Council Takes Final Action on Joint Monkfish/Dogfish/Sturgeon Framework; Posts 2024 Monkfish RSA Project Summaries

The New England Fishery Management Council took final action during its April 2024 meeting on a joint framework adjustment to reduce the bycatch of Atlantic sturgeon in the large-mesh gillnet fisheries for monkfish and spiny dogfish.

The New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils jointly manage both fisheries. The two Councils each took final action in April on:

• Framework Adjustment 15 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan, for which the New England Council has the lead; and

• Framework Adjustment 6 to the Spiny Dogfish Fishery Management Plan, for which the Mid-Atlantic has the lead.

Approved Measures: Here are the measures the Councils selected as preferred alternatives and submitted to NOAA Fisheries for approval and implementation.

- A year-round low-profile gear requirement in the New Jersey bycatch hotspot polygon for federal gillnet fishing vessels targeting monkfish (colored magenta at right); and

- An overnight soak time prohibition from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. for vessels targeting spiny dogfish in (1) the New Jersey bycatch hotspot polygon in May and November, and (2) the Delaware/Maryland/Virginia (DE/MD/VA) bycatch hotspot polygons from November through March – with an exemption for federal vessels using <5.25” mesh in the DE/MD/VA polygons (colored blue in the map at right).

Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch Hotspot Polygons for Monkfish and Spiny Dogfish Fisheries

The colored polygons in the map above identify the locations where management measures were adopted by the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils to reduce Atlantic sturgeon bycatch in the federal monkfish and spiny dogfish gillnet fisheries.
These measures, if approved by NOAA Fisheries, would be implemented in both federal and state waters for vessels with a federal commercial fishing permit for monkfish and/or spiny dogfish. Here is the draft document the Council worked on in April. More information is available in this presentation.

A Recap – Purpose of Action: The joint framework was developed to address recommendations in NOAA’s Action Plan to Reduce Atlantic Sturgeon Bycatch in Federal Large-Mesh Gillnet Fisheries. Subsequently, new developments occurred, elevating the need for the Councils to respond quickly.

- June 2023: NOAA Fisheries informed the Councils that incidental takes of sturgeon in gillnet fisheries had increased and exceeded the amount allowed under the 2021 biological opinion.
- The finding forced NOAA Fisheries to reinitiate consultation on the biological opinion, which it did in September 2023.
- The agency is expected to release a revised biological opinion in January 2025. The opinion will determine whether Atlantic sturgeon are in “jeopardy” from the gillnet fisheries.
- NOAA Fisheries is expected to use the proposed sturgeon bycatch reduction measures in the joint monkfish and spiny dogfish framework as part of the baseline for evaluating whether Atlantic sturgeon are in jeopardy from these fisheries in the 2025 revised biological opinion.

The New England Council has developed a flyer to help fishermen find out how to connect with research partners to participate in 2024 Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program projects.

Unless otherwise specified, 500 monkfish days-at-sea (DAS) are set aside annually from the total number of allocated days to be used for cooperative monkfish research. No federal money is used to support the research.

Learn more about the ongoing projects, who’s conducting them, and how to pitch in as an on-the-water partner!

Questions? Contact Jenny Couture at (978) 465-0492 extension 111, jcouture@nefmc.org or Robin Frede at (978) 465-0492 extension 124, rfrede@nefmc.org. Visit the New England Council’s monkfish webpage.