**NJ Marine Fisheries Council**

**Offshore Wind Committee**

**Meeting Summary**

The NJ Marine Fisheries Council Offshore Wind Committee met virtually on April 11, 2023. Doug Christel from NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) presented an overview of NOAA Fisheries’ role in reviewing and permitting offshore wind development projects.

Mr. Christel indicated that BOEM is the decision making authority for most decisions related to offshore wind development projects, through a process authorized by the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act. NOAA Fisheries is a cooperating agency that provides recommendations relative to topics in which they have “special expertise,” such as fisheries, habitat, protected species, and ecosystem interactions. Working cooperatively with other state and federal agencies, NMFS’ responsibilities include data sharing, proposal reviews, development of alternatives, and evaluation of impacts. It was emphasized, however, that NMFS has no legal authority over most of these topics within the permitting process, and BOEM is not obligated to follow NOAA’s recommendations. The one exception is that NMFS has full authority over allowable takes of protected species.

Mr. Christel then summarized the types of data NMFS uses to evaluate projects and the types of impacts they consider. Fisheries data, including landings, effort, transit patterns, and socio-economics, are used to evaluate loss of access, effort displacement, and community impacts. Habitat data are overlayed with lease areas to evaluate habitat loss, damage, or conversion, as well as impacts to hydrodynamics and effects on the Cold Pool. Scientific and survey data are used to identify potential impacts to protected species including noise, ship strikes, and entanglements. Other concerns include impacts to the surveys themselves, which will affect stock assessments and management advice.

Following the presentation, there was discussion on a number of topics relative to NMFS’ role in evaluating impacts. Concerns were raised about radar interference from the turbine fields. It was noted that some developers have offered to upgrade radar systems for fishery participants, but no one has yet taken advantage of it. Several participants recommended requiring AIS be installed on all turbines, but it was suggested that it might only be necessary on a subset of turbines because turbines will be deployed in a consistent pattern and individually numbered to help mariners track their location within the turbine field.

One participant questioned whether NMFS was evaluating projects for cumulative impacts. Mr. Christel responded that NMFS is assessing cumulative impacts using a few different methods, such as the MAFMC State of the Ecosystem Report. It was noted, however, that while cumulative impacts to economics are relatively simple to evaluate, biological impacts are much harder to verify and quantify.

One participant questioned whether there was a threshold for the level of marine mammal interactions that would result in NMFS requiring additional restrictions. There is a threshold, and NMFS is monitoring interactions relative to that threshold. It was noted that even currently approved permits could be revised if that threshold is reached.

Participants discussed the potential impacts and benefits to recreational fisheries. It was noted that NJ has recently funded the first study of socio-economic impacts of OSW on the recreational sector. There was some uncertainty on whether placing additional structure in the water would increase catch rates or reduce them as fish disperse across all the new habitat. Concerns were also raised about construction noise affecting fish behavior, which may affect angler experience, and whether industry would be compensated for any impacts. NMFS and other agencies have recommended both timing restrictions for construction activities to minimize impacts and compensation for any realized impacts.

Survey work was discussed, both in terms of impacts development will have on agency surveys used for stock assessments and management decisions, and surveys done by developers to identify impacts from construction and operation. NMFS has conducted a modelling study of the effects of reduced survey coverage on each of their fishery management plans. A final report is expected soon, but preliminary results indicate that the effects are not uniform across all stocks. NMFS is also looking into alternative survey methods that will allow continuation of sampling in areas their current survey vessels will no longer be able to access. With respect to developer surveys, NMFS and DEP are working closely with ROSA to standardized methods and develop data standards.

A number of other topics were discussed, including duration of monitoring, communication of activities to the general public, and decommissioning. One participant asked how best to use this information to further the mission of minimizing impacts to marine resources and fishery participants. Mr. Christel responded that he is available to discuss concerns on topics under NMFS’ purview. NMFS may not have absolute authority on any decisions, but there is opportunity through their special expertise and interagency discussions to leverage their position for the collective interest.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the committee discussed future meeting topics. Staff indicated that several developers from the NY Bight lease area have expressed interest in meeting with the committee. Staff will work with Dr. Bochenek and the developers to identify topics and potential dates.