



## **Bluefish Advisory Panel Webinar**

**November 12, 2020**

### **Meeting Summary**

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council's) Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (Commission's) Bluefish AP via webinar on November 12, 2020. The objectives of this meeting were to review and provide feedback on staff recommendations for 2021 recreational measures for bluefish.

**Please note:** Advisor comments described below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements. Some advisors also provided written comments which are included in the briefing materials for the December 2020 joint Council and Board meeting (available at: <http://www.mafmc.org/meetings>).

**Council Advisory Panel members present:** Frank Blount (RI), Phil Langley (MD), and Judith Weis (NY)

**Commission Advisory Panel members present:** Paul Caruso (MA), Robert Lorenz (NC), and Rusty Hudson (FL)

**Others present:** Chris Batsavage, Cynthia Ferrio, Hannah Hart, Michelle Duval, Steve Witthuhn, Steve Cannizzo, Michelle Duval, Mike Waine, Dustin Colson Leaning, and Matthew Seeley

### **Bluefish**

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Advisors first received a presentation from staff discussing the current recreational measures, stock status, 2019 data update and fishery performance, 2020 data gaps, and staff recommendation for status quo 2021 recreational measures. Following the presentation, advisors offered their on-the-water observations, research recommendations, and comments. In general, most advisors supported the staff recommendation of status quo recreational measures for 2021 due to the lack of available data in 2020 and lack of understanding of how the reduced bag limits are currently performing. Specific comments are provided below and are partitioned by state.

**NC** – Effort reported by MRIP for 2020 should not be interpreted coastwide. The effort results coastwide are not well representative of the effort I have been observing in NC. If MRIP was down due to access, shore-based fishing (surf) should be significantly higher in NC. Our shut down for in-shore type fishing was only for about 10 days and some counties did not shut down at all. The number of people that went to the beaches for recreational activities was either consistent or higher than normal – I could not fish because there were too many people.

**NC** – We typically catch 1-3 lb fish in our waters. Surf and pier fishing will most likely continue because water temps are in the 70s near shore. In general, people are starting to come fishing again. My personal shore effort is going to increase due to our phenomenal beach season.

**NC** – In light of everything going on, I think it is a very prudent and fair recommendation to remain status quo. However, regarding the for-hire sector, we should maybe try to give them a few more fish since they are serving the recreational community. It could be impactful for them and not too impactful against the entire quota.

**MA** – Early COVID-19 waves greatly impacted fishing communities through shutdowns. We had a lot of restrictions when the bluefish were here earlier in the year. Considering the cyclical nature of bluefish, I saw more bluefish than in recent years. However, the spring run was late because it stayed cold longer into the season than usual. We had a great summer and fall which was full of bluefish inshore and offshore.

**RI** – From August through mid-October, we had more bluefish offshore than we have seen in years. Sizes were ranging anywhere from 2 to 15 pounds.

**MD Chesapeake Bay** – Question: Has there been research on discard mortality with increased ocean temperatures? Answer: There has been research on discard mortality rates. That is how we are able to use a 15% mortality rate for discarded fish. This research was conducted years ago and has recently been discussed as a result of the upcoming bluefish assessment. However, no one on the call was aware of recent discard mortality studies related to ocean temperatures.

**MD Chesapeake Bay** – More anglers targeting bluefish should use circle hooks because they are still very effective and reduce discard mortality. The for-hire sector has taken a huge hit coastwide over the years. Over the past two years, it started with the reductions in bag limit and now it's the inability to fish due to COVID-19. Right now, we are living with the reductions. I depend on bluefish in the area because of the lack of other species, but I do support the status quo recommendation as a result of the situations we are dealing with.

**NC (Public)** – Question: Why are fishing license sales way up but the MRIP effort survey shows a reduction in 2020 compared to 2019? Answer: Not everyone getting a fishing license is fishing. Also, it is consistently difficult to discern whether the COVID-19 pandemic is causing individuals in specific regions to spend more time outside fishing or more time inside away from other people.

**NY (Public)** – This year, we had great weather, but losing the 15-fish limit has been hurting the for-hire community. On the east end of Long Island, there are now only 2 bluefish party/charter vessels left.

**NY (Public)** – As bluefish migrate, they herd up the beach and anglers catch them in waves. Some of these fish are getting very large (up to 20 lbs). The migration cycle observed with bluefish is the nature of the species. This year, we did not have as much of a bait issue considering sand eel and chub mackerel/menhaden abundance. Thus, when bluefish are not available, we may be able to attribute the absence to water temperature. Increased water temps (up to the 80s) lead to fish moving further offshore and into northern waters, which was the case during the prime summer months.

**NY (Public)** – Fewer and fewer people want to target bluefish. Further constraining the limits will turn bluefish into a bycatch fishery. Ultimately, the for-hire sector needs a 7-8 fish allowance (this does not need to be in the form of sector separation). When fish are available, they come in very large numbers and we would like to be able to land more than 5 fish. In regard to the staff recommendation, I would support status quo, but implore the Council and Board to look into developing a for-hire sector allowance since we account for such a small percentage of total catch.

## Comments submitted late or via email

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**Capt. TJ Karbowski**, Rock & Roll Charters, Clinton, CT

New 2020 regulation:

In my opinion, the new bluefish regulations had zero to little effect on the bluefish population. On my boat, we did not harvest or release any more or less bluefish than any other season. I still do not know anyone who specifically leaves the dock and targets bluefish for harvesting; it's usually just the "backup plan." With the exception of, the very poorly regulated, "Greatest Bluefish Tournament on Earth" in August (of which there is no minimum size) most anglers just catch and release the blues as by-catch while they are actually targeting striped bass or other species. There are of course a handful of fishermen out on Saturday's or Sunday's casting to the blues when they see them jumping on top, but this is usually just for 20 minutes or so and then they move on.

As a 6 passenger Charter operator, the new regulations did not affect my business at all as once again I am stating that no one really target's bluefish. Not a single one of my 1,800 customers this season have complained about the regulations. For a typical party of 6, we harvest 0 – 3 fish and sometimes a bit more if the fishing was slow for other more desirable species. Even if we are into a heavy school, the harvest rarely exceeds 10 fish. Bluefish are a "bailout fish" just to bend the rod. Additionally, customers have the view of them being "junk fish." I assure you; overharvesting is not an issue among recreational anglers.

The new 2020 regulations likely only had an effect on those fishing from shore targeting snappers. Raising the bag limit for fish under 12 inches or so will likely go a long way in building some trust back into the fishery management process without affecting the population. A 5 fish bag limit for the "for hire" fleet is fine, but it CANNOT be lowered as the blues do indeed save the day on trips every so often and those customers of whom want a bunch of bluefish to smoke will have the perception they can retain enough to make it worth their while.

2020 Fishing Season:

Blue fishing during the 2020 fishing season in general was a very solid fishery. Not as many fish for example as 2010, but vastly improved since the virtual collapse of the Long Island Sound ecosystem that occurred in 2014. Since then, (and I'm sure its forage related) they have started coming into the Sound in reliable numbers the first week of August.

Unlike striped bass that will often solitarily take up residence on a piece of structure for days or weeks knowing forage is not too far away, bluefish are completely different. Bluefish do not roam around by themselves. They are almost exclusively accompanied by lion's mane jellyfish, rain bait of all kinds and menhaden. "Find the bait and find the fish". Yes, it's pretty much as easy as that. – They are constantly eating. We have had for several years (since 2014) an extreme absence of forage fish, this translated to a lack of bluefish and because of this, we now have those advocating for this "Rebuilding Plan". Those that are pushing for stricter bluefish harvest regulations are concentrating their focus in a fruitless effort.

Baitfish:

To spend time, effort, hold public hearings etc... to push for further harvest reductions is pointless for the Rebuilding Plan. Efforts need to be focused on forage fish such as silversides of all kinds, menhaden, bay anchovies, spearing, butterfish, squid etc. We suffered an extreme lack of these

species for the last 5 years. To try to have an understanding as to what makes these forage species have successful or poor year classes and successful or poor YOY survival rates is what the focus should be. Whether it's temperature, migration patterns, salinity, predation, commercial fishing, pollution or current speeds are what need to be studied and factored into your equations. The "cyclical" nature of these species is 100% directly connected to the ability to locate bluefish. If you find small rain bait you will find smaller bluefish. If you find larger forage, such as menhaden, you will find the larger bluefish. It is really not that complicated. Again... find the forage find the fish.

During the lean years (which started in 2014), menhaden in Long Island Sound disappeared like a switch. Long Island Sound was virtually BARREN of life. The Sound was virtually DEAD. (This is the year Omega Protein started taking most of their quota from the Chesapeake after getting banned from fishing in North Carolina). Also, around this time was when Rhode Island squid boats started pair trawling for squid. – We have not had squid in numbers ever since until this year. We ALWAYS did before that. Now in 2020, you can walk on the bunker. It is quite amazing. The schools measure MILES in size. We have had porpoises and even a whale near us. Long Island Sound is currently like a nature preserve. Did Omega Protein harvest less fish??? Did Covid keep the commercial squid harvest down due to lack of demand ultimately leaving more squid and other baitfish in the ocean??? Did all of this contribute to the success of this season? If not Omega, than why all the bunker this year? I don't know. Was there a favorite flavor of plankton the bunker like in the Sound this year? Was it the lack of calcium chloride and calcium magnesium in the Sound this year due to the mild winter and the roads not being treated with this poisonous ice melt??? This is what you need to be studying and entering as part of the rebuilding plan. ...Not recreational bluefish harvest. \*\*\*THIS AFFECTS OTHER SPECIES TOO!

#### Migration:

Bluefish have been coming in later the last few years. They used to come in July. Now they come in early August. It traditionally was the 2nd week of July. I believe this is due to the success of the 2015-year class of striped bass which are competing for the same forage and "turf" along the migration. This clearly has an effect on numbers if sampling is done WHEN THE FISH AREN'T THERE. Please adjust your surveying methods accordingly.

#### Additional comments:

I believe it is neither fair to the fish nor fishermen, that alot of these meetings are during the fishing season. Imagine if accountants held their meetings on updating the tax code in early April.... I know the Connecticut Black Sea Bass advisor, and guess what?? He couldn't attend the Sea Bass webinar because he had a charter. Those that are (or should) be advisors will be working on the water every day. Is this intentional? That's the way it feels..., the timing of these meetings just lack common sense. Whether it is a lobsterman, charter operator or other commercial fisherman you need solid advisors. Most likely that individual will be on the water and not be able to attend a meeting until December. Having advisors that are recreational fishermen that go out on Saturday mornings a few times a month with their kids and dog do not have a handle on things. Anyone who works on the water pretty much north of Maryland is likely to be on land for the majority of the winter. There is plenty of time to talk about and work on regulations then. For example: The reason I'm submitting this email is because today is Thursday November 12th. The forecast was for high winds yesterday, so I cancelled my 2 charters and started working on these

comments. Today is the advisory meeting. The forecast is great. I will be on the water. I have 2 charters and clearly cannot attend a webinar.

\* Also, once again because of the use of the “New MRIP” I feel like I’m wasting my time. Yes, I’m going through the motions so I have no regrets regarding the health of the fishery or my business, but the feeling is like that of paying your monthly bills while using a completely fictitious number as the bank account balance. You know in your gut what the balance is closer to, but you can’t use that number because someone is forcing you to use fake numbers that aren’t even close, but they give you no choice. It’s mind boggling.

In 2019 they had Connecticut anglers harvesting 121,712 blues from SHORE during May/June alone! That’s 2,028 PER DAY! The laughable part is this is at a time of year when bluefish aren’t even in Long Island Sound. The MRIP numbers are a SHAM and until MRIP goes back to the old numbers or corrects their methodology we are all just WASTING OUR TIME.