



New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492 | FAX 978 465 3116

E.F. "Terry" Stockwell III, *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Research Steering Committee

Holiday Inn, Mansfield, MA

Friday, August 8, 2014

The Research Steering Committee met on August 8, 2014 in Mansfield, MA to review cooperative research reports and make recommendations to the Council for management use, if appropriate.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: M. Alexander (Chairman), V. Balzano (Vice Chair), T. Alexander, E. Goethel, D. Preble, W. DuPaul, J. Hoey, M. Pol; (Absent – T. Platz, G. Brogan, E. Meredith, D. Beutel); C. Kellogg, J. Cournane, D. Boelke (NEFMC staff); R. Silva (NMFS GARFO staff). In addition, approximately 10 members of the public attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- The RSC reached a consensus that the Scallop Dredge Bag Modification report is technically sound and has useful management applicability. The Committee moved to have the scallop PDT assess the report and apply the results to the development of management recommendations as appropriate.
- The RSC recommends that the Council request that NMFS consider the results of Component 3 of the REDNET analysis in considering sector exemptions that request codend mesh sizes of less than 6.5 inches in the redfish fishery.
- Discussion of the RSA process: There was concern that the management review has taken a secondary role in the RSA process, since there are no scores or priorities solicited from management review, there is a total disconnect if the management discussion of projects does not have the weight it needs to have sufficient impact on the selection process.

AGENDA ITEM #1: 2012 AND 2013 SCALLOP RSA PROJECTS

Farrell Davis, presented the description and results from the Coonamessett Farm Foundation projects to reduce flatfish bycatch in scallop dredges. In 2012, the researchers identified apron size (5-ring apron) and twine top hanging ratio (1.5:1) modifications as potential solutions for finfish bycatch reduction. The experimental dredge bag was compared to a standardized dredge bag but with 7-8 ring aprons that already had a low profile and reduced bycatch retention. The 2012 Results were used for the creation of a windowpane flounder accountability measure (AM) through gear modifications that shortened the apron and reduced the twine top's hanging ratio of a dredge in Scallop Framework 25. The 2013 project attempted to look at how this solution may

affect the fleet. Sampling locations in 2012 were in and near (groundfish) Closed Area II, Closed Area I and in Southern New England (SNE) south of Martha's Vineyard in 50- and 100-fathom depths. The 2012 results showed statistically significant, model-based reductions in the bycatch of yellowtail, winter and windowpane flounders caught in scallop dredges. The 2012 and 2013 pooled results showed similar reductions in flatfish bycatch. Some trips had increases in scallop catches for the experimental dredge and others had decreases. The model predicted decreases in scallop catch. In 2013, for two trips, there was a significant length effect on catch of small scallops. The experimental dredge increased the catch of large and decreased the catch of small scallops. Although gear performance was consistent between 2012 and 2013 results, the sample size for the project, regarding number of vessels and tows, was too small to make fleet-wide inferences based on data results. The 2014 scallop RSA research will test escape windows as a gear modification to reduce flatfish bycatch.

1. MOTION: Ellen Goethel/Seconded by Dave Preble

Move for the RSC to send the report to the scallop PDT for their technical review and recommendations to the Council on how to use it in management decisions.

Motion Withdrawn

Discussion on the Motion: The Committee discussed whether the project had a formal technical review. Although technical comments were forwarded with the project for the committee's consideration, several committee members did not think these provided a sufficient technical review and as a result, the motion was withdrawn.

The Committee agreed to the following consensus statement: *While the committee is uncomfortable with the thoroughness of the technical review [of the report A Review of the 2012 and 2013 Scallop Dredge Bag Modifications], the committee feels that the project and report represent a sound body of work that has useful management applicability. The Committee recommends that the scallop PDT assess the report and apply the results to the development of management recommendations as appropriate.*

Public Comment:

Ron Smolowitz, Coonamessett Farm Foundation. In response to questions, Mr. Smolowitz noted that Scallop Framework 25 included a 7-ring apron requirement and that it should have tremendous benefits for not only SNE windowpane and yellowtail but also for fluke and winter flounder. The fleet used to have a lot more 12 and 13 ring aprons and is starting to use more 7's or 8's. As people get used to 7 rings, we are hoping that FW 26 would consider AMs using this mechanism for Georges Bank.

In writing RSA proposals, researchers never have the information from the current year's RSA. To actually project the bycatch rates for yellowtail flounder, a lot more tows would be needed. For this year the project will test escape windows on 7-row aprons; however, it could be combined with a 5-row apron and 1.5 hanging ratio, lower profile dredge. Ideally the number of vessels using the gear would increase from about two dozen vessels to 50 vessels in the next year. The target is to have a 90 percent reduction flatfish but that is a multiyear goal.

Several committee members had questions about how experimental controls might be applied through management and the possible expense of making changes to the dredges. Mr. Smolowitz replied that the changes from a 7- or 8-ring apron to a 5-ring apron would not require the purchase of a new dredge bag and would not require significant amount of labor outside typical trip gear preparation that takes place before each trip. However, the 5R apron would make the bag shorter, and then tows would therefore need to be shorter; these impacts to the industry are unknown. There is industry support for the modifications because the industry prefers a gear AM to a seasonal area closure.

In response to a question about the possible effect of different dredge frames, Mr. Smolowitz noted there was a mix of frames used but that the researchers did not observe a frame effect so they were able to group the data. In 2013, some vessels chose a New Bedford frame but others chose a turtle dredge. This research does not deal with the frame effect and some other variable factors, which may explain why results did not yield statistical significance in addition to low flatfish bycatch, which may have added to that problem.

In response to a question from Mr. Pol about possible resistance to using new gear, Mr. Smolowitz explained that initially modifications had to be made in response to concerns about the strength of the frame for fishing on hard bottom, and that the frame now has double the strength in one direction and five times the strength in another. As the result of weakness during hauling the center bar was replaced with an I-beam. Still there is some concern that fishing in the channel cause rocks to tear up the twine top.

In terms of the current regulation that prohibits an apron of less than seven rows of rings, Dr. DuPaul explained it was originally adopted to prevent using the back of the dredge as a net many years ago when the ring size went from 3 to 3.5 inches and hanging ratios could be 5:1, but that changing the regulation would not be difficult.

MOTION #1 withdrawn. A consensus statement was reached.

AGENDA ITEM #2: RSA PROGRAMS FOR SCALLOP, HERRING, AND MONKFISH

Ms. Boelke raised some issues regarding the need for improvement in the RSA process to allow for more flexibility. Every year, the Council approves research priorities for the three RSA programs (scallop, herring, and monkfish). In the most recent round, committee and council members have raised concerns:

1. Are the final projects fulfilling the Council's priorities to the greatest extent possible?
2. It has become more difficult to align procedures for research with the management timing needs for scallop RSA projects. Grants.gov administration does not allow sufficient flexibility to address these changes. Mid-Atlantic also faces similar challenges. Mid-Atlantic has explored some of the options for this issue already.

Mr. Silva addressed the audience to further explain that the RSA programs are cooperative research programs, and stated that the new reporting requirements would help to monitor vessel activity for compliance with exemptions and to avoid abuse of the program's exemptions. Dr. Hoey addressed the issue with enforcement in the mid-Atlantic, stating that the value of RSA

programs exceed the risk. Mr. Silva also stated that it may be useful to standardize how research is incorporated in the management aspect, similar to the process for the scallop RSA research.

Ms. Corbett from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center explained the competitive review and selection process for RSA proposals. Once proposals are submitted, completeness is determined by a minimum requirements review, after which a minimum of three technical reviews (GARFO, NEFSC, and industry member/rep) take place. For the scallop RSA proposals, additional technical reviews are sought. Evaluations are based on 100 points with up to 20 points awarded to meeting management priorities. Reviewers may add comments to address technically sound projects that may not address management priorities. Currently the management review is done separately from the technical review, so that the projects can be the science and management. The entire RSA process takes 120 days with the management and the technical tasking at the same time.

Decision memo for selected projects are then submitted to GARFO and a regulatory review is done for any issues that may arise with rules for EFPs, NEPA compliance, etc. This information is then provided to the science center, and the science center will then put this information into the favorable letters. Also, management can also provide feedback if there are duplications of projects, in which case only one may be chosen during the negotiations phase. Since this Northeast RSA has 19 or more priorities, it can be difficult to determine which projects have the highest management priority. It would be helpful to condense the list of priorities that are provided during the solicitation period.

Ellen Goethel stated that the management review has taken a secondary role in the process, since there are no scores or priorities solicited from management review, there is a total disconnect if the management discussion of projects does not have the weight it needs to have sufficient impact on the selection process.

Agenda item #3: Review of REDNET Projects Component 2 [Baseline Catch and Bycatch Evaluation] and Component 3 [Codend Selectivity]

Dr. Pingguo He provided a presentation of the results of the REDNET projects component 2 [Baseline Catch and Bycatch Evaluation] and component 3 [Codend Selectivity]. The summary in the final report for Component 3 stated: *“A trouser trawl was used to determine the size selectivity of three sizes of mesh opening (4.5, 5.5 and 6.5 in double 5 mm twine diamond) on a commercial fishing vessel. Fishing off Provincetown, Massachusetts, 56 tows were completed in March and April 2013, catching over 42,000 kg of redfish and about 6,000 kg of other species. Adequate length frequencies of redfish and pollock were collected to produce selectivity models; only redfish results are reported here. Neither species has been the subject of a trawl selectivity study in the Northeast US before. Robust models for the mean L50s and selection ranges, and confidence intervals, were developed for all three tested codends, incorporating both within and between haul variability. All measures of model validity were positive. These models are fully adequate to provide guidance to managers and fishermen on size retention of redfish and appropriate codend mesh size.”*

****Note:** L50 is the length at which 50% of the fish caught in the net are retained by the codend.

Dr. He also provided the following summary of results of Component 3.

- The results are robust and could be used to identify appropriate codend mesh sizes for sustainable fishing and for incorporation into stock assessment models
- Selectivity results may vary due to fish condition
- There was low bycatch even with a 2.5 in codend mesh size provided vessels fished at selected times, depths and in certain areas
- The limited size range of redfish that were caught has implications for marketing

Dr. He also explained that current regulations required a minimum 6-1/2 mesh size to be used to catch groundfish including redfish and that mesh size this large allows a lot of small fish to escape through the codend before the net can be hauled back with the result that they die and float to the surface. Others present shared his concern about the mortality of small fish that escaped the net at too shallow depths. Mr. Terry Alexander also explained that small boats cannot catch redfish with 6-1/2 inch mesh because they could not catch enough fish on a short trip to cover the trip expenses, although larger boats could tow fast enough to retain enough fish with the same sized codends. Mr. Pol indicated that all the technical comments provided by NMFS had been addressed in the final version of the report on Component 3 provided to the committee.

In consideration of the information provided in the report and of the discussion, the committee agreed to the following consensus statement:

Consensus statement:

The RSC recommends that the Council request that NMFS consider the results of Component 3 of the REDNET analysis in considering sector exemptions that request codend mesh sizes of less than 6.5 inches in the redfish fishery.

The RSC Committee meeting adjourned at approximately 3:30 p.m.