



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEETING SUMMARY

Monkfish Committee

webinar

March 24, 2022

The Monkfish Committee met on March 24, 2022, via webinar at 9:00 AM to begin work on: 1) Framework Adjustment 13 specifications and management measures, 2) the monkfish fishery performance report, 3) the 2022-2026 Council research priorities and data needs, and 4) other business.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Ms. Elizabeth Etrie, Mr. Peter Hughes (Vice Chair), Mr. Pete Christopher (GARFO), Mr. Dan Farnham, Mr. Matt Gates, Mr. Dewey Hemilright, Mr. Scott Olszewski, Mr. John Pappalardo, Mr. Paul Risi, Mr. Alan Tracy, and Ms. Kelly Whitmore; Council staff: Ms. Jenny Couture, Dr. Rachel Feeney (Plan Development Team (PDT) Chair), and Mr. Chris Kellogg; NMFS GARFO staff: Mr. Spencer Talmage and Mr. Kris Winiarski; MAFMC staff: Mr. Jason Didden. Council Chair Mr. Eric Reid and about ten other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- On Framework Adjustment (FW) 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan, the Committee:
 - Recommended initiating this action, to include 2023-2025 specifications and potentially: adjusting effort controls and the Research-Set-Aside (RSA) allocation, reducing southern area discards, and requiring 12” mesh for monkfish gillnets and Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS).
 - Gave input to the PDT that the method for the discard deduction from the annual catch target should provide stability to the directed monkfish fishery and consider recent recruitment.
 - Recommended that the Council recommend to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) to consider the recent monkfish discard mortality research in the 2022 monkfish management track assessment.
 - Tasked the PDT with analyzing adjustments to effort controls (possession limits and Day-at-Sea (DAS) allocations) and the value of the 500 DAS that are set aside for the monkfish RSA program.
 - Recommended goals for reducing southern area discards.
- On the monkfish fishery performance report, the Committee identified the potential use of this report and gave input on the outline drafted by the PDT.
- On updating the research priorities related to monkfish, the Committee recommended accepting the PDT recommendations for updates and made one clarifying suggestion.

AGENDA ITEM #1: INTRODUCTIONS, APPROVAL OF AGENDA, AND OTHER UPDATES

The Committee Chair introduced the Committee, welcomed attendees, and sought approval of the agenda. There were no agenda changes. Staff reviewed the timeline for monkfish work, including Framework Adjustment 13, the monkfish assessment, fishery performance report, and research priorities.

Discussion: A Committee member suggested that the monkfish timeline note effort of PDT members in support of the assessment. Staff clarified that time is spent attending assessment meetings and supporting *Monkfish Committee Meeting*

the process. It was noted that the Assessment Oversight Panel meeting in May is public and is being held remotely.

AGENDA ITEM #2: OVERVIEW OF 2022 PRIORITIES, TIMELINE

Staff discussed a preliminary timeline for the 2022 management priorities. Framework 13 will include 2023-2025 specifications and potentially other management measures as identified by the Council. Work on the management measures should occur early in 2022, as full development of specifications will be informed by the monkfish stock assessment, scheduled for September. Final action on FW13 is expected in December. The PDT is working early in 2022 to develop the fishery performance report in collaboration with the Advisory Panel (AP) during its meeting likely in early May. The update of research priorities and data needs will be finalized in June.

Discussion: There were no comments on the timeline.

AGENDA ITEM #3: FRAMEWORK ADJUSTMENT 13 - SPECIFICATIONS

Staff reviewed the draft memo on the development of 2023-2025 specifications including a review of Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) setting and flowchart, revisiting discard deduction methods, effort controls (e.g., possession limits and DAS, and other issues to be addressed through specifications. For calculating the discard deduction from the Annual Catch Target, staff briefly reviewed the existing method (recent three-year average) and ideas developed over the last few years in collaboration with O’Keefe (2020). Staff provided data on landings frequency and DAS usage to help inform any changes in effort controls.

Discussion: A Committee member asked if the specifications would include recent data given the missing survey and observer data from the past two years. Staff would defer to the NEFSC but understand that a coordinated approach is being taken to help address the data gaps.

Several Committee members discussed the need to change the discard estimation based on Dr. Cate O’Keefe’s 2020 and 2021 work. The 2015-year class seems to be an unusual recruitment event and staff are waiting on the results of the upcoming assessment to understand more about recent recruitment. Members indicated preference for either using the highest discard value in the last three years or using the recruitment index and growth as part of the method to predict future discards. There was a desire to have a more adaptive approach for years with episodic recruitment. A member commented that the current discard estimation approach is lagged and that applying a recruitment factor to the discard estimation methods would be more proactive. Another member cautioned that interaction with monkfish varies by gear type, so it is not uniform across gear types how a year class is encountered by the fisheries.

There was concern over the 100% discard mortality rate assumption used to calculate discards given a recent research project indicated a much lower mortality rate for the dredge fishery. It is uncertain whether the Assessment Oversight Panel will include discard mortality rate as within the scope of the 2022 assessment.

Public Comment:

- **Chris Rainone, Monkfish gillnet fishermen, NJ:** Asked why dredge discards are being discussed when the focus should be on the directed monkfish fishery. Staff noted that sustainable management needs to consider landings and discards from all fisheries that catch monkfish. There is no sub-Annual Catch Limit (ACL) for monkfish in other fisheries, however, the monkfish FMP could institute controls on other fisheries if that is the desire of the Council.
- **Greg DiDomenico, Garden State Seafood Association, NJ:** The Large Whale Take Reduction Team recently indicated that the Mid-Atlantic gillnet fisheries would need a 90% reduction in

risk. The Monkfish Committee should discuss how this will impact the fishery over the next few years.

The Committee then responded to a PDT request for input on the management goal of the discard deduction from the Annual Catch Target.

Consensus Statement #1: The Committee feels that a monkfish discard deduction approach should provide as much stability to the directed fishery as possible (minimizing change between specification cycles), while considering recent recruitment (potentially diverging based on a trigger).

Discussion of the consensus statement: A few members were interested in having the PDT evaluate a trigger threshold for what may be average recruitment versus high or low recruitment levels. A member emphasized that including recruitment in discard estimation is a more proactive approach.

Consensus Statement #2: The Committee recommends that the Council recommend to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center that recent monkfish discard mortality research (related to gear-specific discard rates) be considered in the 2022 monkfish management track assessment.

Rationale: The 100% discard assumption is likely inappropriate based on recent research in the dredge fishery. Additional research on discard mortality in other gears is needed, potentially through the Research-Set-Aside program.

- 1. COMMITTEE MOTION (Farnham/Risi):** The Committee recommends to the Council consideration of possession limits and DAS allocations for analysis in Framework Adjustment 13. This includes the incidental limit. The Committee tasks the PDT to analyze a few adjustments in these effort controls to see if there may be better ways to optimize landings.

Rationale: The Committee is not necessarily supporting changing effort controls and would like the Advisory Panel to give input. The Committee is concerned about discards that could be turned into landings in the incidental fishery.

Discussion of the motion: The Committee noted the low quota use in the southern management area and if there are opportunities for improved use, especially if the market improves. Members wanted to do their due diligence in evaluating changes in trip limits and DAS to understand monkfish landings can be better optimized. The Committee wants to hear from the Advisory Panel on if they want effort control changes. A member wanted the PDT to evaluate the incidental possession limit (50 lb/day, up to three days).

Public Comment:

- **Greg DiDomenico:** Supported status quo for possession limits and DAS allocation, especially in the southern management area. These effort controls have been in place for several years and landings are depressed due to ex-vessel price and high costs (gear, fuel, permit). The fishery was performing well before the price decrease at those trip and DAS limits so once the price rebounds, more of the quota will be caught. Fishermen do not want irresponsible fishing, prefer high quality fish, and have very short soak times to reduce protected species interactions.
- **Chris Rainone:** Supported status quo. The main issue is latent fishing effort, which the Committee should address first and foremost. He is concerned that an increase in trip limits will increase gear in the water and protected species interactions.

Elizabeth "Libby" Etrie, Chair		Scott Olszewski	Absent
Peter Hughes, Vice Chair	Yes	John Pappalardo	Yes
Pete Christopher	Yes	Paul Risi	Yes
Dan Farnham	Yes	David Stormer	Absent
Matt Gates	Yes	Alan Tracy	Yes
Dewey Hemilright	yes	Kelly Whitmore	yes

Motion **carried** 9/0/0.

Consensus Statement #3: The Committee tasks the PDT with analyzing the value of the 500 DAS that are set aside for RSA.

Rationale: This would help determine the value of the Monkfish RSA program and determine whether continuing the allocation is appropriate.

Discussion of the consensus statement: Several Committee members asked for more specifics on the RSA program as it related to the monkfish fishery and recent use of the program. GARFO staff shared that there are two current monkfish RSA projects through the Arizona State University and the University of Delaware with research not related to estimating gear-specific discard mortality rates of monkfish. GARFO recognizes the issues the projects face in generating sufficient funds to conduct research and is figuring out what the RSA program will look like this year, whether there will be a request for proposals. Members questioned why 500 DAS are being set aside if these days are not being used for research and the implications of future research projects if this allocation is reduced. The specific research project depends on the project so the projects may or may not be focused on gear-specific discard mortality research, which is the desire of the Committee.

Public Comment:

- **Greg DiDomenico:** Interested in suspending the RSA monkfish program until the sturgeon bycatch issue is addressed and until the current monkfish assessment is completed, which may identify more targeted research ideas.
- **Chris Rainone:** Asked whether the RSA program could include a research project on ways to improve the markets for monkfish. Staff clarified that this could be set as a research priority.

AGENDA ITEM #4: FRAMEWORK ADJUSTMENT 13 – MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Staff discussed the three types of management measures that were approved by the Council for consideration in FW13. On potentially requiring 12” minimum mesh size for monkfish gillnets, staff reviewed the current regulations, when the idea was previously considered, data on number of monkfish gillnet trips by mesh size, and 12” mesh-related research projects. On requiring use of VMS for the entire federal monkfish fishery, staff noted which vessels would likely be impacted by the proposed requirement, current VMS requirements, and when the idea was previously considered. On measures to reduce discards in southern fishery management area, staff presented on the magnitude of discarding and potential reasons for discarding. Potential approaches for reducing southern area discards are included within the FW13 Management Measures memo.

Discussion: Regarding 12” mesh requirement, several Committee members were interested in not requiring this mesh size given most of the fleet already uses 12” mesh. Another Committee member urged the Committee to keep this and other management measures as part of FW13 until at least the Council initiates the action.

Regarding the VMS requirement, the Committee questioned if there is an overarching goal for requiring all vessels to use VMS. GARFO and Council staff were unaware of such a goal. A member commented that a large segment of the lobster fishery does not require VMS, nor does the tile fishery. The Council Chair suggested the PDT review the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s current work on

requiring the lobster fishery to carry VMS. The high cost of requiring VMS (installation and monthly costs) and enforcement issues were brought up as something for the PDT to investigate.

Regarding reducing southern area discards, a member asked for data on the size distribution of discards for each gear type to understand the size of monkfish entering the gillnet, trawl, and dredge gears. Staff later presented a figure showing that most of the discards are from the dredge and trawl fishery and that any measures to reduce discards on the directed monkfish gillnet fishery would be negligible. A few Committee members agreed that the Council has an obligation to reduce discards and that the dredge discard mortality rate based on research should be incorporated into the assessment this year. A member noted that scallop fishing effort is likely going to shift from the Mid-Atlantic access areas to Closed Area II and further north so discards in the southern area may decline for the next few years.

Public Comment:

- **Chris Rainone:** Clarified that monkfish vessels are reporting through a phone app, not calling in to the call-in system, so this approach is efficient. He does not favor a VMS requirement because of the cost burden on small monkfish directed vessels. He later asked why the Committee is focused on discards from the scallop fishery when it should be on the directed monkfish fishery.

Consensus Statement #4: The Committee recommends to the Council that the goals of management measures to reduce southern area discards in Framework Adjustment 13 are to:

- Reduce unnecessary waste and mortality of monkfish.
- Turn discards into landings where possible for economic reasons, including for fisheries that do not target monkfish.

2. MOTION (Hughes/Farnham): The Committee recommends that the Council initiate Framework Adjustment 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan. This action will include developing specifications for 2023-2025 and consider:

- Revising DAS allocations and possession limits, including the incidental limit,
- Revising the Research Set Aside allocation,
- Management measures to reduce southern area discards,
- Requiring 12” mesh for monkfish gillnets, and
- Require VMS across the monkfish fishery.

Rationale: After discussion of the Council’s priorities for this action, these topics warrant further consideration. The Committee would like the Advisory Panel to give input. There was some concern that requiring 12” mesh may not be needed if most of the fishery is using it already. Also, there was concern about the need for VMS for the vessels not currently using it. The Committee would like more information and input on these topics before developing alternatives.

Discussion of the motion: A Committee member supported this motion, noting she wanted to understand how changes in the lobster VMS requirements and how offshore wind development would impact this action.

Public Comment:

- **Timothy Froelich, Monkfish gillnet fisherman, NY:** Explained that he has two vessels without VMS because of the added cost; he was previously an AP member where this issue, discards from the scallop fishery, and latent fishing effort were all discussed. Latent effort and simplifying the fishery management and regulations should be the Council’s focus. If the VMS requirement benefits the fishing industry from being acknowledged by the offshore wind industry, then he could be okay with this requirement.

Elizabeth "Libby" Etrie, Chair		Scott Olszewski	Yes
Peter Hughes, Vice Chair	Yes	John Pappalardo	Yes
Pete Christopher	Yes	Paul Risi	Yes
Dan Farnham	Yes	David Stormer	Absent
Matt Gates	Yes	Alan Tracy	Yes
Dewey Hemilright	No vote	Kelly Whitmore	yes

The motion **carried** 9/0/0. One member did not vote (perhaps lost audio connection).

AGENDA ITEM #5: PDT-ADVISORY PANEL FISHERY PERFORMANCE REPORT

Council staff reviewed a draft outline of the fishery performance report to be completed in collaboration with the AP. The outline is akin to the approach used by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council as a starting point for discussion given this approach was referenced by the Committee when developing this task. The Committee was asked to identify the purpose of this report and give input on the proposed content.

Discussion: A Committee member felt that these reports for the Mid-Atlantic fisheries, prepared annually, are very helpful to the Council and its Scientific and Statistical Committee in understanding the fishery. It was noted that the public comment can also be included in these reports.

Public Comment:

- **Greg DiDomenico:** Felt the performance reports help identify discrepancies between landings and abundance during the specifications setting process; the report can clarify reasons why a fishery is not catching its full quota.

Consensus Statement: The Committee recommends to the Council that the purpose of this report is to help the Committee, Scientific and Statistical Committee, and Council understand the fishery and to help interpret fishery data. It may help understand trends in and relationships between landings and abundance. The Committee recommends the following be added to the report:

- The number of DAS that have been allocated in recent years for the Research-Set-Aside program and their use.
- AP input on what is hindering the use of RSA DAS.
- Issues with the assessment (e.g., aging monkfish).

Public Comment:

- **Chris Rainone:** Indicated that fishermen are not using their own DAS let alone the RSA DAS. Fishermen are constrained by market issues and are uncertain on what will happen in the future if DAS or trip limits are increased, especially with the latent permit issue.

AGENDA ITEM #6: 2022-2026 COUNCIL RESEARCH PRIORITIES, DATA NEEDS

Staff reviewed the 2021-2025 Council Research Priorities and Data Needs relevant to monkfish including the PDT recommended updates for 2022-2026 priority setting. The PDT developed a few clarifications to the priorities, noted where two priorities could be consolidated, and did not recommend any new priorities.

Discussion: A Committee member recommended that for priority #30, "Develop guidance for rejecting stock assessments" should be revised to "Develop guidance for when stock assessments are rejected." There was no objection to this recommendation.

Consensus statement: The Committee accepts the PDT recommendations for updates to the 2022-2026 Council Research Priorities and Data Needs related to monkfish.

AGENDA ITEM #7: OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed. The meeting adjourned at 2:45 pm.