



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

July 18, 2019

To: Tautog Management Board
From: Tautog Technical Committee
RE: Review of Commercial Tagging Program and Recommendations for next Stock Assessment

Attendees: Coly Ares (RI), Lindy Barry (NJ; Chair), Sandy Dumais (NY), Dave Ellis (CT), Alexa Kretsch (VA), Craig Weedon (MD), Bob Glenn (MA)

Staff: Caitlin Starks, Katie Drew, Kirby Rootes-Murdy

The Commission's Tautog Technical Committee met via conference call on Tuesday July 9 to discuss the following items:

- 1) The Commercial Tagging Program
- 2) Type and timing of next Stock Assessment

Call Summary and Recommendations

Commercial Tagging Program

The group discussed the tagging program with the objective of reviewing and considering 1) where the tag would be applied to the fish; 2) the biological metric to request annual number of commercial tags and 3) the tag expiration date.

- 1) Where the tag will be applied on the fish

Staff presented on where and which side of the fish tags could be applied based on feedback from the TC members. Concerns had previously been raised over the tag potentially damaging the operculum and impacting the ability to age the fish. TC members confirmed that the tag does leave a hole in the operculum, however it should not make the operculum unreadable. In considering a preference on which operculum is used for biological sampling, many states indicated they take both opercula for aging, so if one is damaged it would not be an issue.

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The TC did not specify which operculum the tag should be applied to, so it would be up to the states to specify on which is side harvesters would be required to place the tags to aid enforcement. The current tagging guidelines are meant to assist the states in writing regulations, but only the language included in Amendment 1 is required of all states.

The group also revisited the rationale for choosing a strap tag applied to the operculum over other tag types and placements. Soft tissue areas were shown to not hold tags well. When considering the application of tags to soft tissue or muscle, there were also concerns that the tags may damage the quality of the fish meat. Lastly, tags placed in soft tissue are also easily removed and re-used, which could create opportunities for cheating the program.

2) Biological Metric to request annual number of commercial tags

As part of Amendment 1, states will need to develop a biological metric to annually estimate the number of tags needed to supply the commercial fishermen in their state. Staff highlighted to TC members that while the methodology and number is not needed yet, they should have a methodology and estimate ready by the end of August or beginning of September.

In discussing potential methodologies, the group focused on 'tag failures' and how to incorporate this into their tag estimate. MA DMF and NYDEC staff who have tested the tags indicated there is a failure rate, related to both the tags not sealing properly and operator error. Tags can also reasonably be lost over the side of the boat when tagging at sea. There was consensus among those who have tested the tag and applicator of roughly a 10% failure rate. The buffer within the guidance document indicated a 20% buffer, so the approximate failure rate would be encompassed within that buffer.

It was also noted that it is unlikely that tags will always be applied in sequential order due to tag loss or failure. The group was in agreement that once the 1st year of the tagging program has been completed, there should be a reevaluation of the appropriate tag loss rate. At that time, it could be determined that continual tag loss on the part of fishermen above a certain level could potentially be an enforcement issue. Given there may be a variety of reasons for a tag being lost or damaged, an important piece of information during first year will be how many tags were applied and returned compared to the total number distributed to each harvester. The group did not express any concerns with using available data to develop a biological metric. Most TC members indicated they would likely be estimating an average fish weight around 4 pounds.

ASMFC staff explained that the Commission plans to order all tags in bulk to distribute to the states later in 2019, and that states must submit a request for the number of tags to order; the states would then reimburse ASMFC for their tags. Regarding applicators, staff indicated that an initial purchase of these could also be included in the bulk order, but it would be another item the states would need to estimate and request. The group agreed that if additional applicators are needed during the fishing year, individual fishermen should be able to purchase them directly from the supplier. During the August meeting the

Board should discuss how to handle an instance where a state underestimates the number of tags needed, and needs more tags mid-season.

3) Expiration date for tags

Next, the TC discussed the expiration date for tags. The draft tagging guidelines indicate the following:

- Tags expire at the end of the fishing year for which they were issued (unless a state determines this would unnecessarily restrict harvest and sale at the end of the year, in which case an alternative expiration date could be determined).
- It will be illegal for any dealer to buy or sell any tautog with an expired tag.
- Tautog with expired tags may be sold only directly to the final consumer.

TC members indicated that some fishermen keep fish caught at the end of the year (November/December) in tanks and sell them later in January/early February. If the fishing season aligns with the calendar year, these fish could have the previous year's tags on them. In these cases, the fish are often caught and held in tanks for around a month.

Given this scenario, tag accounting that requires fishermen to return all tags from the prior year in order to receive the new year's tags may be challenging. For the states in which this situation occurs, an alternate tag expiration date should be requested. Additionally, having clear documentation of when tags are applied may help address this concern.

Due to these challenges, the TC indicated that there should be more clarity written into the guidelines to differentiate between a tag expiration date for fishermen and what the expiration date is for commerce/ or sale of the fish. Additionally, the TC indicated the Law Enforcement Committee should also provide a recommendation on this issue.

There was no clear consensus on a preferred tag expiration date, though some members indicated the end of February may be a suitable time. Staff encouraged TC members to work with their states to determine what would be an appropriate alternate date for their fishery.

Discussion on next Stock Assessment

The TC reviewed the research recommendations and recent updates to MRIP harvest information with the objective of providing recommendations on the timing and type of next Stock Assessment.

ASMFC Staff presented on changes to MRIP that have adjusted the recreational harvest estimates for tautog. The new calibrated estimates for the entire time series indicate increases in annual coastwide harvest ranging from 50% to 313% (harvest in numbers of fish) and 27% to 322% (harvest by weight). The coastwide PSEs are below 50 (greater than 50 indicates high uncertainty in the estimate) for annual harvest estimates in both weight and number of fish, generally ranging from 9-30. State by state harvest increases also vary over time, with the highest increases occurring in the states of Massachusetts through New Jersey.

Staff also presented on progress that has been made relative to research recommendations from the previous stock assessments. Many of the previous research recommendations remain works in progress. One that could have implications for future assessments is a recent genetics study completed by VIMS that may indicate different grouping of stock units relative to the most recent stock assessment. Staff clarified that in considering whether the next assessment should be a benchmark stock assessment or assessment update, the key distinction is that an update would not require peer review, nor could new data sources or models be considered; with a benchmark, everything would be reconsidered and it would go through a peer review process. The incorporation of the new MRIP estimates could be done through an assessment update.

In considering changes to the MRIP data, questions were raised about the PSEs at the state and regional level. Staff noted that the current model can account for the uncertainty of the estimates at the regional levels the resource is assessed at. It is possible changes in MRIP could impact the model converging and operating correctly, but this would not be determined until the process is underway. Additionally, assumptions about harvest in wave 1 (Jan/Feb) may need to be revisited given MRIP does not sample then, but many states do have open fishing seasons during that wave.

The group also discussed the extent of work that would be required for either approach (benchmark or update). Because each region is assessed as a unique stock, there will be four models that would either need to be updated or re-assessed; it would be a significant workload under either approach. The group also briefly discussed whether different modeling techniques could be explored at the regional level; this could be done only through a benchmark assessment.

Given the discussion and information presented, the group was in favor of an assessment update being completed with data through 2020, when available. This would ensure the regulatory changes aimed at conserving tautog that went into effect after Amendment 1 could be evaluated; specifically the average F rate using 3 years of data (2018-2020).