**NJ Marine Fisheries Council Tautog Committee**

**July 16, 2024**

**Meeting summary**

The NJ Marine Fisheries Council Tautog Committee met with commercial and recreational advisors to discuss potential changes to regulations. Staff and individual Council members have heard from industry that updated regulations may be needed to protect the stock and fishery, and several industry members attended a recent Council meeting and requested a committee meeting to discuss potential changes.

Staff presented an overview of the most recent stock assessment, recent survey data, and commercial and recreational harvest trends.

* The 2021 stock assessment indicated that overfishing was not occurring, and biomass was increasing; however, the stock was still considered overfished.
* Recent New Jersey ocean trawl survey data indicate that the NJ population has been relatively stable over the last decade, but that regional trends may vary over the last 5 years (decreasing in the north; increasing in the south). Length data show that there are generally more legal sized fish in the north.
* Commercial harvest has declined dramatically over the last 8-10 years.
* Recreational catch (harvest plus discards) has increased, with discards making up approximately 90% of the catch. Harvest has generally increased in the south while remaining relatively stable in the north.
* Estimates of recreational effort for tautog have been increasing since around 2016. Similar to the trawl data, recreational length data suggest there are more large fish in the north than the south.

There was discussion on how long it would take to implement new regulations if that was the direction taken. Staff indicated that because this is not being mandated by ASMFC, it would require a full rule proposal which may take 12-18 months, rather than a Notice of Administrative Change which can be done more quickly.

Commercial participants indicated that harvest had declined since they were prohibited from fishing on the artificial reefs in 2016. In addition, the mandatory tagging program is burdensome and has forced many permit holders to exit the live market fishery. Some of the suggestions they made include increasing the season length to compensate for reduced access on reefs; a smaller minimum size; and changes to the tagging program to make it more efficient. Some possible improvements would be providing harvesters more tags at the beginning of the season, and using different tags that are easier to handle and don’t damage the product.

Recreational participants from both regions commented that there are more large fish in the south, contradictory to both the ocean trawl and MRIP data.

Several confirmed that effort does seem to have increased in the north and that overcrowding has become an issue, but very few vessels target tautog in the south. Overcrowding is particularly bad in the summer when there is a one fish possession limit. There was a suggestion that there is so much effort that anglers catch the fish as soon as they move onto a reef. It was noted that the one fish limit was implemented to satisfy the spearfish sector, but that private boats and shore anglers have begun targeting them during this season as well. This was attributed to new technologies that allow anglers to find structure and maintain their position without anchoring.

Several suggestions from the recreational sector included improvements to habitat through reef deployments, additional outreach to encourage discards of females and large fish, and different size/season/possession limits. There was some discussion about restricting “spot lock” motors on reefs, but it was suggested that such regulations would be difficult to enforce. Several participants cautioned that any regulatory changes should not be more restrictive than ASMFC allows because we would likely not get credit for being proactive if ASMFC requires cuts in the future.

Dr. Donnelly acknowledged the discussion had been useful. The two biggest take aways from the meeting are that we do not do anything more restrictive than required by ASMFC, and we need to consider the timing of any potential changes with respect to the time it would take to implement relative to the upcoming stock assessment. He encouraged everyone to continue thinking outside the box for ways to improve NJ’s tautog fisheries and requested staff confirm neighboring state’s regulations and ASMFC requirements to inform future discussions.