



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Monkfish Plan Development Team

webinar

April 4, 2022

The Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) [met on April 4, 2022](#), via webinar at 1:00 PM to continue work on Framework Adjustment 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management plan and the monkfish fishery performance report.

MEETING ATTENDANCE

Dr. Rachel Feeney (PDT Chair), Jenny Couture (NEFMC); Sharon Benjamin, Alicia Schuler, Kris Winiarski (NMFS/GARFO); Dr. Jon Deroba (NMFS/NEFSC); Jason Didden (MAFMC); Eric Schneider (RI DEM DMF); and Renee St. Amand (CT REP). Monkfish Committee Chair Libby Etrie, Committee members Kelly Whitmore and Scott Olszewski, and a few others attended.

TIMELINE AND UPDATES

The PDT reviewed the timeline for the 2022 management priorities. On March 12, the NEFMC is expected to initiate Framework 13 to include 2023-2025 specifications and potentially other management measures as identified by the Council. The Council will also be updated on development of a monkfish fishery performance report. The next deadline for the PDT is April 27, for getting documents prepared for the May 4 Advisory Panel meeting.

FRAMEWORK ADJUSTMENT 13

The PDT reviewed outcomes of the March 24 Monkfish Committee meeting and discussed tasking. A sub-group of the PDT had met on March 29 to discuss methods for making a discard deduction from the annual catch target, and outcomes of that discussion were reported on.

Specifications

Updating discard data

The Catch Accounting and Monitoring System (CAMS) project is close to providing a unified approach to querying fishery data across GARFO, the NEFSC, and Councils. The CAMS approach to querying discard data is still under review. NEFSC still needs to use the “StockF” system for assessments this year. Due to delays in observer data processing, discard data for calendar years 2020 and 2021 will not be available until mid-late May. The PDT discussed that analyses using discard data will be on hold until after that point. Jon Deroba reported that minor corrections to the discard time series have been made.

Considering discard mortality assumptions

It is unclear if the Assessment Oversight Panel will consider revisiting the 100% monkfish discard mortality assumption to be within the scope of the 2022 management track assessment, as discard data are

not currently used to determine stock status. The PDT noted that the assessment in 2025 is scheduled to be a research track, which may have scope to consider broader issues. Also, for other fisheries (e.g., skates), the SSC has approved changes to discard mortality assumptions, following PDT recommendations. Staff will investigate if that is a viable option this year. PDT members would like to discuss Weissman et al. (2021) at a future meeting but had some cautions about incorporating new data streams or revising existing data streams outside of the assessment process.

ABC setting approaches

The PDT clarified earlier discussions about Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) setting methods used for prior monkfish specifications. In 2019, for FY 2020-2022 specifications, the trawl survey index multiplier was applied to the existing (FY 2017-2019) ABC, not recent catch as “Plan B” assessment approach calls for. In 2016, for FY 2017-2019 specifications, when the assessment first used the Plan B approach, The PDT prepared potential ABCs using both recent catch and the existing ABC, but the SSC recommended using the No Action ABCs that had been in place since FY 2011. Thus, the ABC setting method that the Plan B assessment calls for (use of recent catch) has never been implemented. The PDT would like to clarify the rationale, particularly for the current specifications, noting that it may have been a cautionary measure, as FY 2017-19 average catch exceeded the ABC. If discard mortality assumptions change, it is an open question how far back in time historical catch would need to be recalculated. ABC was set for FY 2011 using exploitation rates and biomass in 2002-2009. For FY 2023-2025 ABC setting, the PDT agreed that it would likely be appropriate to prepare ABCs using both methods: the multiplier applied to recent catch (the Plan B method) and to existing ABC (PDT method for FY 2020-2022).

Discard deduction methods

The PDT discussed the goal of the discard deduction from the Annual Catch Target, as identified by the Committee: *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.*

The PDT noted that the focus of this goal is on the total allowable landings, rather than on predicting discards. The PDT felt that the goal of stability would most likely be achieved by using a longer term mean or median than the current three-year approach. Having a hard cap on the year-to-year change was raised as a new idea in addition to those explored by O’Keefe (2020; 2021). After the CY 2020 and 2021 discard data are available, the PDT agreed to analyze:

- Current method: most recent 3-years discard as % of catch.
- Most recent 10-year mean and median of discards as % of catch, which may balance stability with recent trends.
- Most recent 10-year mean and median of discards, as monkfish discards are largely not in directed fisheries.

The PDT discussed the possibility of using recruitment data for setting the discard deduction. The PDT could develop a few trigger options for deviations from a standard discard deduction-setting method, such as when a recruitment index is more than two standard deviations above or below a certain long-term mean. However, several concerns were raised:

- While the assessment reports include an update to the recruitment indices, monkfish aging, growth and recruitment are significant sources of uncertainty in the assessment and a key reason why growth models were rejected in 2016 and recruitment has not been used predict abundance. The PDT hesitates to use recruitment data as a predictor until these assessment issues have been addressed.
- Recruitment data are from the trawl survey. It is uncertain how reliably the survey detects unusual recruitment events.

- While there seemed to be a correlation between the large 2015 monkfish year class and increased discards a few years later, the full time series of recruitment and discard data have not been analyzed for the reliability of potential correlations.
- Use of an autoregressive model would likely be appropriate, but the PDT does not currently have sufficient expertise in such approaches. Perhaps a contractor could help with this.
- If a reliable relationship between recruitment and discards were discovered, to implement an approach that would successfully predict discards, development of specifications must align with an assessment. In 2022, the recruitment indices for CY 2019-2021 will not be peer reviewed until September. This does not allow much time for analyzing options. However, this timing is better than if there is a gap between specifications setting and the assessment where a recruitment event may be missed. There is no guarantee that the monkfish assessment and specifications setting processes will be simultaneous in future.
- The reasons for discards stem well beyond fishery interactions with juvenile monkfish.
- Picking an approach ad hoc with insufficient analysis may compound rather than reduce gaps between predicted and actual discards.

In short, the PDT feels that developing a trigger or other adjustment that predicts future discards based on prior recruitment data is a complex research topic that is beyond the current expertise of the PDT and would involve more time than may be available for developing the FY2023-2025 specifications (especially considering the delay in having discard data updates). If research began on this topic soon, this could potentially be a topic considered in the 2025 research track assessment.

The PDT also noted that other NEFMC-managed fisheries that have a discard deduction when specifying the total allowable landings (i.e., skates and small-mesh multispecies) use a similar approach to the current monkfish method (using the most recent three years of data). In the case of skates, where discards are largely in fishery segments outside of the directed fishery, the discard deduction equals the latest three- year average of discards (not as a percent of catch).

The PDT expects to prepare a memo to the SSC with the above options and a potential recommendation. The SSC could review these options over the summer if the timing of updated discard data allows the PDT enough time to complete this work. Otherwise, this may need to be considered when the SSC recommends ABCs in October.

Effort Controls

The PDT discussed the Committee task of analyzing a few adjustments in possession limits, including incidental limits, and DAS allocations to see if landings can be better optimized. Before identifying what adjustment may be worth analyzing, the PDT agreed that additional data would be helpful on identifying the vessels that are being limited by the current possession limits and DAS allocations. It would also help to understand reasons for discarding by different fishery segments, including the incidental fishery. The PDT agreed to review more data at a follow-up meeting.

Research-Set-Aside

The PDT discussed the Committee task to analyze the value of the 500 DAS that are set aside for RSA. The PDT plans to provide this and more information about the program, and a sub-group will be meeting soon with Ryan Silva of the RSA program for additional input.

Next steps - specifications:

- Deroba – Update the CY discard data when available.
- Feeney – Investigate the potential for the SSC to consider discard mortality assumptions.
- Feeney – Clarify the record on the rationale for the ABC setting method for FY 2020-2022.
- All – review Weissman et al. (2021) and discuss at a future meeting.

- Talmage and Winiarski - identify if the data pulled for the March memo to the Committee on landings relative to possession limits includes vessels that are using groundfish and/or RSA DAS in addition to monkfish DAS.
- Couture and Winiarski – provide more data on where landings are being limited by current effort controls.
- Couture – identify discard reasons within the observer data.
- Winiarski – identify if prior PDT work by his office on effort controls may be helpful to bring forward.
- Feeney, Couture, Talmage – meet with Ryan Silva and develop RSA information.

Management Measures

The PDT then discussed the three types of management measures that were approved by the Council for consideration in FW13 and developed background information to inform the Committee on developing this action (potentially requiring 12” minimum mesh size for monkfish gillnets, requiring Vessel Monitoring System, and reducing southern area discards). On the gillnet mesh and VMS, the PDT will provide more background information on why these topics are a Council priority. The PDT is learning about the VMS action that ASMFC is considering for the lobster fishery and looking into any enforcement issues where VMS may have been helpful. The PDT plans to provide more information about the monkfish vessels currently without VMS.

Next steps – management measures:

- Feeney and Couture – develop information on the history of these priorities and the ASMFC action
- Winiarski – provide data on monkfish vessels that currently do not use VMS.

PDT-AP FISHERY PERFORMANCE REPORT

The PDT reviewed the Committee input on the outline of the fishery performance report. A draft report is being compiled.

Next steps:

- Deroba – review information on monkfish biology and stock status
- Talmage – review information about the management system
- Winiarski – help update fishery data regarding permits, vessel activity and effort
- Walden – help update fishery data regarding economics
- Feeney – update draft report.

OTHER BUSINESS

After briefly reviewing follow-up tasking, the meeting adjourned at 3:15 pm with no other business discussed. The next PDT meeting will likely be in mid-May.

REFERENCES

- O’Keefe C. (2020). Evaluation of Methods to Estimate Monkfish Discards for Calculating Total Allowable Landings. Fishery Applications Consulting Team LLC with support from the New England Fishery Management Council. 32 p.
- O’Keefe C. (2021). 2021 Evaluation of Monkfish Discard Estimation for Calculating Total Allowable Landings. Fishery Applications Consulting Team LLC with support from the New England Fishery Management Council. 19 p.
- Weissman A, Knotek R, Mandelman J, Rudders D, Roman S & Sulikowski J. (2021). Determining discard mortality of monkfish in a sea scallop dredge fishery. *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*. 41.