Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

NEWS RELEASE

Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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Atlantic Sturgeon Stock Assessment Update Shows Signs of Improvement for Coastwide Population and Mixed Results at the Distinct Population Segment Level

Arlington, VA – The Atlantic Sturgeon Stock Assessment Update finds that while the coastwide population remains depleted relative to historic levels, the population has shown signs of improvement with a significant positive trend over the time series. Further, there is a high probability that abundance in 2022 was greater than abundance in 1998 at the start of the coastwide moratorium. Total mortality is low and has a low probability of exceeding its reference point. Depleted status is used instead of overfished because many factors (such as bycatch, habitat loss and ship strikes), not just directed historical fishing, have contributed to the continued low abundance of Atlantic sturgeon.

At the individual distinct population segment (DPS) level, results were mixed. Most indices showed either a positive trend or no significant trend over the time series. The average probability that the New York Bight and Carolina DPSs indices were greater than the reference year was high, meaning it was likely that abundance in 2022 was higher than it was at the start of the mortarium. For the Gulf of Maine, Chesapeake Bay, and South Atlantic DPSs, the average probability was lower – less than 50% for all three DPSs – meaning that it was unlikely that abundance in 2022 was greater than it was at the start of the moratorium. Total mortality estimates for each DPS were higher than for the full coastwide population and the probability of exceeding the reference point was higher, partly due to the smaller sample size and higher uncertainty in the tagging model at the DPS level than at the coastwide level. For the Gulf of Maine DPS there was a greater than 50% chance that total mortality exceeded the reference point, while there was a lower probability that total mortality exceeded the reference point for the other DPSs.

Atlantic sturgeon are a challenging species to assess because datasets for this species are limited. However, progress has been made on research recommendations addressing questions about genetics, life history, abundance, and sources of mortality, and work will continue to develop better datasets to support the next benchmark assessment in 2028.

No management action was taken given the continued coastwide harvest moratorium and protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. Additionally, efforts are being taken to reduce sturgeon bycatch in other directed fisheries. In April, the Mid-Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils recommended their preferred alternative to NOAA Fisheries to reduce sturgeon bycatch in the federal monkfish and spiny dogfish fisheries, and a final rule is expected by the end of 2024. The Commission's Spiny Dogfish Management Board also initiated an addendum to develop options to maintain consistency with the federal action for state-permitted spiny dogfish harvesters in state waters, with the goal of reducing sturgeon bycatch.

A more detailed description of the stock assessment results can be found at https://asmfc.org/uploads/file/66b398b9AtlanticSturgeonStockAssmtOverview_Aug2024.pdf. The Stock Assessment Update will be available on the Commission website, www.asmfc.org, on the Atlantic Sturgeon webpage next week. For more information, please contact James Boyle, Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at jboyle@asmfc.org.

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