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New England Fishery Management Council

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To: Tom Nies, Executive Director
From: Scientific and Statistical Committee
Date: August 24, 2016

Subject: Acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations for monkfish for fishing years for 2017- 2019.

The SSC met on August 10, 2016 to address the following terms of reference (TORs):

1. Review information from the June 2016 operational assessment for monkfish and provided by the Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT).
2. Specify OFLs and develop ABC recommendations for both the northern and southern management areas for fishing years 2017-2019. ABC recommendations should be provided under the current control rule and/or under any new control rule that the SSC might recommend.

The SSC considered the following documents in its deliberations:

- A.1 Memo to the SSC from the Monkfish PDT, dated August 3, 2016
- A.2 Monkfish Fishery Performance Report, dated August 3, 2016
- A.3 Monkfish Operational Assessment 2016
<http://nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd1609/crd1609.pdf>
- A.4 2013 SSC Report on Monkfish
- A.5 Assessment Presentation (Richards)
- A.6 Risk Policy Matrix - Monkfish

An important initial consideration for the SSCs recommendations on TOR 2 is that the previous model used to calculate stock status for monkfish was not updated for this operational assessment. Due to new information that indicated that the growth information used in the previous SCALE model was inaccurate (does not follow a linear assumption), as well as a study that invalidated the current aging technique, and given that age and growth are fundamental elements for the SCALE model in its calculations of the population estimates, this model was abandoned and an index-based assessment of the stock was conducted for both the Southern and Northern management areas as an alternative source of catch advice information. The SSC considered the alternatives provided by the PDT based on this index based assessment.

The SSC recommends status quo for both the OFL and ABCs for the two monkfish management areas for fishing years 2017-2019. This follows the advice of the PDT. Ultimately, the SSC concluded that status quo OFLs for the Northern and Southern Fishery Management Areas (17,805 mt and 23,204 mt, respectively) and status quo ABCs of 7,592mt for Northern management area and 12,316mt for the Southern management area represent the best advice the SSC can provide at this stage.

This advice is based on the information provided that indicates the trend in stock size based on the index based assessment is flat in the north, declining in the south (but within the inter-annual variance of the index), and based on the signal of an above average recruitment event in 2015. With regard to the recruitment event, the SSC noted that not all recruitment events observed in the past had recruited to the fishery and it was unclear as to whether this large recruitment event would transfer in to the fishable population. The SSC recommended that this be closely monitored. The recruitment event will be relevant for the time period covered by this action as monkfish reach harvestable size in approximately 3 years. This information taken in sum was viewed as indicating a stable population with potential stock growth for these two management areas in the timeframe of the specification setting period.

In addition to the technical information presented, there were also indications from both public comment and fishery performance that supported the SSCs recommendation of status quo OFL and ABC. The monkfish fishery in the Northern Management Area is largely a component of the groundfish fishery, which itself is a highly regulated fishery, and the implication was that these regulations in the groundfish fishery had conservation impacts on the monkfish fishery. As well, the monkfish fishery has not harvested its TAL in recent history, thus providing a reason to believe an additional buffer exists for this fishery based on the fisheries recent performance. This information coupled with the technical information of an apparent stable population led the SSC to conclude that current status quo OFL and ABCs were adequate to keep these stocks from declining to a poor status.

Finally, the SSC discussed future needs and technical recommendations for these stocks. The first SSC comment was to recommend investments towards a return to an analytical assessment through improved growth and age information. The discussion on interaction with other fisheries such as the groundfish fishery should be investigated and defined as these interactions could have important implications for specification setting. The SSC stressed that it was important to track the 2015 recruitment event as it has important implications for management during the multiyear specification period. Therefore, the SSC requests a data update in 2017 to help determine if the year-class is indeed recruiting and to provide updated advice if warranted.

As noted in previous reports from the SSC on monkfish, new information should be available in the coming year or two which may help inform an analytical assessment for this species, therefore the SSC recommends beginning to plan for a benchmark assessment for monkfish. However, a more systematic process for selecting the fallback assessment methodology is needed in the event that an analytical model is not utilized or does not perform adequately during future specification-setting. The SSC discussed this topic at the June 2016 meeting, and suggested that monkfish illustrates the need for a sub committee to examine the alternative (so-called "Plan B") assessment process. The SSC also notes that the fishery performance report was a helpful document in understand the broader context of the monkfish fishery, especially those attributes that determine the risk profile.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. Acceptable biological catch (ABC) for the two monkfish stocks remains at the status quo levels of 7,592mt for the Northern stock and 12,316mt for the Southern stock.**
- 2. The overfishing limits (OFL) for the two monkfish stocks remains at the status quo levels of 17,805mt for the Northern stock and 23,204mt for the Southern stock.**
- 3. A data update should be provided in 2017 to help determine the persistence of the 2015 cohort.**
- 4. A benchmark stock assessment should be conducted once improved estimates of age and growth are available, with the aim of returning to an analytical assessment approach.**