



New England Fishery Management Council

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Eric Reid, *Chair* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Skate Advisory Panel

Hybrid - Radisson Hotel - Warwick, RI

March 22, 2023

The Skate Advisory Panel (AP) met on March 22, 2023, at 8:30 AM in Warwick, Rhode Island and via webinar primarily to provide input to the Skate Committee (Committee) on developing the Fishing Year (FY) 2024-2025 Specifications and a white paper regarding thorny skate rebuilding.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Advisory Panel: Dr. Jeff Kneebone (AP Chair), Mr. James Dopkin, Mr. Patrick Duckworth, Mr. Gregory Mataronas, Mr. Randall Morgan, Mr. John Whiteside, Ms. Sonja Fordham, Ms. Andrea Incollingo, and Mr. Dan Nordstrom; Committee: Mr. Scott Olszewski (Committee Chair), Ms. Kelly Whitmore, Mr. Dan Salerno, Ms. Elizabeth Etrie, Mr. Mark Alexander; Council staff: Dr. Rachel Feeney (Plan Development Team (PDT) Chair), Mr. Connor Buckley, and Mr. Chris Kellogg; NMFS GARFO staff: Ms. Cynthia Ferrio and Ms. Jennifer Goebel. In addition, several members of the public attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- Regarding the 2023 Skate Management Track Assessment, the AP recommended NEFSC staff determine the distribution and abundance of the two reproductive morphs of thorny skate, and report on the skate distribution and abundance in other surveys (e.g., Gulf of Maine bottom longline survey).
- On the FY 2024-2025 Specifications action, the AP recommended the PDT evaluate changes to barndoor and smooth skate possession limits with consideration of specific biological and market characteristics and consider using a daily possession limit to help reduce discards.

AGENDA ITEM #1: INTRODUCTIONS, APPROVAL OF AGENDA, ADVISORY PANEL POLICIES, AND TIMELINE

The Skate AP Chair introduced the AP, welcomed attendees, and sought approval of the agenda. There were no agenda changes, but it was noted that the Committee Chair would like to speak with the AP under Other Business about compliance with pinger requirements in the gillnet fishery. Staff presented on the NEFMC Advisory Panel Policies and reviewed timeline and work priorities for 2023. There were no comments from the AP.

AGENDA ITEM #2: DISCUSS RECENT FISHERY PERFORMANCE AND OUTLOOK FOR FISHING YEAR 2023

Staff presented recent in-season and year-end quota monitoring and asked the AP to provide input on the status of both the wing and bait skate fisheries.

Discussion: An AP member shared that there has been little change in the performance of the bait skate fishery and is satisfied with current production. Regarding the skate wing fishery, AP members felt that the declining landings since 2020 can be largely attributed to declining fishery participation (e.g., labor shortages), and that skate biomass was very high. There was general concern from AP members involved in the wing fishery that measures to reduce sturgeon and marine mammal interactions, such as increasing mesh sizes beyond the current 12” mesh used, would substantially decrease catch and lead to more nets in the water to compensate. There was greater support for the use of lighter twine (70 mm) as a measure to reduce bycatch.

AGENDA ITEM #3: THORNY SKATE REBUILDING

Staff presented a draft white paper provided by staff describing the current relevant research on thorny skate and potential approaches to addressing the lack of progress in the rebuilding plan.

Discussion: In general, the AP thought the white paper provided excellent background information to support potential approaches but that any gear modifications should be targeted to the areas and gear types where thorny skate bycatch is occurring. Other concerns included further exploration of potential grey seal depredation and the effect of offshore wind development on thorny skate.

An AP member felt that additional management measures would not be justifiable given that climate change may be a significant, limiting variable in the rebuilding process for the species, and urged the Council to allow for additional time for rebuilding. Another AP member wanted to see additional management, particularly in working with the North Atlantic Fisheries Organization to facilitate an international effort to reduce fishing mortality on thorny skate and urged the Council to increase the priority of thorny skate rebuilding.

AGENDA ITEM #4: FISHING YEAR 2024-2025 SKATE SPECIFICATIONS ACTION

Staff presented a review of the specifications setting process and the potential scope of the upcoming 2023 management track assessment. The Assessment Oversight Panel will meet and approve the assessment plan on May 22, 2023, and the Assessment Peer Review panel will meet from September 18-22, 2023. The assessment will likely use the same index-based methods to evaluate the skate complex but could consider updating the data time series for determining MSY_{proxy} , methods for attributing fishery catch by species, and adding recreational catch data to the time series.

Discussion: The AP discussed recreational skate catch, and an AP member expressed an interest in continued monitoring of this catch to ensure it does not prove limiting to commercial catch. The AP then discussed potentially expanding barndoor and smooth skate possession. Several AP members shared that due to the 25% possession limit on barndoor skate in the wing fishery, they often are forced to discard a substantial amount of either barndoor or winter skate and supported expanded possession. Regarding smooth skate, the AP was unsure of any interest in retaining the species but supported allowing retention given its current biomass and the potential to shift some discards into landings.

CONSENSUS STATEMENT

The AP recommends the following to consider for the assessment and specifications.

- For the assessment
 - Determine the distribution and abundance of the two reproductive morphs of thorny skate.
 - Report on skate distribution and abundance in other surveys (e.g., Gulf of Maine bottom longline survey).

- For specifications
 - Evaluate changes to barndoor and smooth skate possession limits with consideration of specific biological and market characteristics. For barndoor, potential approaches could be to separate possession of barndoor from the other skate limit or remove the 25% barndoor restriction.
 - Consider using a daily possession limit vs trip limit to help reduce discards.

Discussion of the consensus statement: The AP Chair shared an interest in understanding whether the two size morphs of thorny skate in the Gulf of Maine have different population trends. The AP discussed several methods of allowing increased possession of barndoor skate, such as creating a separate limit for barndoor skate, removing the 25% restriction on barndoor skate within the skate limit, or increasing the overall skate limit. An AP member felt that creating a separate barndoor skate limit would allow for improved accounting, flexibility, and enforcement. Several AP members were interested in exploring the potential benefits of a daily possession limit rather than a trip limit to help reduce discards. Staff clarified that there was no need yet to develop specific alternatives and cautioned that the AP should be cognizant of management track assessment constraints. An AP member wished to understand the effect of offshore wind development and grey seal depredation on thorny skate explored by the assessment, but consensus was not reached.

AGENDA ITEM #5: OTHER BUSINESS

The Committee Chair reported that harbor porpoise takes in gillnet fisheries, while below Potential Biological Removal, were still above 5-year Zero Mortality Rate established by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and this was marked as a concern. The Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction team would like more outreach with the Southern New England gillnet fleet regarding compliance with pinger regulations. Ms. Jennifer Goebel from the Protected Resources Division at GARFO was present to address any questions.

AP members were concerned that the low compliance statistic for the Southern New England gillnet fleet was due to the use of observer data and identified challenges for observers misidentifying or otherwise incorrectly counting the number of pingers on gillnet gear. No suggestions for improved outreach regarding pingers was made.

The Skate AP meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.