**Marine Fisheries Council Tautog Committee**

**Meeting Summar**y

May 21, 2025

The Tautog Committee, advisors, and staff met by webinar to discuss concerns around night fishing as well as to evaluate the pros and cons of shifting the spring season and implementing a slot limit.

Law enforcement staff indicated that there has been an apparent increase in nighttime fishing for tautog, including a recent case in Atlantic City with 38 out of season and undersized tautog caught while night fishing from the jetty. The main concern is that law enforcement will have to divert already limited resources in order to monitor this new fishery. One advisor noted that they have seen anglers shine lights between jetty rocks to catch them. Several participants indicated that tackle shops are promoting nighttime tautog fishing, as well as fishing during the closed season. A staff member who interacts with anglers frequently noted that many anglers understand staffing concerns and suggest ways to deter bad behavior to reduce the need for enforcement. Some examples include signs and posters or the presence of other Fish and Wildlife staff. He also noted that illegal harvest occurs in many places, not just the big inlets. A participant asked what could be done to reduce non-compliance. Enforcement responded that staffing is the main issue, even with two new officers coming onboard soon. It was recommended that people continue to call the WARN DEP hotline and should not confront offenders directly, both for safety reasons and to avoid hampering any investigation. There was discussion about closing the fishery at night, but it was argued that we rarely recover access after it has been taken away, and a closure would penalize many people who are doing it legally. Similarly, there is no basis to restrict what bait a tackle shop can sell or tell their patrons about what is biting. There was discussion about whether it is legal to target a species during its closed season, but currently only striped bass has explicit language preventing targeting during a closed season.

Shifting the spring season was suggested as a way to close the two week gap between the end of the April tautog season and the opening of black sea bass in May. In central and north NJ, there isn’t much to fish for during the gap. A continuous season would keep vessels working and bait shops busy. Several participants commented that tautog spawning season begins in May so shifting the season into May would increase pressure on spawning females. Advisors from southern NJ indicated that the first two weeks of April are important for them because most private boats are not in the water yet. Shifting the season would increase participation because more boats are in the water, further increasing pressure on the stock during spawning season. It was also suggested that boats in the northern part of the state have more options for target species and need to be more creative in planning trips. An alternative for closing the gap would be to open black sea bass sooner since biomass is above the target; however, that is currently only possible for state waters. Participants noted how there are more undersized fish and generally more effort up north compared to the southern part of the state. In addition, improved technology is making it easier for people to find and stay on fish.

Staff indicated that ASMFC was in the process of updating the tautog stock assessment, and there may be a need or opportunity to change to regulations, such as implementing a slot limit, depending on the results of the assessment. Participants were generally in agreement that slot limits may have benefit. Some participants advocated for reducing the minimum size limit due to the high number of small fish. A lower size limit could thin the stock to allow more fish to grow quickly. There was concern, however, that because there are so many small fish, a smaller size limit might lead to overfishing. Several participants preferred to maintain the 15” minimum size, suggesting that the benefit of a slot limit would come from limiting the harvest of larger fish, but there should still be an opportunity to harvest a limited number of large fish. For example, Rhode Island has a slot of four fish at 16-21” plus one fish over 21”. One participant suggested increasing the minimum to 16” to allow fish another year to spawn, but another participant cautioned that once we increase size it’s hard to revert to a smaller size in the future. Staff noted that recreational anglers have expressed support for mode specific regulations, such as used for summer flounder on Island Beach State Park. Ultimately, participants recommended maintaining status quo until the results of the assessment are available.

The committee was opposed to closing the night fishery for tautog. Instead, the focus should be on increasing education about not keeping undersized fish or targeting fish during the spawning season.

**Attendees**

Advisors: Adam Nowalsky, Ajay Nash, Bob Cope, James Parker III, Joan Berko, John Toth, Keith Laudeman, Mickey Sherry, Paul Haertel, Peter Belasco, Ray Bogan, Tom Daffin, Tony Butch

Committee: Bob Rush, Eleanor Bochenek, Greg Hueth, Pat Donnelly

Staff: Brian Scott, Heather Corbett, Jeffrey Brust, Jess Gorzo, Jonathan Klotz