

## Anglers Unite With Biologists to Change Weakfish Management Plan

In 1985, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) developed and adopted a coastwide Weakfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP). The plan recommended that coastal states delay fishing on weakfish until they reached one year of age (about 12 inches) and for southern states to use escape panels for weakfish in their shrimp trawls. By the late 1980s it was apparent that these recommendations were inadequate in stopping the decline of weakfish.

Around this time New Jersey and Delaware formed the Bi-State Weakfish Commission, which made recommendations to the states' fisheries agencies and adopted regulations to restrict the harvest of weakfish in their waters. In addition, at the request of both states and with their financial support, the ASMFC began the work to update the FMP. Amendment 1 was adopted in 1992 with recommendations that all states implement a 12-inch minimum size in the recreational fishery. There were also recommendations for states with directed commercial weakfish fisheries to reduce harvest by 25%, implement minimum mesh size in nets to allow 75% escapement of undersized weakfish, and shrimp fisheries to reduce by-catch mortality of weakfish by 50%. Although New Jersey implemented the recommendations, this was not the case with all states.

### Meaningful Regulations

The passage of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act in 1993 finally put some regulatory teeth into the ASMFC and for the first time mandated states to fully implement the provisions of the FMP's and their amendments. In 1994, the ASMFC adopted Amendment 2, which provided a reference for each state and evaluation guidelines in establishing fishery reductions through 1995. Unfortunately, throughout the 10-year history of the weakfish FMP weakfish stocks continued to decline.

In 1996, the ASMFC adopted Amendment 3 as a long-term plan for recovery of weakfish to healthy levels in order to maintain commercial and recreational harvest consistent with a self-sustaining spawning stock. The major objective of Amendment 3 was to restore the weakfish population over a 5-year period by reducing fishing pressure 32% in both the commercial and recreational fisheries. The results have been pretty impressive.

According to the ASMFC's most recent stock assessment, annual mortality has progressively dropped from a high of 92% in 1984 to about 20% in 2000. The spawning stock has exceeded expectations and continues to increase while recruitment of young weakfish has reached more than 60 million per year. The percentage of older fish (6 years and older) in the population has increased from a low of 0.3% in 1996 to a high of 6.9% in 2001. There has also been a significant increase in the number of large weakfish harvested in the recreational fishery with the percent of 24 inch and larger fish harvested increasing coast-

wide from a low of 0.86% in 1997 to 11.08% in 2000. Commercial landings in Rhode Island and recreational landings in Connecticut are similar to landings from the early 1980's, which shows that weakfish are returning to their historical range.

### Something's Fishy

Since Amendment 3 achieved the majority of its goals and objectives, it was assumed that any fine tuning of the plan in 2003, through Amendment 4, would be considered the next logical step. However, when draft Amendment 4 was introduced it painted a somewhat different picture of the weakfish stock. New Jersey and Delaware anglers were looking at a potential 71% reduction in the bag limit. It seemed ironic that the two states that took action to manage weakfish in the early years of the plan were being called upon to bear the brunt of management now.

If the latest stock assessment was so promising, then why the drastic decrease in recreational bag limit? The Division decided to investigate to determine the *real* reason behind the proposed changes to weakfish management. The answers we discovered led to testimony by the Division at public hearings last October and, combined with *your public input*, became crucial to the management process. Without the Division's direct questioning of Amendment 4 and strong opposition by recreational anglers at New Jersey's public hearings, the process which follows would have never taken place.

Several meetings and conference calls were arranged by ASMFC staff to discuss possible solutions to what many New Jersey anglers and business owners (especially from the Delaware Bay area) perceived as a gross injustice wrought with severe economic impacts. As the process unfolded, the ASMFC Technical Committee (TC) reported that an incorrect methodology was used to estimate the creel limits under Amendment 3, resulting in the adoption of overly liberal creel limits in 1996. Consequently, the regulations for these higher minimum sizes failed to achieve the desired conservation goals, which was to reduce harvest by 32%. The option of a 14-inch minimum size and a 14-fish creel limit, adopted by New Jersey in 1996, actually resulted in a recreational harvest reduction of only 18% from the baseline period. This was not discussed at the 2002 public hearings. When the correct methodology for calculating the bag limits is applied to the Amendment 3 reference period (1990–1992), the actual bag limits should have been four or five fish instead of 14 fish.

Since the adoption of Amendment 3, the TC determined that the early 1980's best represented a less-fished stock with an expanded age and size structure and the catch rates of a healthy fishery. Therefore, the 1981–1985 time period became the new reference period for the recreational fishery. This reference period actually produced more liberal creel limits than the original reference

period under the corrected methodology. Confused? You are not the only one!

### Why Create a Boundary?

Another aspect of the recreational fishery proposal included a north-south boundary split between Virginia and Maryland. This split was completely arbitrary and without biological justification. If adopted, this would have allowed drastically different bag limits at the same minimum size. Although there are catchability differences throughout the range of weakfish, including New Jersey waters, bag-limit discrepancies between these areas is not judicious. Public meetings put to rest this proposed geographical split.

After the final meeting of the TC, a new option was put on the table that based new size/bag limits on a straight 32% reduction in harvest, using the 1981–1985 reference period, to coincide with the target for the commercial harvest reduction of Amendment 3. This table was modified somewhat, but it is believed that any option will meet the conservation goals outlined in Amendment 4.

### Final Management Plan

New Jersey accomplished much in the battle for equitable and sound fisheries management. As a whole, New Jersey anglers know how to search through all the rhetoric to find the full story. If it takes a fight, then so be it. Be proud of the way you handled the process and continue your public input because it really has an impact.

*by Russell L. Allen, Principal Fisheries Biologist*