

- The advisors favored Alternative 4 limited access with status quo possession limits for Category I and II vessels and an incidental possession limit of 2000 lbs. whiting and 400 lbs. red hake, but a 4-0-1 margin. They favored Alternative 1 (NE Multispecies permit conditions) with Alternative 4 (one history, one qualifier) and Alternatives 2a and 3 for incidental permits to target whiting with large mesh on a Multispecies DAS and with small mesh in the squid and herring limited access fisheries. They did not favor the “Pierce” amendment, allowing vessels to exceed the incidental limit while using small mesh in raised footrope trawl exemption areas.

There was a discrepancy between the estimated number of qualifiers in different parts of the amendment document, especially for Alternative 4. One part (Section 6) said there would be 179 qualifiers while another part (Section 4 and the public hearing document) said there would be 316 qualifiers. Staff could not immediately tell why this difference occurred but believed that the estimated number of qualifiers in Section 6 of the DEIS, taken out to public hearing, were correct. Further review after the meeting revealed that the summary estimates in the public hearing document and Section 4 were from a preliminary analysis that had been corrected for the draft amendment analysis of impacts. It was reported during the meeting that the estimated number of qualifiers in the decision document and in Section 6 of the amendment document are correct.

Mostly due to the uncertainty about the estimated number of qualifiers for Alternative 4, the Committee voted to recommend No Action (i.e. no limited access) to the Council.

- The committee discussed a potential 2019 Council priority to evaluate and take action which could change exemption area seasons, based on recent research. Mr. Applegate reported that the groundfish discard rates in Small-Mesh Area I were 10-20%, but that was mostly comprised of haddock, the rest being less than the 5% standard. The committee and advisors asked for the MA Division of Marine Fisheries experimental fishery report to evaluate whether this issue should become a management priority before the December Council meeting.

Mr. Balzano opened the meeting at 9:45, discussing the altered agenda to accommodate an advisor who needed to leave early and committee member that would be arriving late. It was decided that the meeting would start with the regulatory efficiency review, followed by a review of public comments and discussion of Amendment 22 alternatives by the advisors, followed by a presentation of the 2018 Annual Monitoring Report, then the committee would discuss and develop recommendations for final action in Amendment 22. Mr. Balzano thought it would be helpful to review the broad choices listed in the decision document for the advisors to deliberate, then go through it in more detail later in the afternoon for the committee. The meeting began with a round of introductions before Mr. Applegate summarized the issues related to the regulatory review and recommendations.

AGENDA ITEM #1: STREAMLINING SMALL-MESH MULTISPECIES FISHERY REGULATIONS

Presentation: Mr. Applegate reported that this analysis of existing small-mesh multispecies regulations had been part of a broader effort to review fishery regulations in response to Mr. Trump's executive order, at the request of NOAA Fisheries. A summary of the small-mesh and other FMPs had been given at the April and June Council meetings, following two rounds of review by the PDT, Advisors, and Committee. During the June meeting, some issues with the small-mesh recommendations arose and the issues were referred back to the committee. Mr. Applegate circulated the detailed 8-page table and said that the unresolved issue had been whether Letter of Authorizations were currently necessary, since many of the small-mesh multispecies vessels were required to use a vessel monitoring system (VMS) due to their participation in other fisheries that require it, but that the information wasn't much use to the Council because it did not indicate whether or not small-mesh multispecies fishing had occurred and the PDT did not indicate that it was very useful for enforcement purposes either.

1. MOTION: Mr. Kendall/ Mr. Reid

To forward to the Council the existing list of regulation review recommendations, recognizing that some actions could be addressed through NOAA fisheries action and some issues could be addressed by a Council priority, including a regulation that prohibits transiting Closed Area II with small-mesh trawl gear aboard.

Discussion: Mr. Ruccio said that GARFO staff had no objections to the recommendations, but thought that some of them, like the Letter of Authorization program (3 out of 20 Letter of Authorization types), should be evaluated in a wholistic way, across fishery plans. He also felt that some of the regulatory issues would need the Council to take them up as a priority, rather than having NOAA Fisheries take the initiative. One example was the exemption area possession limits, which could be inconsistent with other fishery regulations, so they become more uniformly consistent and appropriate to discourage targeting with small-mesh trawls, but not cause excessive discarding.

Mr. Goethel thought that it would be useful to have the Council re-evaluate the need for the small-mesh multispecies transfer at sea limit, one of the items on the list and felt that the possession limits should be more consistent for all exemption areas. Mrs. Almeida cautioned that doing so may open up revising them to the lowest amount across all areas. Mr. Farnham Jr. agreed that the season dates for the Cultivator Shoals Area should be re-evaluated, but more importantly there is a problem with the prohibition of having small-mesh trawls aboard when transiting Closed Area II. This regulation caused vessels using small-mesh to steam from the east, around the southern part of Closed Area II, costing fuel and increasing risk in foul weather.

COMMITTEE MOTION #1 The motion carried 6-0-0.

AGENDA ITEM #2: AMENDMENT 22 FINAL ACTION

Presentation: Referring to documents 3b and 3c, Mr. Applegate gave a summary of the public hearings and written comments for the advisors to discuss. He reported that the public hearing and written comments were both in favor of and opposed to limited access, but the responses

varied somewhat by port. Some strongly supported limited access with higher thresholds, but would settle for lower thresholds to get limited access in place. Other areas with a longer history of small-mesh multispecies fishing, supported limited access with a lower threshold, like Alternative 4. The majority of people commented in favor of No Action, many recommending that the Council address bycatch and choke species issues through other means, specifically gear solutions and possession limits. It seemed that many were opposed to limiting new entrants when there was a low utilization rate as a proportion of the annual catch limit for whiting. Mr. Applegate thought that many people that commented lost sight that the intent of the amendment and the alternatives were designed to freeze the footprint of the fishery, not scale back effort or take away permits in use. He also pointed out that the raised footrope trawl appears to be very effective at reducing flatfish catch (i.e. flounders, monkfish, skates), but was not very promising for roundfish (e.g. haddock and red hake).

At the Chair's request, Mr. Applegate also presented the four broad choices in the decision document (Document 3A) for Amendment 22, including:

1. No Action – the Council could kill the amendment
2. Establish Category I and II limited access permits, but make no immediate changes to whiting and red hake possession limits.
3. Establish Category I and II limited access and incidental permits, but allow vessels with incidental permits to fish in raised footrope trawl exemption areas with the same possession limits as a limited access vessel.
4. Establish Category I and II limited access permits; and establish small-mesh multispecies possession limits for each permit type.

Discussion: Individually, the advisory panel was split on the issue, with Mr. Calomo and Mrs. Almeida supporting no action. Mr. Goethel, Mr. Farnham, and Mr. Lackner supported a limited access alternative.

Mr. Calomo favored management approaches that would rely on gear solutions. He felt that the raised footrope trawl was very effective, especially when paired with shortened ground cables. He explained that Capt. Sam Novello felt strongly that the long ground cables that some vessels are using increase bycatch by herding groundfish into the net. Mr. Goethel reported that the raised footrope trawl was effective for reducing bycatch of some species, but it does not eliminate haddock catches and is not highly effective in eliminating monkfish and lobster catch. Mr. Goethel said that few haddock are present in Small-Mesh Area I after July 15 and that red hake catches could be reduced by setting the head rope further back than normal.

Mrs. Almeida and Mr. Reid asked if a moratorium on new Category K permit issuance would be effective in freezing the footprint of the fishery, asking how much small-mesh multispecies landings came from vessels with Category K permits. Mrs. Almeida was surprised that during the development of Amendment 22, a moratorium on Category K permits was not identified as an alternative. Mr. Lackner

Mr. Applegate replied that the number of Category K permits have been declining steadily since 2005 when 1051 permits were issued and in 2017, 747 permits were issued. The Amendment 22 analysis summarized landings in a variety of ways, but not specifically by permit, because often vessels were only declared out of another fishery to land whiting, utilizing a Category K permit.

He pointed out that when estimating whiting and red hake discards, the use of the permit to land whiting was confused with declarations in another fishery, such as herring or squid. That said, the number of vessels targeting small-mesh multispecies was less than 200 vessels in recent years, many vessels utilizing a large-mesh multispecies limited access permit to fish.

Mr. Applegate advised and Mr. Ruccio agreed that a proposed moratorium on Category K permit issuance would require a separate action, or at least would create an additional alternative that would require additional analysis and public hearing.

The Committee and Advisory Panel took up the following discussion on Amendment 22 final action after agenda item #3. To get a sense of the Advisory Panel, Mr. Farnham offered a motion and the advisors voted.

Further discussion of Amendment 22 final action was taken up after the arrival of a committee member mid-day and Agenda item #3 was taken up next, because data in the annual monitoring report could have bearing on the final committee recommendation.

The Committee and Advisory Panel took up the following discussion on Amendment 22 final action after agenda item #3.

Action 1: Limited access qualification

2. MOTION: Mr. Farnham/ Mr. Lackner:

The AP would like to go forward with small-mesh multispecies limited access.

Discussion on the motion:

Before voting on the motion, the Advisory Panel members individually spoke about whether they supported or opposed to a small-mesh multispecies fishery limited access program.

Mr. Goethel stated that he favored a limited access program for the small-mesh multispecies fishery because the science and management is always out of sync with the fishery. As an example, he cited the graph for northern red hake biomass which applies a 3-year moving average to determine status. Due to the lag in adjusting the specifications, many fish were discarded and wasted in 2015-2016. He felt that the process is too cumbersome to react quickly and developing limited access later would be too late. He said that at some future time, the whiting stock will decline, and limited access will make measures more effective to regulate the fishery. He pointed out that the small-mesh multispecies fishery is the only remaining open access alternative for vessels in other limited access programs, which makes the small-mesh multispecies fishery vulnerable to increases in fishing effort (i.e. other fisheries were closed to new entrants except by vessel purchase).

Mr. Calomo was opposed to establishing limited access because the current fleet is much smaller now than it had been and a low proportion of the annual catch limit is being taken by the fleet. When he fished, his boats relied on a portfolio of fisheries to remain viable. He felt that limited access would wipe out fishermen that rely on periodic access to the whiting fishery.

Mr. Lankner supported the motion and was strongly in favor of limited access. He said that the Council needed to be proactive to address the looming issues, including southern red hake and yellowtail flounder potentially becoming choke species and the declining abundance of and annual catch limits for southern whiting. He forecasted that action to address these changes will be needed and they would be costly if new vessels entered the fishery.

Mrs. Almeida did not support the motion or limited access, because of the low utilization rate of the whiting annual catch limits. She thought that the amendment did nothing to deal with bycatch issues at all. In fact alternative would increase the whiting possession limit, in contrast with placing a cap on fishing effort. She stated that limited access removes opportunities for fishermen to switch fisheries when conditions change. Mrs. Almeida added that many boats that could qualify under one of the Category II thresholds often land more than 15,000 lbs. of whiting. She said that many vessels depend on whiting landings for revenue on trips targeting squid.

Mr. Farnham pointed out that northern red hake was overfished recently and accountability measures had been triggered. Southern red hake is now overfished and the Council will be developing an action to rebuild the stock. Southern whiting biomass has been declining and could become overfished if it declines further. He strongly supported limited access to protect the fishermen that currently depend on whiting.

Mr. Sherman was opposed to small-mesh multispecies fishery limited access. He felt that limited access would deliver the fishery into too few hands. He also said that the official records were not accurate, in his case. He had assembled records to support his case for qualification and thought that there would be many challenges to negative limited access qualification determinations. He recommended that the Council should address the red hake problem separately, not through limited access.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #2 The motion carried 3-2-0.

3a. MOTION: Mr. Reid/ Mr. Olszewski:

Move to recommend that the Council approve Alternative 1, status quo for Amendment 22. Further recommend considering a trailing action to freeze or eliminate the issuance of "Category K" permits using the current control date of November 28, 2012.

Discussion on the motion:

Following the Advisory Panel motion (#2), the committee considered a motion on Action 1 (limited access), tied to alternatives in Action 2 (whiting possession limits).

Mr. Reid did not support limited access due to the low whiting utilization rate. He felt that open access provided the only remaining flexibility for the small-mesh fleet, which targets squid and mackerel (both under limited access programs).

Mrs. Nolan on the other hand pointed out that the whiting fishery was the only Council-regulated fishery without limited access to cap effort, an open door for increasing fishing effort. She said that Amendment 22 had a very inclusive range of alternatives, from higher and more conservative thresholds to a very liberal threshold that is estimated to qualify 316 vessels. She added that the choice of a possession limit for limited access permits would be a very important consideration.

Mr. Ruccio said that the amendment development was an interesting process, due to the complexities that were considered. He thought that the standard application of limited access to balance capacity with the target species productivity did not apply here and that the Council was taking a position on limited access for compelling reasons. He understood the concerns of fishermen who felt that they were being closed out of the fishery, but thought that the alternatives that the Council crafted to “freeze the footprint” of the fishery somehow did not resonate with the public. Mr. Ruccio said that he would abstain from the committee motion, but said that GARFO was not opposed to implementing a limited access program even if it is not immediately effective (i.e. no changes in possession limits or other exemptions for non-qualifying vessels).

Mr. Ruccio advised that the committee motion would create another alternative. This would require additional analysis and would need an additional public hearing, but it could be done with some added work.

Dr. McKenzie thought that there was not a single alternative that would cleanly separate fishermen in the whiting fishery from those that currently operate in the fishery. With 300 to 340 vessels that have been active in the fishery, he asked whether freezing the issuance of Category K permits would actually achieve the purpose of the amendment. Therefore Dr. McKenzie was reluctant to support the committee motion.

Mr. Kendall said that his preference would be different if the utilization rate was much higher, around 80%. He thought that many Gloucester fishing vessels would be excluded due to the choice of qualification period.

3b. SUBSTITUTE MOTION: Mrs. Nolan/Dr. McKenzie:

Mrs. Nolan/Dr. McKenzie: Move to substitute limited access qualification criteria alternative 4, which would qualify 179 vessels, with [Action 2] Alternative 1 possession limit for Category I and II vessels. The motion failed 2-3-2.

Discussion on the motion:

Focusing on Alternative 4 and status quo possession limits for limited access qualifiers, a committee motion was made to recommend the most liberal qualification criteria with a single possession limit for all qualifying vessels.

Mr. Ruccio asked about the number of qualifiers actually fishing for whiting with Alternative 4. He needed to understand the implications of very liberal qualification criteria creating a large group of limited access vessels. He asked how many vessels were actually squid fishing and landing whiting on those trips. Mr. Applegate replied that there was an extensive analysis of

fishing activity and economic impacts in the DEIS for all of the alternatives. He indicated that alternatives with liberal criteria and more historic qualification period tended to qualify vessels that haven't been active in the whiting fishery in 2014-2016. On the other hand, alternatives 3 and 4 extended the qualification period through the end of 2016, thus more recently active vessels would probably qualify. He thought that Alternative 4 is a compromise between the two outcomes.

When the initial motion was made, it was to recommend Alternative 4 that would qualify 316 vessels listed in the public hearing document. This number of estimated qualifiers was however inconsistent with the decision document table that came from the DEIS, showing that Alternative 4 was estimated to qualify 179 vessels. Staff could not immediately comprehend the reason for the different results, but believed that the number of qualifiers in the DEIS was correct instead of the summary in the public hearing document. Staff believed that the DEIS estimates were consistent with the number of vessels in the fishery targeting whiting, but the committee believed the summary numbers from the public hearing document.

In any case, partly due to the uncertainty, the Committee Motion 3b failed and the committee voted to recommend No Action (i.e. no limited access) to the Council (Motion 3c). Mr. Kendall pointed out that this decision will of course be debated at the Council and by that time we will understand and correct the error.

Dr. McKenzie did not understand what was the right estimate, but he was uncomfortable with reducing the fleet to 200 vessels. He was therefore unable to make a firm decision with respect to a limited access alternative.

Mr. Ruccio added that the estimates in the documents are an initial analytical outcome to compare alternatives. The actual number of qualifiers could be higher or lower depending on how many vessels apply for limited access and how many qualify via their own supplemental data. He said that regardless of the number of estimated qualifiers, we will not know the final numbers until NOAA Fisheries begins qualifying vessels. We know that Alternative 4 has a liberal (i.e. low) qualification threshold for Category II and a fairly low qualification threshold for Category I. He thought that this problem should not hold up the committee vote and the matter would be cleared up by the Council meeting.

COMMITTEE MOTION #3b The motion failed 2-3-2.

3a. MAIN MOTION: Mr. Reid/ Mr. Olszewski:

Move to recommend that the Council approve Alternative 1, status quo for Amendment 22. Further recommend considering a trailing action to freeze or eliminate the issuance of "Category K" permits using the current control date of November 28, 2012.

MAIN COMMITTEE MOTION #3a The motion carried 3-1-3.

After the committee motion, Mr. Balzano thought it would be helpful for the Advisory Panel to take a position and provide advice on Action 2 and 3 in the Amendment 22 document, supporting the Advisory Panel motion to recommend Alternative 4 for Action 1 (limited access qualification).

Action 1 and 2 – Limited access qualification and possession limits

4. MOTION: Mr. Goethel/Mr. Lackner:

To support Alternative 4 with Alternative 1 possession limits for Category I and II vessels.

Discussion on the motion:

Mr. Goethel commented that Alternative 4 would most likely qualify vessels currently fishing and with status quo possession limits for qualifiers, it would have no effect on vessels with Category II permits (which has a low qualification threshold sic).

Although Mr. Farnham supported a higher qualification criteria threshold, he supported Alternative 4 because mostly it would freeze the footprint of the fishery and position management to act in response to future conditions. Due to the discrepancy in the documents, he did not have faith in the number of estimated qualifiers, but the cumulative landings per year equivalent to the qualification thresholds proposed were fairly low and relatively easy for a vessel targeting whiting to meet.

Mrs. Almeida restated her opposition to limited access, believing that vessels that fish in multiple fisheries (i.e. diversify) would be punished by limited access qualification for their prior decisions.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #4 The motion carried 4-0-1.

5. MOTION: Mr. Farnham/Mr. Goethel:

To support Alternative 2 for incidental permit possession limits.

Discussion on the motion:

Alternative 2 would establish a 2000 lbs. whiting possession limit and a 400 lbs. red hake possession limit for vessels that do not qualify for limited access, making the limited access program immediately effective. The advisors were in favor of this, coupled with limited access qualification.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #5 The motion carried 4-0-1.

Action 3 – Permit allowances

Presentation:

Mr. Applegate described the alternatives for the committee, referring to the decision document, indicating which were designated as preferred by the Council and summarizing the few comments in favor of Alternative 4 for limited access permits. He said that no one spoke in favor of Alternative 4 for incidental permits (exempting the vessels from incidental possession limits when fishing in exemption areas that require a raised footrope trawl).

6. MOTION: Mr. Goethel/Mr. Farnham:

To support Alternative 1 and 4 (one history, one qualification) for Action 3 applying to limited access permits.

Discussion on the motion:

The advisors were in favor of allowing only one vessel to claim a qualifying history, transferring with the sale of a vessel unless otherwise specified in the bill of sale. This was the only modification relative to large-mesh multispecies limited access permit characteristics detailed in Alternative 1. Mr. Goethel clarified that Alternative 4 would not allow a previous owner of a vessel to qualify with a different vessel using the same history as the one used by the new owner of a vessel to qualify. It is assumed that the history transfers with the MRI, unless specified in the P&S agreement.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #6 The motion carried 3-0-2.

7. MOTION: Mr. Goethel/Mr. Calomo:

To support Alternative 3 for vessels targeting squid or herring to exceed the incidental possession limits, up to the limits for the mesh in use.

Discussion on the motion:

Vessels in the squid and herring fishery are already under limited access and often catch whiting while pursuing the target species. The advisors were in favor of this Alternative because it would minimize discards but would be unlikely to promote targeting of whiting by vessels that do not qualify for small-mesh multispecies limited access. Mr. Farnham however thought that it could open a potential loophole for vessels using small-mesh to target whiting under other permits. He said that whiting are often caught when targeting loligo squid. Mr. Ruccio asked if he understood correctly that under this alternative would allow vessels in the squid and herring fishery would have status quo possession limits, with a whiting possession limit consistent with the mesh in use. Mr. Goethel said that the squid and herring fisheries have large catches and it would be unrealistic for them to sort through the catch to ensure that they did not exceed a low, incidental whiting and red hake limit. Mr. Farnham asked if the measure would allow vessels using 2-inch mesh to target whiting. Mr. Applegate explained that the current possession limits would apply and the whiting possession limit for 2" mesh is only 3,500 lbs.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #7 The motion carried 5-0-0.

8. MOTION: Mr. Goethel/Mr. Farnham:

To approve Alternative 2a to allow vessel on a Multispecies DAS to exceed the incidental small-mesh multispecies possession limits.

Discussion on the motion:

The advisors favored this motion because it would be unlikely for non-qualifying vessels using large mesh to target small-mesh multispecies, but the measure would minimize discards when whiting catches on groundfish trips exceeds 2000 lbs.

With respect to Alternative 2a, Mr. Farnham asked how it would apply to vessels in the redfish fishery, using 5-inch mesh. Mr. Applegate replied that the motion was not focused on mesh, but rather whether the vessel is on a multispecies DAS. He thought it might be a potential loophole to target whiting using a groundfish DAS. If the vessel targeting redfish is on a groundfish DAS, the alternative would apply but not if they are declared out of the groundfish fishery. Mr. Goethel thought that the vessels targeting redfish are on a groundfish DAS. Mr. Goethel was confused by Alternative 2b that he thought would require a groundfish vessel to declare out of the groundfish fishery (DOF) if it exceeded the incidental whiting and red hake possession limits. Mr. Farnham explained that Alternative 2b would require the vessel to DOF before leaving the dock, in order to target whiting and red hake.

ADVISORY PANEL MOTION #8 The motion carried 4-0-0.

AGENDA ITEM #3: ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT FOR FISHING YEAR 2017

Further discussion of Amendment 22 final action was taken up after the arrival of a committee member mid-day and Agenda item #3 was taken up next, because data in the annual monitoring report could have bearing on the final committee recommendation.

Presentation: Mr. Applegate presented a summary of the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) for Fishing Year 2017. He reported that the purpose of the AMR was to update the Council on recent trends in the fishery, to determine whether post-season accountability measures (AMs) would be automatically triggered, and to give the PDT an opportunity to advise whether management actions were needed. This year's AMR was shorter than the prior year's SAFE Report because new three-year specifications had been adjusted last year, for 2018-2020. Thus this year's AMR focused on the last year and prior specifications. The report consists of three parts: an estimate of total catch for the fishing year, an update of survey biomass indices, and an analysis and summary of recent trends in effort and economics. A preliminary report was presented because at the time of the meeting, the chair had not yet received all of the text from GARFO and the NEFSC. More importantly, the PDT had not had sufficient time to review and finalize the report.

Catches (landings and estimated discards) for 2017 were all below the Annual Catch Limit, thus no post-season AMs would be triggered in 2018. In fact, the report revealed that effort, landings, and revenue all declined by about 10-20% relative to recent years.

A part of this analysis included more detailed estimates of bycatch than were available in the past. Following SBRM procedures, silver and red hake discards were estimated by applying discard to kept ratios on observed trips to total fleet landings, stratified by half-year, target fishery, and stock area. Of particular interest were red hake discards because the Council will be considering an action to address the overfished status of southern red hake, much of it caught in whiting and other small-mesh fisheries. There were however some peculiarities in the data, noted by the PDT. These peculiarities included a large amount of estimated discards in the lobster/crab fishery, arising from NY state samples. Also, a large amount of red and silver hake

discards were associated with the squid or squid/whiting fisheries. Investigating the source showed that many trips targeting whiting were declared to be in the squid fishery, rather than DOF, because whiting trips commonly exceeded the 2500 lbs. squid possession limit when the vessel was not declared into the squid fishery. Another peculiarity was that most of the silver hake caught in the herring fishery were landed in the northern management area, but discarded in the southern management area. Estimated southern red hake discards in the scallop fishery were 162,000 lbs. (out of a total estimate of 1.5 million lbs.). Mr. Applegate reported that he had asked Debbie Duarte from the NEFOP program about sampling of red hake, which are known symbionts, inhabiting the shells of live scallops. She said that observers sometimes record catches of in-shell scallops when they take a subsample of scallops for biological sampling, but that data collection was not always consistent. She advised that red hake discards on scallop trips should be considered as a lower bound estimate.

A relatively detailed analysis that summarized trends in effort and economics by Dr. Pradhan was presented. These data included trends by vessels targeting small-mesh multispecies on one or more trips in a year (i.e. 2000 lbs. whiting OR 400 lbs. red hake) and by vessels landing incidental amounts of whiting. Although whiting abundance increased in the northern area and the annual catch limit was not approached in the southern management area, small-mesh multispecies effort (number of boats and trips), landings, and revenue were down 10-20% in 2017. The number of trips were down by 11% while the number of boats landing more than this amount was down by 14% to 95 vessels. Other than the decline in the survey biomass for southern silver hake, there was no apparent reason for the decline in effort. Prices were steady (increasing by 1%). The PDT thought that the increase in squid fishing may have contributed because many vessels that target whiting also target squid.

Discussion:

Mr. Goethel said that vessels with Category C permits often declare into the herring fishery when they target whiting because they usually catch some herring on those trips. If they declare DOF (and thus would be classified as a whiting trip), they would have a zero herring possession limit. Vessels with a Category D herring permit are allowed to retain up to 6,000 lbs. of herring.

Mr. Ruccio said that GARFO was looking into some of the details of the small-mesh multispecies discard estimation and these issues should be investigated and addressed before using the fishery discard estimates for making management decisions to rebuild southern red hake.

AGENDA ITEM #4: OTHER BUSINESS

Presentation: Mr. Applegate reported that he had attended the last Research Steering Committee meeting, where the MA DMF study designed to estimate discard rates in the two weeks before the Small-Mesh Area I opens. The report indicated that discard rates were no less before the opening than in the two weeks after the July 15 opening. Groudfish discard rates were higher (i.e. 10 to 20%) than the 5% standard when haddock were included, but less than 5% without haddock. Haddock are currently in high abundance due to strong recent year classes. There was a vessel effect on discard rates and a vessel might have fished in a different depth zone than the others, with different bycatch rates.

Mr. Applegate reported that there was a request for the Council to adjust the exemption area season and that it would be on the priority list. He was skeptical that the new data would justify an earlier season and that there was no other data available to estimate impacts. He thought that it might be possible to have an early season opening if there was an sub-annual catch limit for haddock.

Discussion: Most of the committee and advisors had not seen the MA DMF report and asked if it could be distributed to them. Mr. Balzano noted that the committee could form a consensus by email and weigh in on the issue before final priorities are decided at the December Council meeting.

No additional business was taken up by the committee and Mr. Balzano adjourned at about 5:00 p.m.