



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Monkfish Plan Development Team

webinars

September 27, October 18, November 2, 2022

The Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met on September 27, October 18, and November 2, 2022, via webinar to continue work on Framework Adjustment 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan and develop recommendations for 2023 monkfish work priorities. This document summarizes these three meetings and the related PDT correspondence.

MEETING ATTENDANCE

Dr. Rachel Feeney (PDT Chair), Jenny Couture (NEFMC); Sharon Benjamin, Danielle Palmer, Spencer Talmage, and Kris Winiarski (NMFS/GARFO); Dr. Jon Deroba and John Walden (NMFS/NEFSC); Jason Didden (MAFMC); Renee St. Amand (CTDEEP), Eric Schneider (RIDEM) and Dr. Tara Dolan (MADMF). Monkfish Committee Chair Libby Etrie, Committee member Kelly Whitmore, and a few members of the public attended.

FRAMEWORK ADJUSTMENT 13

September 27

On September 27, the PDT was presented with the results of the 2022 monkfish management track assessment and the preliminary findings of its peer review, which happened the week prior, and developed potential overfishing limits (OFL) and acceptable biological catches (ABC) for the Scientific and Statistical Committee to consider in late October. The PDT discussed how the catch time series was updated with the new (lowered) dredge discard mortality rate, how missing trawl survey data in 2020 was treated (used the mean of the surrounding years as a proxy), and how the 2015-year class seems to have been short lived (was either not as big as was thought or may have been largely caught as juveniles). The peer review report was not available, but the PDT discussed how the reviewers seemed to agree that the Ismooth method for developing catch advice is appropriate but did not reach consensus on how that catch advice should be applied in management. The PDT discussed how the Ismooth approach uses the latest trend in the trawl survey; essentially, if the survey index is trending up for example, then allowable catch can increase. However, both the northern and southern monkfish survey indices are trending downward.

The PDT then reviewed the history of prior assessments, the NEFMC's Risk Policy, and how assessment outcomes have been used to develop specifications. Because the last three monkfish assessments (2016, 2019, 2022) have determined that the stock status is unknown, the PDT determined that it is impossible to calculate OFLs. The PDT agreed that use of OFLs based on the 2013 assessment is not appropriate, as the method used for that assessment was later determined to have failed. The PDT thus agreed that the OFL should be undetermined. It was noted that the modeling work led by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center determined that the Ismooth method for developing catch advice, in the face of multiple

uncertainties, was good at promoting long-term stability of biomass and catch and likely to provide catch advice that prevents overfishing.

The PDT then calculated ABCs per the Ismooth method (trawl survey multiplier * recent catch = ABC). Several PDT members were concerned about basing the next ABCs off the current ABCs. Like the above rationale for OFL, the premise for the current ABCs was the 2013 assessment that was rejected in 2016. Also, the current ABC in the south is higher than in the north, and some indicators are suggesting (e.g., chainsweep study) that biomass is lower in the south relative to the north. The PDT discussed much of the data in the assessment, and while there are some uncertainties that the PDT was optimistic about, the only indicator that has been accepted through the last three assessment peer reviews is use of the trawl survey index using the Ismooth method. The PDT discussed the potential ABCs using the Ismooth method and other potential approaches (e.g., phasing in ABCs over time, varying approaches by area). Staff will update the NEFMC and MAFMC on assessment outcomes and likely ABCs.

The PDT sub-group on developing methods for setting the discard deduction from the annual catch target reported progress on completing an analysis of the current and four alternate discard deduction methods. PDT members provided input on refining the analysis and developed a preliminary recommendation to change the method to using the most recent 10 years of discards for setting the deduction. The PDT discussed the importance of setting the deduction accurately, so there is neither substantial catch overages or allowable catch left unharvested.

The PDT then discussed the Committee's tasking to develop effort control alternatives that would help keep the fishery within updated catch limits. The PDT recommended removing certain alternatives that are focused on increasing effort. The PDT was concerned about the potential of just turning potential landings into discards; focusing on measures that reduce the number of trips taken may have more impact on reducing catch than measures that decrease landing limits. Staff will bring this input to the Councils. The PDT also discussed the challenges with querying data and developed solutions.

October 18

With the draft assessment peer review report available, the PDT finalized its [memo to the SSC](#) regarding 2023-2025 OFLs and ABCs. Having already agreed to recommend that OFL be undetermined, the PDT focused on the ABCs. The PDT discussed how it is the general practice of PDTs to present ABCs to the SSC that are consistent with the assessment and/or control rule methods. Due to the lack of an analytical assessment, the parameters needed to apply the monkfish ABC control rule are not available, so use of the ABC control rule is impossible. The PDT forwarded the ABC values calculated from the Ismooth approach as it has been presented in the past three assessments and accepted via peer review except in the latest, in which the reviewers did not reach consensus on how catch advice should be applied. For SSC discussion, the PDT prepared ABCs based on both recent catch and ABCs, because a minority of reviewers supported consideration of applying the multiplier to recent ABC. The PDT agreed to recommend against basing FY 2023-2025 ABCs off recent ABCs but did not reach explicit consensus on recommending the Ismooth approach because of several concerns about relying in the Ismooth approach (reasons detailed in the October 18 PDT summary). Reasons for not basing future ABCs off current ABCs included that current ABCs stem from an analytical assessment method that was invalidated in 2016 and that used a previous timeseries of discard data with errors and assumptions that were updated in the 2022 assessment.

The PDT also finalized its [memo to the SSC](#) on discard deduction approaches, including an analysis of how use of the Ismooth approach for setting ABCs would impact the discard deduction and total allowable landings..

November 2

With the SSC's recommendations for the OFLs and ABCs, the PDT worked to finalize alternatives and impacts analysis for review by the AP, Committee and Councils, aiming to finish documents by

November 21. The PDT focused on developing effort control alternatives, noting the Committee task to develop alternatives that would keep catch within the ACLs and that most of the recent landings in the northern area are coming from groundfish trips that are not using monkfish DAS, landing incidental amounts of monkfish. The PDT is concerned that the effort controls in the Monkfish FMP (monkfish DAS and possession limits) have limited impact on controlling monkfish landings or discards, especially in the Northern area. A member of the public was concerned about the lack of a good assessment model and suggested developing seasonal closures to control catch. The PDT noted that the assessment has many uncertainties. While the PDT believes that seasonal closures could impact catch, the PDT decided there is insufficient time to develop such an idea in Framework 13, noting this idea has not been discussed by the Committee. The PDT agreed to develop alternatives that would make DAS allocations distinct between the north and south, and options for reducing DAS in each area. The PDT discussed the incidental monkfish trips in the north and decided to develop alternatives that would adjust them. With each of these options, there was concern about the possibility of just turning landings into discards rather than reducing overall catch.

DRAFT 2023 COUNCIL MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES REGARDING MONKFISH

On November 2, the PDT reviewed the recommendations made thus far by the PDT, Advisory Panel, and Committee about 2023 work priorities and developed final comments for the Committee to consider. The PDT commented on the following potential priorities from the August 30 Committee meeting:

1. “Review recommendations from the Research-Set-Aside (RSA) program review and develop improvements to the Monkfish RSA program. Consider use of RSA DAS and whether additional flexibility is warranted (e.g., flip to a directed RSA DAS while at sea).”

The PDT supports having a functional RSA program. Given concerns about future reductions in catch limits, this is not the time to implement revisions to the RSA program that would increase participation. The PDT supports having a discussion to help prepare for future program revisions, but this is a lower priority now relative to others on this list. This could be combined with priority #3, as a workgroup could be convened to have these discussions.

2. Address monkfish recommendations in the NOAA Fisheries *Action Plan to Reduce Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch in Federal Large Mesh Gillnet Fisheries*.

This is a required action, but the PDT suggests developing this action as an omnibus in collaboration with other FMPs and perhaps the MAFMC.

3. Form a work group of fishermen, NOAA and Council staff, Monkfish Committee members, etc. to discuss the Monkfish RSA program and identify potential improvements.

The PDT suggests combining this with priority #1.

4. Address latent effort in the fishery; consider 1) developing a DAS leasing program that would allow markets to drive DAS availability and cost, or 2) moving to a quota management program to increase profitability, flexibility, and efficiency (eliminate the DAS program). Consider updating the control date that was established in May 2012 during development of Amendment 6.

The PDT notes that the number of active permits in the monkfish fishery has been on a consistent, downward trend for some time (see performance report). The PDT generally supports considering other management approaches to increase the options for how management can respond to changes in catch limits.

5. Develop a model that would help predict how changing effort controls would impact the monkfish fishery.

In developing Framework Adjustment 13 analysis, the PDT was limited in accurately estimating how the fishery may respond to changing effort controls. There is likely enough fishery data to support developing a model to better predict fishery responses to various management measures, but insufficient time to create and evaluate such a model within either the specification timeline (or workload limitations of PDT members). Such a model could help the Councils evaluate whether the current management system (i.e., reliance on monkfish DAS and possession limits) provides sufficient flexibility to adjust the directed, incidental, and discard fisheries to changing quotas.

6. Develop an economic analysis of the monkfish fishery to help understand the fishery and the outcomes of potential management actions, include further defining the distinctions between the northern and southern fisheries.

The PDT recommends combining this with priority #5.

7. Update AP-PDT monkfish fishery performance report.

The PDT indicated that having an annual update of fishery data and a check-in with the AP on fishery performance would help the PDT fulfill the regulatory requirement of the NEFMC and MAFMC to annually monitor the status of the monkfish fishery and resource ([50 CFR 648.96\(a\)](#)). The PDT expects that future reports would take less time to prepare, as much of the time spent this year was on determining the content and organization of the report. There is now a template to base future reports on.

Additionally, the PDT recommends adding a priority:

8. Evaluate whether the current management system (i.e., reliance on monkfish DAS and possession limits to control catch) provides sufficient flexibility to adjust the directed, incidental, and discard fisheries to changing quotas.