



New England Fishery Management Council

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John F. Quinn, J.D., Ph.D., *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 17, 2020
TO: Groundfish Committee
FROM: Groundfish Plan Development Team
SUBJECT: **COVID-19 impacts – recreational groundfish fishery**

The Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar on June 11, 2020, and June 17, 2020, to discuss COVID-19 impacts on the recreational groundfish fishery. This memorandum is version 2, and the final version of a memo sent to the Groundfish Committee on June 12 as version 1.

Background

The Stellwagen Bank Charter Boat Association, which has members in the for-hire recreational groundfish fishery, wrote requesting flexibility in the Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock management measures for fishing year 2020. The for-hire sector is restricted due to federal and state guidelines on carrying anglers and are projecting losses until the situation improves. At its meeting on April 14, the Council discussed that a Recreational Advisory Panel meeting and Groundfish Committee meeting would be held prior to the June Council meeting to review the request.

Council proposed fishing year 2020 measures for Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock

The Recreational Advisory Panel (RAP) met on Jan. 21, 2020 to discuss potential fishing year 2020 accountability measure (AMs) for Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock. The Groundfish Committee discussed the RAP's recommendation, making the same recommendation on Jan. 23, 2020.

The Council then reviewed the RAP and Committee recommendation and impact of the scenario. The Council noted that a limited early April open season would provide spring recreational fishing opportunities but is not expected to substantially change catches of GOM cod. The timing of the spring opening is intended to minimize interactions with cod spawning. Based on these discussions, the Council passed the following motion, which is identical to the recommendation from the RAP and Groundfish Committee, on Jan. 29, 2020:

That the Council recommends to GARFO for fishing year 2020 recreational measures:

Gulf of Maine cod

- Open Season: September 15-30 and April 1-14
- Bag Limit: 1 fish
- Minimum Size: 21

inches Gulf of Maine haddock

- Open Season: May 1 – February 28 and April 1-30
- Bag Limit: 15 fish
- Minimum Size: 17 inches

The motion *carried* on a show of hands (15/1/1).

The Council forwarded its proposal in a letter to GARFO on Feb. 4, 2020.

PDT Discussion

Available data sources

- MRIP Data - Private and For-Hire Modes -
 - Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS)
 - As already occurs - no data is collected in Wave 1 (January and February), and none in March in Maine.
 - Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, some states collected limited data in March. However, data collection was halted in the region in March. Data collection has recently resumed in RI and ME (but this is a state-by-state process).
 - NOAA is discussing the problem of having missing data- especially catch data for Wave 2 (March and April) and beyond.
 - Wave 2 data was not available from NOAA at the time of drafting this memo. Further, Wave 2 data for 2020 would cover the last two months of the 2019 fishing year (March 2020 and April 2020).
 - Cod mortality in Wave 2 last year (March 2019 and April 2019) comprised less than 1% of the total 2018 fishing year mortality and that 1% came from the for-hire sector.
 - There was no private boat effort catching cod in Wave 2 last year. Even if there was private boat effort catching cod in Wave 2 of this year, the number is likely to be very small.
 - The private boat season in the GOM does not really begin until May, so a change in Wave 2 private boat effort is unlikely to be reflective of what will happen in Waves 3 (May and June), 4 (July and August), and 5 (September and October).
 - Fishing Effort Survey (FES)
 - No disruptions to the FES – and the mail survey continues collecting effort data.
 - However, while the FES continues, estimating effort is limited in the absence of APAIS. APAIS is used to parse out the total FES effort data between inshore, near-shore ocean (<3 miles), and ocean 3+ miles. Thus, the FES could indicate how many shore/private boat saltwater trips occurred, but APAIS helps determine where trips occurred.

- Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs) – For-Hire Mode
 - VTRs can be used as source of information on the for-hire fleet, depending on how quickly they come in and are processed.
 - Past effort trends could be examined and compared with 2020 effort.
- Environmental Data – Indicator of favorable conditions for private mode and for-hire trips to occur.
 - RAP recommended using wave height data.
 - NOAA buoy data in the Gulf of Maine could be examined.

PDT Analysis and Highlights

- Bioeconomic model projections and hypothetical scenarios under COVID-19 restrictions
 - Model projections are provided as discussed at January RAP, Committee, and Council meetings (Table 1), including a summary of scenarios that were rejected.
 - Table 2 indicates the predicted effort and cod catches by mode (private and for-hire) under Option 2 in Table 1.
 - Table 2 was used to develop the hypothetical scenarios for private mode or for-hire mode increasing/decreasing for the entire year in Table 3.
- Party/charter activity during COVID-19 (see Appendix 1)
 - Examines changes in reported activity among party/charter vessels during 2020 considering COVID-19 from federal VTRs with a trip category of “party” or “charter”.
 - Data analysis shows:
 - Party/charter trips taken seem to be down, particularly for the Gulf of Maine. It is also possible that some reporting delays could exacerbate the difference, although many vessels are reporting via eVTR.
 - Number of anglers on party/charter trips were down, for both the entire region and Gulf of Maine, but seem to be rebounding of late.
- Daily wave height data during COVID-19 restrictions
 - Significant wave height information was collected from five NOAA buoy stations in the Gulf of Maine (Figure 1). Measurements were available for every 20-30 minutes for the last 12 years. Daily average wave height was calculated for spring months between 2008 to 2019 to construct a historical baseline which was compared to daily average wave heights for 2020, as an indicator of how favorable conditions were for recreational fishing between March 1st and May 31st.
 - Wave height data illustrate that:
 - Conditions between April 15 to April 30th were generally average (<5 ft on any given day) except for the last few days, where wave height exceeded 12 ft at four out of five locations.
 - While higher than average wave heights were recorded for the first few days of May (>6ft), conditions throughout the rest of the month ranged from below average (<2 ft) to slightly above average (4-5 ft) on any given day.

Discussion on revisiting measures proposed by the Council

- Council’s proposal continues to balance the risk of exceeding the cod sub-ACL while allowing access to cod and haddock. Many uncertainties remain as to the magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on the different modes – private and for-hire.

- Certain fishing modes are expected to be more impacted than others due to restrictions in each state (party vessels (head boats) being the most impacted over charter and private modes).
 - Massachusetts
 - March 23 - Governor Baker issues Executive Order stay at-home advisory
 - April 27 - Division of Marine Fisheries permits are prohibited from for-hire activity, but this did not affect private anglers
 - May 25 - Phase 1 announced. Includes reopening limits for for-hire vessels to no more than ten people per vessel, including any captain and crew (which effectively could be 7-8 customers maximum)
 - New Hampshire
 - March 24 – Governor Sununu bans gatherings of more than 10 people, impacting party boats
 - March 26 - Governor Sununu declares a stay at home order
 - May 16th - for-hire fishing activity resumes. Party boats able to operate at 50% capacity while abiding by social distancing requirements. Other state regulations prohibit groups of more than 10 people.
 - June 15 – stay at home order ended
 - Maine
 - March 25 – Governor Mills issues stay at home order
 - May 1 – Stage 1 allows 10 or fewer passengers, including crew
 - June 1 – Stage 2 allows vessels that take 6 guests or fewer, “6 packs,” can run at maximum capacity, vessels licensed to take 7 or more passengers must not exceed passenger limits established in current guidance from the Governor’s Office on gatherings (50 people as of 6/17/2020).
- For-hire effort in the Gulf of Maine appears to be down compared to this time last year.
- Changes in private angler effort are unknown. Conditions may be favorable for increased private boat effort. Other regions have observed increased recreational effort during this period.
- Most recreational groundfish fishing typically ramps up later in the fishing year, especially in the months of July, August, and September.
- Haddock - The recreational haddock fishery opened on April 15 and effort and catches are expected to be down – however it is very difficult to estimate by how much. The current and proposed haddock measures are not predicted to be limiting based on the sub-ACL for haddock.
- Cod – Private mode accounts for most of the cod removals and it is unknown if activity in this mode has increased or decreased in recent weeks. The risk of exceeding the sub-ACL for cod depends more on what happens in the private boat mode, such that even a 5% increase in the private boat angler trips could lead to an overage. Negative impacts are likely to be greater for the for-hire fleet than private anglers– so maybe separate measures that are more liberal for the for-hire fleet could be discussed. The risk of exceeding the cod sub-ACL is lower for a season opening after Labor Day than an opening earlier in the summer.

Bioeconomic model projections and hypothetical scenarios

Table 1. FY 2020 Gulf of Maine Recreational Cod and Haddock Bioeconomic Model Simulation Projections

Option	Cod				Haddock				Angler Trips (Median)	% Under Cod ACL (out of 100 Simulations)	% Under Had ACL (out of 100 Simulations)
	Cod Limit	Cod Size	Cod Open Season	Cod Total Mortality (Median)	Had Limit	Had Size	Had Open Season	Had Total Mortality (Median)			
1 (Status Quo)	1	21"	Sep 15-Sep 30	185	15	17"	May-Feb 28, Apr 15-Apr 30	1,092	273,930	67	100
2 (Open Cod Apr 15-30)	1	21"	Sep 15-Sep 30 Apr 15-30	187	15	17"	May-Feb 28, Apr 15-Apr 30	1,094	273,998	65	100

FY 2020 rec sub-ACLs: cod = 193 mt, haddock = 6,210 mt

Options considered, but rejected because % under cod sub-ACL < 50%:

- 3) Increase cod limit (from 1 to 2 fish)
- 4) Open cod Sep 1-Sep 30 (1 fish, 21")
- 5) Open cod Sep 1-Sep 30 (1 fish, slot limit of 21" - 24")
- 6) Open cod Sep 1 -Sept 30 (1 fish, slot limit of 22" - 25")
- 7) Close cod Sep 15-Sep 30, open cod May 1-May 15 (1 fish, 21")
- 8) Close cod Sep 15-Sep 30, open cod May 16-May 31 (1 fish, 21")
- 9) Close cod Sep 15-Sep 30, open cod Aug 16-Aug 31 (1 fish, 21")
- 10) Close cod Sep 15-Sep 30, open cod Sep 1-Sep 14 (1 fish, 21")
- 11) Open cod May 1-May 15 and Sept 15-Sep 30 (1 fish, slot limit of 22" - 25")

Table 2. FY 2020 Predicted Gulf of Maine Angler Trips and Cod Removals by Mode

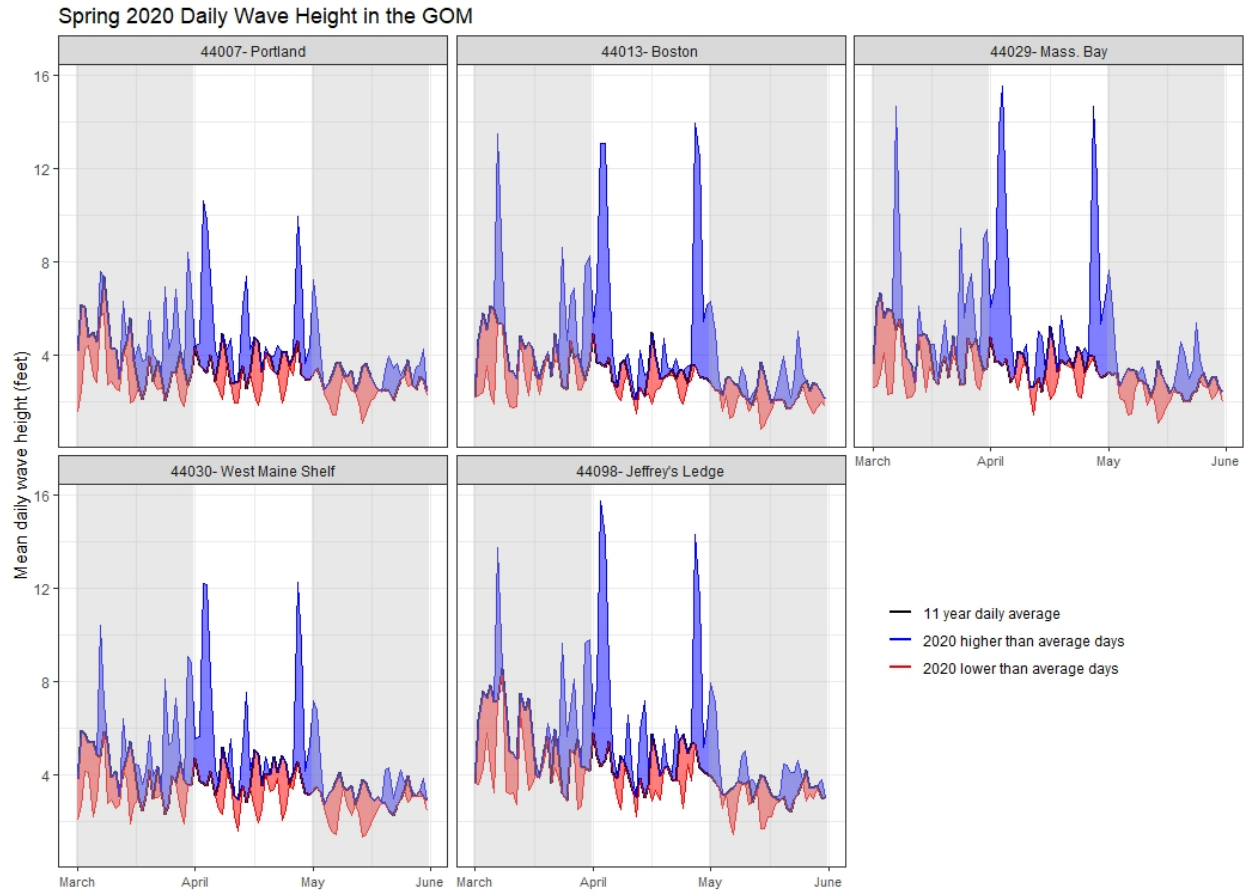
	Cod & Haddock Angler Trips ¹	Cod Removals (mt)
For-Hire	42,882	29
Private Boat	231,116	158
	273,998	187

¹Predicted number of angler trips targeting and/or catching cod or haddock

Table 3. FY 2020 Predicted Cod Removals from Hypothetical Changes in Angler Trips

For-Hire	Private Boat	Cod Removals (mt)
0%	0%	187
-10%	0%	184
-10%	5%	192
-10%	+10%	200
-10%	+25%	224
-10%	+50%	263
-25%	0%	180
-25%	5%	188
-25%	+10%	195
-25%	+25%	219
-25%	+50%	259
-50%	0%	172
-50%	5%	180
-50%	+10%	188
-50%	+25%	212
-50%	+50%	251

Figure 1- Daily wave height data, accessed at NOAA Buoy stations. Source: National Data Buoy Center: <https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov>



Appendix 1

Party/charter activity during COVID-19

Daniel Linden, NOAA/NMFS/GARFO

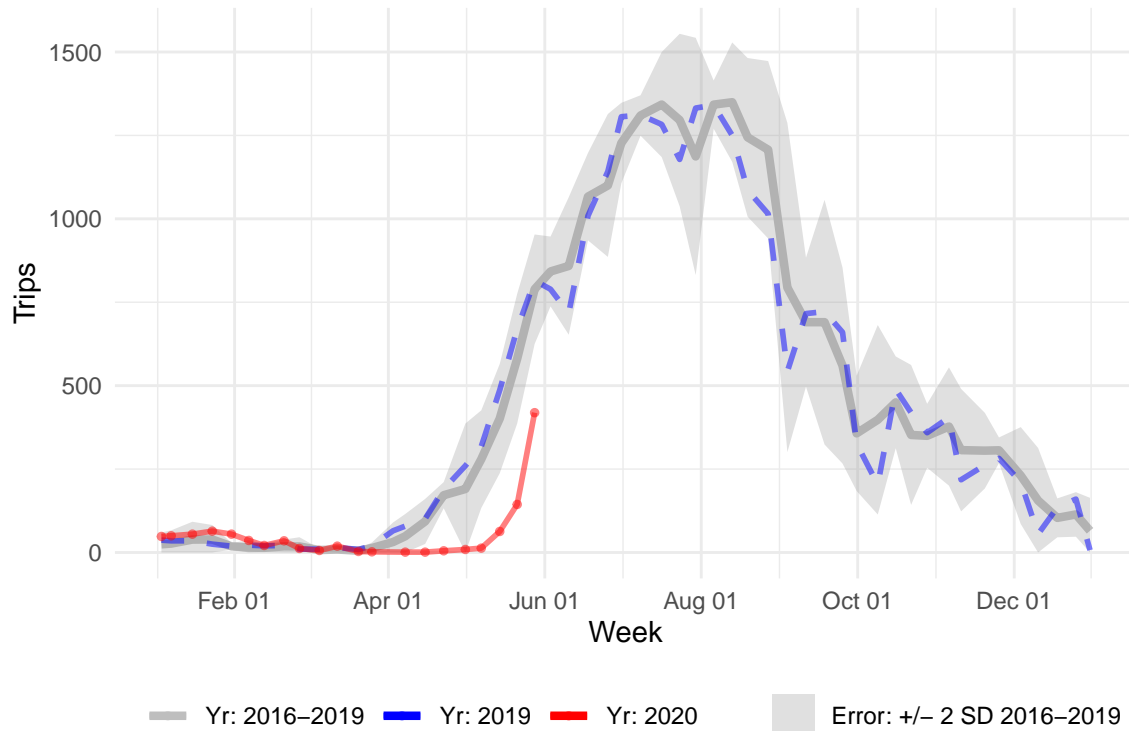
6/8/2020

This report examines changes in reported activity among party/charter vessels during 2020 in light of COVID-19. All information here was obtained by federal Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs) with a trip category of “party” or “charter”. Data are presented through 2020-05-31. Some relevant context is necessary to properly interpret these data:

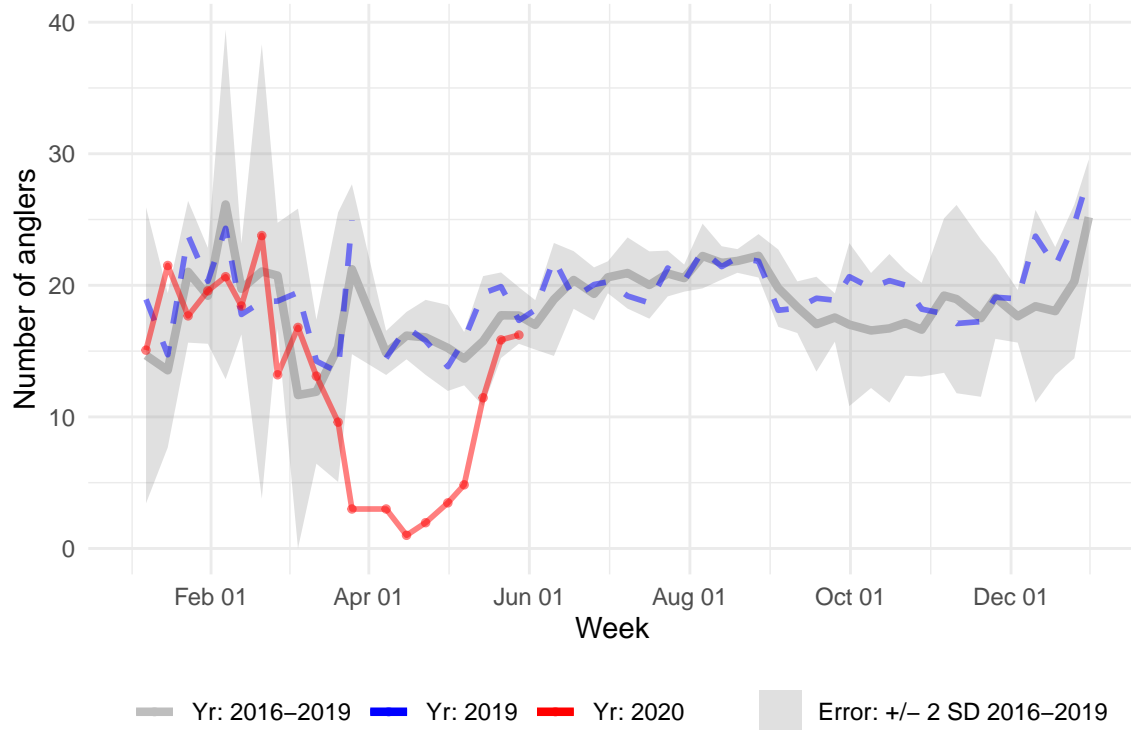
- The information is limited to trips with a submitted VTR. Trips that are missing a VTR submission and/or vessels that do not have a VTR requirement are not represented.
- The weekly mean number of anglers is only displayed for those weeks having *some* activity in each of the previous years (2016–2019) to account for periods of low activity with highly variable values (e.g., January–March).
- Gulf of Maine (GOM) trips determined by the statistical area reported.

Weekly Party/Charter VTR Trips

Years: 2016–2020



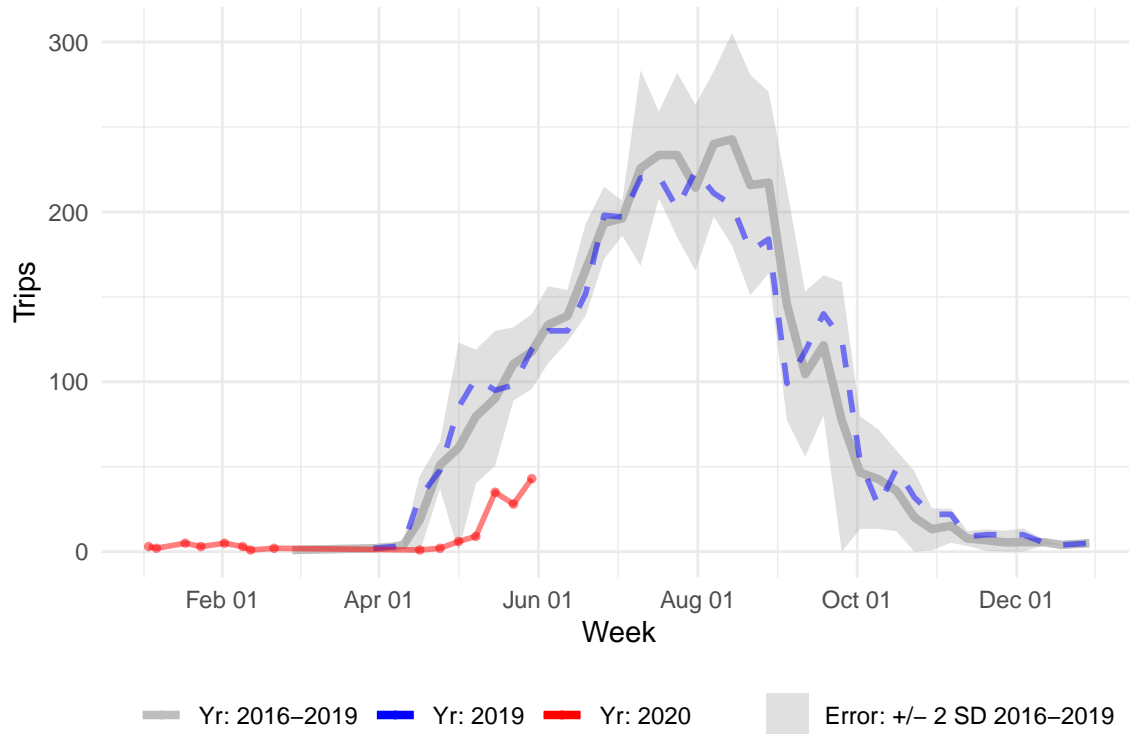
Weekly Mean Number of Anglers on Party/Charter VTRs Years: 2016–2020



Gulf of Maine (GOM) only:

Weekly GOM Party/Charter VTR Trips

Years: 2016–2020



Weekly Mean Number of Anglers on GOM Party/Charter VTRs

Years: 2016–2020

