



New Jersey Chapter

March 15, 2021

Dave Golden, Director, Division of Fish and Wildlife
P.O. Box 40
Trenton, NJ 08625-0402

Dear Director Golden:

The New Jersey Chapter of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA-NJ) would like to address the most recent meeting of the NJ Marine Fisheries Council (the Council) on March 4, 2021. While RFA-NJ appreciates the challenging times we are all working through, especially when it comes to holding public forums, the RFA-NJ is greatly concerned that several members of the public were unable to fully participate and believes the Department of Environmental Protection (the Department), Division of Fish and Wildlife (the Division), Marine Fisheries Administration (the Administration) and the Bureau of Marine Fisheries (the Bureau) needs to work with the Council in advance of future Council meetings to ensure that public input can be adequately and fully considered prior to decision making.

RFA-NJ recognizes that the past 12 months has been extremely difficult as a result of COVID restrictions on public meetings, and is thankful that the Bureau has been able to work with the Department and Division to utilize the GoToWebinar platform for virtual Council meetings. Unfortunately, the Council meeting on January 7, 2021 was interrupted and when the meeting resumed, there were difficulties for the public being able to reconnect. Following this, the meeting on March 4, 2021 found members of the public again expressing difficulties with being able to provide their public input on the 2021 Summer Flounder season. Full participation by the public during a public forum and comment period is always the goal and anything less is unacceptable. While it has been suggested that other platforms may be preferable, RFA-NJ trusts all entities involved to make the best decision possible regarding a virtual platform. However, we would submit that every effort possible needs to be made to make it extremely clear to the public what the requirements specifically are in order to participate. RFA-NJ believes those instructions and communication with the public must be more robust.

With respect to the decision to solicit public input via e-mail for the 2021 Summer Flounder season, RFA-NJ appreciates the effort on behalf of the Division and Bureau. However, it appears this effort was not made in a timeframe that was complementary to the Council's existing decision making process. Specifically, if e-mail solicitation of comments are going to be accepted as input for Council decision making in the future, there needs to be consideration of the timing for the solicitation of those comments so that they can be integrated with any committee/advisory body meetings held in advance of the full Council meeting. Additionally, RFA-NJ believes more effort is needed to make the public aware of the ability to offer e-mail comments than by notification via an opt-in listserv as the primary mechanism.

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While the RFA-NJ is disappointed with the Council's decision not to delay action to ensure that public input could be fully considered, we do thank the Council for spending time debating the issue and those members that were in support of the motion. RFA-NJ recognizes that the Council must make difficult decisions as a result of broken federal management processes, questionable MRIP data and inadequate quotas that do not reflect stock status. We believe, however, that even in the face of these challenges, the Council must be able to adequately and fully consider public input. We look forward to the Department, Division, Administration and Bureau working with the Council to achieve that goal.

Sincerely,

Ed Goldman
Acting Chairman, RFA-NJ Chapter

cc:

Ray Bukowski, Assistant Commissioner, Department of Environmental Protection
Joe Cimino, Administrator, Marine Fisheries Administration
Jeff Brust, Chief, Bureau of Marine Fisheries
Dick Herb, Acting Chairman, Marine Fisheries Council

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