



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

January 13, 2020

Tautog Technical Committee (TC) Meeting Summary

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

Staff: Katie Drew, Kirby Rootes-Murdy

The Commission's Tautog Technical Committee (TC) met via conference call on Monday January 6 to discuss the following items:

- 1) Discussion on next Stock Assessment
- 2) Provide feedback on implementation of commercial tagging program

Call Summary and Recommendations

1. Discussion on next stock assessment

The TC reviewed a pre-publication manuscript on tautog stock structure authored by Hamish Small, Jingwei Song and Jan. R. McDowell from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. The main take-away was that even with new genetic analysis methods, there is still not evidence for strong genetic stock structure within the population: the only genetically distinct stocks were north and south of Cape Cod.

These results were brought to the ASMFC Assessment Science Committee, who were asked to comment on the relevance of the manuscript results (i.e., the lack of genetic structure) to the current tautog regional assessment structure. The committee recommended that the current four-stock regional breakdown is reasonable and that an assessment update using the current regional boundaries would be sufficient and that a benchmark was not necessary. While the genetic results suggests a lack of structure from a gene flow perspective, tagging work shows that adults typically have small home ranges with little north-south migration and growth rates differ between areas, meaning that large-scale management policies could lead to localized overfishing.

The Technical Committee was supportive of maintaining the regional breakdown for the upcoming stock assessment and continuing to move forward with a stock assessment update. There was some discussion about whether north and south of Cape Cod should be considered as different stocks, but the TC members pointed out that despite the distinct genetic difference that was observed, there was only a small proportion of the tautog population north of Cape Cod so the data may be insufficient for an age-structured stock

assessment. The TC may return to this regional breakdown issue in the future in light of new data or further understanding of the genetics.

The TC discussed the workload and timeline for the next stock assessment. It was noted that while this next assessment is not a benchmark it will require more work than a typical assessment update because the new MRIP data means that the catch-at-age time series will have to be completely reconstructed rather than simply added to. There are four assessment regions, and the TC agreed to start considering who would be responsible for compiling the data and running the assessment model (ASAP) for each region. The last assessment also included a coast-wide model, but it was not determined whether a coast-wide model would also be included in the upcoming assessment.

The timeline that was discussed was to have the update completed in 2021 using data through 2020. Part of the rationale for using data through 2020 is that a three-year moving average is used for stock status determination and 2018-2020 would be consistent from a management perspective. The TC's goal is to present the assessment to the Board at the October 2021 annual meeting. The assessment process will be lengthy, especially given the new MRIP data and that there will be new analysts, so it was suggested that work should begin soon. The intent is that the models should be up-to-date through 2019 when the final 2020 data come out in May 2021 so that the 2020 data can be incorporated and the models finalized before October. The first deadline for data gathering will be May 2020 when the finalized 2019 MRIP data are available. To facilitate data compilation, ASMFC will distribute a list of the data sets by region that were used in the previous assessments.

There was a short discussion about whether the catch-at-age might be affected by the transition from ageing opercula to spines. Spines were regarded as acceptable for ageing because the resulting ages were considered equivalent to opercula, but assessment model sensitivity runs focused on this transition could be worthwhile.

2. Commercial tagging program

The Technical Committee discussed progress on the commercial tagging program. Orders were received by ASMFC in September and they placed a bulk order with National Tag and Band in October. There was some discussion at the October Board meeting about the program, mostly concerning when in the year unused tags should be returned. At this meeting ASMFC staff were interested in feedback on (1) how the process played out in terms of each state getting their tags; and (2) a description on the methods and progress of tag distribution in each state.

State updates

Virginia has received all their tags. They have bagged up small numbers of tags for small-scale harvesters; individuals with more of a landings history receive more tag allocation, in some cases several boxes. Tags can be obtained either in-person or through the mail. Virginia got feedback that it would be useful if the applicators had a hole so they could be tied on someplace. An instructional video showing the tag application process was posted on YouTube and written instructions were also included with the tag packets.

Maryland received their order for 500 tags. Harvesters that request tags and have a permit will receive them and applicators will be purchased individually.

New Jersey has approximately 60 permit holders that were allocated tags based on historical average landings. Permit-holders were allocated a minimum of 50 tags with one applicator, and were provided with information on how to order more applicators. The state has tags in reserve for those individuals who will need more tags. In general fishermen are supportive of the program. New Jersey will require monthly reporting where permit-holders will note the tags that they successfully applied as well as those that were damaged or lost.

New York received the tags and applicators that they ordered. In February they will send out a letter to fishermen notifying them of their first tag allotment. Tag allocation was based on landings history.

Connecticut is targeting an April 1 implementation date and will send out a notice to fishermen this month with information about the program. They received the tags and will distribute them according to landings history. The state is selling applicators rather than distributing them with tags. It has not been determined whether individuals will come in to pick up the tags or whether the state will be able to mail them.

Rhode Island received their tags and are working on forms that fishermen will be required to sign acknowledging that they understand the new regulations. The season begins in April and tag distribution is planned for February/March. Individuals will be required to pick up their tags in person.

Massachusetts received their tag order and reported no issues. Tag pickup will be in Boston and New Bedford prior to the September 1 opening of the fishery. Initial allocation is 120 tags/individual. Marine Fisheries has also established a limited entry program for tautog permit endorsement which will bring the number of permits from approximately 2,000 to about 200. It will be several months before the final number of permits is known because of the appeals process.

One TC member suggested that it would be simpler if states could order tags and applicators themselves rather than having to go through ASMFC. There was also a short discussion about tag distribution; many states do not have the mailing budget to mail tags and applicators directly to fishermen which complicated program implementation.

For those states that did not purchase applicators, a link to the National Band and Tag website where purchases can be made will be circulated.

The TC was reminded of the requirements of the tagging program, which include (1) uniquely-numbered, uniform, single-use tags; (2) tags must be applied prior to vessel offloading; (3) allocation must be based on a biological metric; and (4) unused tags must be returned no later than February 15th. If this return date does not work for any state they should notify ASMFC because any changes must be approved by the Board.

The annual compliance reports will now include a tagging section. This will include (1) a description of the biological metric used to allocate tags; (2) the commercial quota; (3) the number of tags requested; (4) the number of tags distributed; (5) the number of fishery participants; (6) the number of unused tags returned; (7) a description of where the fishing

activity occurred; and (8) information on tag violations or infractions.

The TC had a short discussion regarding the description of the fishing area. Landings by statistical area would be the ideal metric to include in the compliance report because this can be directly linked to the stock assessment areas (however statistical area is not specifically required in the compliance report). Spatial information will be useful in general for benchmark assessments in the future.

Some TC members noted potential difficulty with reporting tagging violations, either because of by-species query issues with the law enforcement data sets or because the tagging regulations are not yet officially on the books.

ASMFC would like any feedback on challenges associated with the program and whether additional tags are needed during the fishery. It is possible to do another bulk order if necessary. At some point the group should have a follow-up call to discuss the implementation of the program but as some fisheries do not start until later in the year this would probably need to be sometime in September or later.

3. Elect vice-chair

Craig Weedon was approved as the new vice-chair.