



New England Fishery Management Council

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

April 26, 2023

Dr. Jonathan Hare
Science and Research Director
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543

Dear Jon:

The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) strongly recommends that the 2023 Skate Management Track Stock Assessment include:

- Recreational data in the catch time series;
- An evaluation of the methods for attributing commercial fishery landings and recreational catch by species;
- A reevaluation of the biomass targets for thorny skate; and
- The Gulf of Maine longline survey index.

This recommendation is important for several reasons. First, the Council will be developing specifications in 2023 for the next two years, and there has not been a formal stock assessment of the seven species in the Northeast skate complex since 2007. This delay merits as thorough a stock assessment as possible under the management track framework and human resource constraints.

The Council recommends that the Northeast Science Center (Center) include recreational catch in the fishery catch data used to develop reference points and acceptable biological catch. When the Northeast Skate Complex Fishery Management plan was first established in the early 2000s, recreational catch of skate was considered virtually nonexistent. Thus, recreational catch data were not included in the fishery catch data used to update reference points. Improvements to recreational data collection systems over time have shown that recreational catch of skates has been about 1-5% of the catch relative to the annual catch limit for at least the last six years. The Greater Atlantic Regional Office has been including this source of catch in the year-end catch accounting.

The Council recommends work on evaluating the methods for attributing commercial fishery landings and recreational catch by species. Some skates are very difficult to identify by species, and use of dealer and observer data to characterize the catch by species has been hampered by known data errors. As a proxy, the species and length-frequency data in the bottom trawl survey have been used to attribute fishery catch by species. There may be opportunities to improve the utility of the dealer and observer data streams for skate science and management. For skates that have been managed with a possession prohibition, there could be work on using fishery compliance assumptions to reduce the landings attributed to these skates (could shift some landings to discards and increase landings attributed to other species).

The Council recommends that the status determination criteria for thorny skate be revisited due to the lack of rebuilding progress. The status of thorny skate is particularly concerning. In the fall of 2022, the Center reported that thorny skate remain overfished, and the survey index was at just 3.6% of the rebuilding target despite being 19 years into its rebuilding period that ends in 2028. While the possession prohibition has kept thorny skate catch at very low levels, the survey biomass has continued to have no significant signs of rebuilding.

Finally, the Council recommends that abundance indices for all skate species from the Gulf of Maine longline survey be updated and included in the assessment report to provide an additional perspective on abundance trends. Including information from other surveys has been very helpful for the Council in the past when setting specifications for other fisheries. I emphasize that this information should be included in the report, and not just provided in a presentation at the review meeting.

From recent discussions by the Skate Plan Development Team, the Council understands that the Center is already considering many of these issues in preparing for the skate assessment. We think that the Assessment Oversight Panel should consider and accept these recommendations at its May 22 meeting when it reviews the plans for the September management track assessments.

If you have any questions about these recommendations, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas A. Nies".

Thomas A. Nies
Executive Director

cc: Robert Beal, ASMFC
Dr. Christopher Moore, MAFMC