A public hearing was held via webinar on April 22nd, 2021 to discuss potential changes to New Jersey’s commercial bluefish regulations. Specifically, the agenda included discussion to consider instituting commercial trip limits through a trigger mechanism or seasons to ensure quota lasts throughout the calendar year. The agenda also included discussion related to changing New Jersey’s quota system from one based on gears to one based on directed and bycatch trips. Present were 3 council committee members, 6 Marine Fisheries Administration (MFA) staff, and 4 industry members.

Staff prefaced the meeting by stating that, given the wide scope of issues under consideration and the timeline – that is, April 22nd was the first time the public saw some example alternatives being considered & there is no imminent need to implement changes in 2021 – the meeting was an information gathering session. Consequently, no committee recommendation was needed at this time. Staff also clarified that a public hearing was held rather than council committee meeting due to the very limited number of commercial bluefish advisors.

Staff gave a presentation that covered NJ’s current regulations, that includes trip limits that are in effect if an individual gear exceeds its quota. Staff reviewed the performance of NJ’s commercial fishery over the last decade, described the methods used to develop some example trip limits, and reviewed the example trip limits that included seasons and limits linked to trigger harvest amounts. Finally, staff briefly covered considerations for dissolving gear quotas and replacing them with directed and bycatch trip limits.

All comments received were from participants in the gillnet fishery. There was general support for trip limits linked to trigger thresholds as this alternative appears able to meet the objective of ensuring quota is available throughout the year, while also having less uncertainty than that associated with multiple seasons. The committee chair noted that historically there were reliable seasonal dynamics to the bluefish fishery, but that has changed in recent years, making trip limits associated with seasons problematic. There was general support from industry for trip limits that would be enacted when NJ reaches 60% of its total annual quota, though members wanted as much flexibility as possible to ensure a balance between ensuring quota is available throughout the year while also not preventing the entire quota from being landed during the year.

The committee chair and one member of the public agreed that trip limits may not be necessary under current quota levels, but were concerned that as or if quota drops, to, say, 200,000 pounds, trip limits could be very helpful to the fishery. The chair acknowledged that trip limits may not be advantageous for all commercial gears and indicated that he would solicit input from industry members that harvest with non-gillnet gears.

Staff reminded the public that New Jersey’s current regulation allocates 7.5% of the total bluefish commercial quota to a bycatch fishery, in which trips are capped to 150 lbs of bluefish, subject to other provisions. Members of the public wanted additional time to consider how best to deal with this quota, especially if additional trip limits are enacted. Additionally, there did not seem to be support for dissolving gear quotas.

At the end of the meeting staff reminded attendees that additional time has been allocated to receive written comment through May 3rd through the MFA’s public comment email address. A summary of this public hearing along with a summary of written public comments will be presented to the council’s bluefish committee prior to the May 13th Marine Fisheries Council meeting, at which time further action can be considered.

Summary of written comment

We received 3 emails: from one gillnetter that attended the public hearing, one gillnet / otter trawler, and a follow-up from that same individual signed by 4 members of the same family.

All written comments supported keeping the bycatch allocation as is. The family of gillnet & otter trawlers also thought that trip limits should be equal among all gears. There was also a suggestion that fishery participation should be limited to those who held licenses prior to this action. The individual gillnetter supported daily trip limits once 60% of annual quota was harvested, while keeping the current gear-specific allocations. He also supported increasing or removing trip limits if the remaining 40% of gear quota was not harvested by November of a given fishing year.

The Council’s Bluefish Committee Chair also reached out to an industry otter trawler and received verbal input that one otter trawler would like to see 2,500-pound trip limits at the start of each season until 75% of the bluefish quota is reached, and then reduce trip limits to 1,000 pounds.