



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Northeast Skate Complex Plan Development Team

Webinar

May 18, 2023

The Northeast Skate Complex Plan Development Team (PDT) met on May 18, 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). One additional member of the Skate Committee and one member of the public also attended.

2023 TIMELINE AND UPDATES

The PDT briefly reviewed the updated timeline of 2023 work items. The Assessment Oversight Panel will meet on May 22 and discuss the details of the upcoming Skate stock assessment. The Skate Advisory Panel (AP) is meeting on June 12 and the Skate Committee (Committee) is meeting on June 14.

THORNY SKATE REBUILDING WHITE PAPER

The PDT reviewed recent progress made towards the whitepaper on thorny skate rebuilding. Staff asked for feedback on the addition of a table describing the relative contribution of thorny skate to total skate landings and dealer-reported landings of thorny skate. The PDT briefly discussed how skate discard estimates are generated in respect to species, area, and gear-type, clarifying that the proportions of skate landings and discards attributed to thorny skate are area specific.

The PDT reviewed each of the potential approaches listed in the white paper and made recommendations for the Committee to consider, including:

1. Continued prohibition on thorny skate possession;
2. If area closures are to be considered, then assessing the overlap of thorny skate biomass with current Gulf of Maine closures could prevent unnecessary redundancies or burdensome additional closures;
3. If gear modifications are to be considered, then assessing the feasibility of modifications that could prevent skate catch in the specific fisheries and gear types where they are encountered would be necessary;
4. And that the Council prepare to revisit the rebuilding plan for thorny skate in preparation for a letter from NMFS following the results of the 2023 Skate assessment.

Next Steps:

Buckley: Revise white paper draft by May 29 to allow PDT to review before final draft is provided to the Skate AP and Committee on June 5.

2024-2025 SKATE SPECIFICATIONS ACTION

The PDT reviewed analyses of recent possession limit performance for the skate wing and bait fisheries, including the barndoor skate 25% partial possession limit, which was done to support Committee decisions about allowing possession of smooth skate, expanding possession of barndoor skate, and increasing possession limits in the wing and bait fisheries.

Skate wing fishery seasonal possession limit performance

The PDT discussed the landings and discards of skate wing trips relative to seasonal possession limit performance, noting the large number of trips occurring in FY 2021 that were clustered at or below 500 lb of landings, and discussed ways to identify non-DAS trips that are subject to a 500 lb possession limit. One PDT member suggested that DOF trips are likely a large proportion of trips fishing under this limit. Data from FY 2018 – 2021 showed that 1-4% of trips were reporting landings well above the seasonal possession limit, and the PDT discussed potential causes including aggregated landing from Rhode Island state water trips. Overall, roughly 10-17% of trips landing skate wings were within 5% of the seasonal possession limit with little interannual variation, but a greater proportion in Season 1 than Season 2. Discards on trips landing within 5% of the seasonal possession limit were not noticeably different from those landing less than the limit, but the PDT recommended additional work to address large outliers and non-normally distributed data, and considered how to account for fishers' risk aversion as they approach the possession limit. The PDT also recommended creating a table to represent the proportion of skates relative to other species landed on trips below and within 5% of the seasonal possession limit, and to highlight all changes in these results from the possession limit analysis conducted for the FY 2022 – 2023 specifications action.

Bait skate fishery seasonal possession limit performance

The PDT briefly discussed the landings and discards of bait skate trips relative to seasonal possession limit performance. Data from FY 2018 – 2021 showed that only 1-2% of trips were landing within 5% of the seasonal possession limit, and discards on trips landing within 5% of the seasonal possession limit were not noticeably different than those landing less than the limit. The PDT made similar recommendations regarding large outliers and non-normally distributed discard data, as well as a similar table to represent the proportion of skates relative to other species landed on trips below and within 5% of the seasonal possession limit.

Barndoor skate partial possession limit performance

A PDT member shared an analysis of the landings and discards of barndoor skate relative to partial possession limit performance. Data from FY 2018 – 2021 showed that trips that landed at least 50 lb of barndoor but less than 90% of the partial possession limit discarded 1% of barndoor skate while those within 10% of that limit discarded 9%. Although trips landing within 10% of the partial possession limit ranged from just 6 – 15% of trips landing barndoor skate, the PDT felt that this was likely sufficient evidence to inform the Committee's decision regarding expanded possession of the species. The PDT also reiterated that, were the Committee to move forward with expanded possession, reintegrating barndoor skate into the complex without restrictions for the bait fishery or incidental catch would simplify harvesting, management, and enforcement.

Smooth skate discards

The PDT reviewed recent discards of smooth skate across different gear types on observed trips. Data from FY 2018 – 2021 showed that most discards of the species came from otter trawl gear in the eastern and southern Gulf of Maine. A PDT member suggested including data on any potential smooth skate landings that may be occurring. Like barndoor skate, the PDT preferred merging smooth skate back into the skate complex as opposed to keeping management of the species separate.

Next Steps:

- Buckley and Feeney: Revise analyses and discussion document to incorporate PDT suggestions for June AP and Committee meetings.

OTHER BUSINESS

A PDT member involved in the joint MAFMC/NEFMC action to reduce sturgeon bycatch in the monkfish and dogfish fisheries provided an update on the status of the discussion. Although the Skate FMP was formally removed from the action, the high degree of overlap between the skate and monkfish fisheries suggests there will be trickle-down effects. Discussion thus far has focused on limiting gillnet soak times and time-area closures to reduce sturgeon bycatch while having a minimum impact on the fishery.

The PDT noted that delays in the spring federal bottom trawl survey may preclude use of 2023 spring data when updating the little skate survey index.

With no other business, the meeting adjourned at 11:53 AM.