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Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass & Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish Advisory Panel Meeting Summary

Tuesday, February 15, 2022, 2:30 pm - 4:00 pm

Advisory Panel Members in Attendance: George Topping, Bonnie Brady, Eleanor Bochenek, Harvey Yenkinson, Kenny Hejducek, Greg DiDomenico, Katie Almeida, Meghan Lapp, Pam Lyons Gromen, Mike Waine, Gerry O'Neill, Jeff Kaelin, Bob Pride, Joseph DeVito, Mike Plaia, Daniel Farnham, Jr., Emerson Hasbrouck, Jeff Deem.

Other Attendees: Carrie Upite (NMFS Staff), Jeff Gearhart (NMFS Staff), Karson Coutre (Council Staff), Kiley Dancy (Council Staff), Peter Hughes (Council), Adam Nowalsky (Council), Sonny Gwin (Council), Chris Batsavage (Council), Carly Bari (NMFS Staff), Colleen Coogan (NMFS Staff), Henry Milliken (NMFS Staff), Emily Keiley (NMFS Staff), Jason Didden (Council Staff), Wes Townsend (Council), Dan Farnham (Council), Alissa Wilson, Nick, JB, JN.

Summary:

The Advisory Panels met via webinar and reviewed a presentation from Carrie Upite (NMFS Protected Resources Division) on sea turtle trawl bycatch issues and the ongoing research on mitigation measures in the Greater Atlantic Region. Advisors provided the following questions and comments; however, these do not represent consensus statements.

Several advisors asked clarifying questions regarding the sea turtle bycatch estimate including how the estimate was derived and how the estimate compares to the observed sea turtle interactions. NMFS staff described the estimation process and responded that they would share the bycatch estimate paper which describes the methodology and data in more detail.

Multiple advisors were interested in more information about how many turtles were released alive versus dead and details of the calculated mortality rate estimate. Advisors felt this information is important when determining the scale of the issue. An advisor added that the bycatch estimate of 571 interactions across all trawl fisheries is lower than the number of turtles that are found cold stunned each year and felt it was misleading to say that trawl fisheries are the largest threat to sea turtles. Because of this, they added that it is unfair to impose draconian measures on the trawl fleet.

Advisors also asked how fisheries were defined and commented that haul weight by species was not always the best way to define a fishery. One advisor asked whether different trawl net types were analyzed and if there were different turtle bycatch estimates depending on the net. NMFS

staff responded that different net types within the bottom otter trawl category were not analyzed separately but this was something that could be explored further. Another advisor requested more specific regional information and the percent of trips where sea turtle takes have been observed, noting that in the past there had been an estimate of 5 takes for an area with no observed takes. NMFS staff noted that they would send this advisor the paper that provides regional information.

An advisor asked whether interactions with sea turtles were different during the day versus at night. This advisor also asked about sea turtle behavior when in front of the trawl net and whether sea turtles get herded in or try to escape. NMFS staff indicated day versus night interactions had not been looked at yet. Staff also noted that sea turtle behavior can differ based on the size of the net, for example with larger nets turtles are already in the back of the net when they realize it and therefore cannot escape. Furthermore, in lower visibility turtles will not react as quickly.

One advisor requested that more information be provided to the public about the health and regional status of the different sea turtle populations and how the TEDs have worked in fisheries where they have been required. They asked if there are success stories that can inform current decision making. This advisor also suggested that flexible TEDs may be the preferred modification out of the different TED options. They noted that they were not aware that there was a current croaker fishery, however linking summer flounder and squid for this analysis would make sense because often the same boats fish for both species. They added that getting the word out to commercial fishermen needed to be prioritized and felt that this issue was coming as a surprise after not being discussed for several years. Another advisor noted that comments to NMFS regarding sea turtle bycatch issues were sent in 2009 on behalf of the Garden State Seafood Association and they never received a response. While rulemaking never occurred at that time for a variety of reasons, it was discussed that this letter was sent to Council staff recently and would be sent to NMFS staff for their review since many of the comments are still relevant.

One advisor voiced concern over interactions with sea turtles in recreational fisheries due to vessel strikes or fishing hook and line injuries and asked whether these were monitored and mitigated. They noted that the large number of sport boats moving at high speeds in the summer may be a source of sea turtle interactions that needs to be documented. NMFS Staff responded that there are different reporting mechanisms for when these interactions occur; for example, stranding networks record information about the condition of turtles when they wash up on beaches. Watercraft injuries are a major concern and there are efforts underway to minimize those injuries and interactions.

An advisor asked whether cameras could be used on the gear so that if an operator sees a turtle go in the net they can tow for a shorter amount of time. NMFS staff responded that this had been looked at in the past. There were some water clarity issues and it is a high-cost monitoring system to obtain a live feed of the net camera. Another advisor commented that in the squid fishery there is no option to compensate for reductions in catch by targeting another species on the same trip using squid mesh, therefore reductions would be a direct economic loss.

Overall, several advisors agreed that in order to have meaningful solutions, more information needs to be provided to the public such as the number of strandings, other sources of mortality such as vessel strikes, observed takes by region, and population assessments for the sea turtle species of concern. Another advisor reiterated that the trawl data needs to be analyzed at a finer scale to determine if there are gear configurations or net types where turtle interactions are not occurring.