New England Fishery Management Council
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Eric Reid, *Chair* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Northeast Skate Complex Plan Development Team

Webinar

April 11, 2023

The Northeast Skate Complex Plan Development Team (PDT) met on April 11, 2023, via webinar to discuss progress on the thorny skate rebuilding white paper and the 2024-2025 Skate Specifications.

MEETING ATTENDANCE

Dr. Rachel Feeney (PDT Chair) and Connor Buckley (Council staff); Cynthia Ferrio, Ashleigh McCord, Danielle Warner, and Kris Winiarski (GARFO); Kathy Sosebee and Samantha Werner (NEFSC); Eric Schneider (RIDEM), and Scott Olszewski (Skate Committee Chair). No others attended.

2023 TIMELINE AND UPDATES

The PDT briefly reviewed the updated timeline of 2023 work items. The Skate Advisory Panel (AP) and Skate Committee (Committee) are meeting jointly in late May or June. The PDT will meet on May 8.

THORNY SKATE REBUILDING WHITE PAPER

Staff reviewed the recent progress made towards the whitepaper on thorny skate rebuilding, including the recommendations made during the March 22 meetings of the AP and Committee (AP and Committee meeting summaries). Staff asked for feedback on a figure and table that described thorny skate landings and discards by gear type that were based on survey length-frequency data. As the figure did not rely on real landings or discards of thorny skate based on dealer-reported or observer data, staff thought this information may be confusing to the reader. PDT members thought that showing gear-specific discards was helpful but agreed that the current figure was likely to cause confusion if not properly explained. Through discussion, the PDT settled on removing the figure, but including a table that showed total discards across all skate species, estimated landings of thorny skate by gear-type, dealer-reported thorny skate landings, and total catch, as well as a table showing thorny skate landings relative to total skate landings. PDT members felt that this would communicate helpful information and reduce confusion. The PDT did not have any additional potential approaches for rebuilding to consider.

Next Steps:

- Winiarski – retrieve dealer-reported data on thorny skate landings.

2024-2025 SKATE SPECIFICATIONS ACTION

Staff shared the Committee consensus statement that tasked the PDT to develop information to support decision-making regarding allowing possession of smooth skate, expanding possession of barndoor skate, and increasing possession limits in the bait and wing fisheries. The PDT discussed what data were available to use in an analysis of possession limits to better understand the frequency of trips, landings per trip, and how frequently trips were reaching the possession limit in the bait and wing fisheries and whether this resulted in discarded catch or exceeding the possession limit. GARFO staff confirmed that

CAMS tables for trips that occurred in fishing years 2019-2021 are available. Staff noted that the possession limits were not constant across this period. A query of skate trip-level data done for a previous skate possession limit analysis will be used as a starting point to query the CAMS tables. GARFO staff noted that this analysis could clarify the effect of past changes in possession limits on landings.

Staff then focused the discussion on potential data to inform the expansion of barndoor skate possession and allowance of smooth skate possession, noting that this returns to the issue of speciation in skate catch data. Staff suggested it would be useful to understand the frequency of trips hitting the barndoor partial possession limit, whether discards were occurring, and if this could be separated by area and gear-type. GARFO staff explained that the barndoor partial possession limit of 25% in the wing fishery was initially set to match the proportion of barndoor skate in the fishery, and thus limit high-grading of catch. As skates are managed as a complex and not individual species, the PDT noted a preference towards folding rebuilt stocks into the complex rather than creating separate possession limits for individual species and create additional work for enforcement and industry.

The PDT was unsure if NOAA OLE was checking for compliance with barndoor skate possession limits, noting that vessels are not required to store barndoor skate separately. The PDT noted that the upcoming skate assessment can help determine the merits of changing barndoor and smooth skate possession restrictions. No PDT members had concerns over allowing incidental catch of barndoor and smooth skate. For the bait fishery, it was noted that the maximum length of 23 inches would generally prevent barndoor skate from being retained, so it may be appropriate to lift the bait fishery possession prohibition as well.

Next Steps:

- Buckley and Winiarski – retrieve necessary data for possession limit analysis and summarize data to support PDT analysis of skate possession limit alternatives.

OTHER BUSINESS

Regarding the upcoming Skate Management Track Assessment, staff shared the Committee's recommendations to include recreational data in the catch time series, evaluate the methods for attributing commercial fishery landings and recreational catch by species, reevaluate the biomass targets for thorny skate, and consider the Gulf of Maine longline survey as a biomass index. NEFSC staff shared that they planned to consider the Bottom Longline Survey but may be limited by the length of the abbreviated assessment document template, and that skate biomass targets would be updated. Staff asked for the rationale behind the choice of skate $B_{MSYproxy}$ time series, to which NEFSC staff replied that it was likely in the 2008 Data-Poor Species Working Group report.

The Committee Chair explained that the Committee's interest in considering truncating the $B_{MSYproxy}$ time series used for thorny skate was based on a concern that the current biomass of the species may be a new normal. NEFSC staff replied that they understood that concern, and while it is simple to revise a time series used in a stock assessment model, it is more challenging to find a reasoned approach to truncating the skate time series. One PDT member noted that during the last winter flounder stock assessment, the reference period had been updated through a change in the recruitment time series which resulted in the stock being considered rebuilt, and asked whether this was in the scope of the upcoming skate assessment. NEFSC staff replied that they thought it would be possible but would raise the topic during the Assessment Oversight Panel meeting on May 22. The Committee Chair shared that the Committee was not seeking a stock status change for thorny skate necessarily, but instead a more realistic rebuilding target. Staff noted that having data from other surveys was helpful in the most recent monkfish assessment report. NEFSC staff shared that they planned to include both fall and spring survey performance for all skate species.

With no other business, the meeting adjourned at 11:38 AM.