Winter Flounder Advisory Panel

Recommendations on the Development of Amendment 1 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Winter Flounder

Bud Brown, Chair of the Winter Flounder Advisory Panel, welcomed the Advisory Panel and asked for introductions. Lydia Munger, Winter Flounder FMP Coordinator, presented a summary of the public comments from both the public hearings (ME, NH, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ) and written comments. Lydia ran through the presentation on options for the Board's consideration later today. Steve Correia, Chair of the Winter Flounder Technical Committee, provided some information on the recent peer reviewed stock assessment for both the GOM (considered rebuilt) and SNE/MA (overfished and overfishing is occurring) stocks. GOM's rebuilt status could be attributed to the groundfish restrictions, such as the rolling closures. The GOM assessment is slightly skewed towards the southern range of the GOM. The SNE closures have not been as beneficial to rebuilding the winter flounder stocks because the closures have driven effort inshore.

Bill Hubbard commented that New Hampshire fishermen are not seeing very many winter flounder and those that are seen are generally undersized. Recreational fishermen tend to catch 2 or 3 fluke for one undersized winter flounder.

Jim Lovegren (NJ commercial fisherman) commented that in NJ and western NY the winter flounder appears to be a separate stock from the Southern New England stock. Mid-Atlantic winter flounder should be managed separately from the SNE stock. Regulations and reduction in effort in other fisheries has benefited the stock status of the Mid-Atlantic winter flounder. The fishery is only catching the larger fish because it's the size range allowed in regulations (6 ½ mesh). NEFMC is going to allow a bycatch of 200 pounds of winter flounder while engaged in the summer flounder fishery. Fishermen are seeing larger fish because of the mesh requirements, reaching 4 pounds. Days at sea restrictions are bringing down the mortality on the Mid-Atlantic stock.

ASMFC plan was originally meant to focus on inshore stocks of winter flounder and had several different management units. As time went on, growth rates and tagging studies indicated that some of the management units indicated that the fish are similar and migrate in similar patterns. There was not enough information in the beginning to conduct an assessment of the smaller management units, therefore the management areas were lumped together into larger management units. The similar growth rates indicated that there were enough similarities to manage the areas together. Genetic studies have led scientists to believe there is mixing between the more localized management areas, thus providing further support for managing the smaller areas as larger management units. The ability to manage winter flounder as smaller more localized management areas is hampered by the lack of sufficient information to conduct an appropriate assessment.

A cold winter seems to improve the fishing in NJ. The fish seem to be pretty big. Flounder can be caught all season. Everything brought up is big. Some concern that the little fish are not seen. There is a mass exodus as soon as the bluefish show up, they move offshore.

Fishing in NY has been pretty big. There are deep holes where you can catch the big fish, but not nearly as many big fish as was once seen. Predation is a concern. Lots of cormorants

preying on winter flounder in Jamaica Bay, NY. Bluefish also chase the winter flounder away. 3-pound winter flounder is about 16 inches and tend to look like a summer flounder. The smaller fish are still seen in the Bay.

The large winter flounder on George's Bank are called Lemon Sole when they reach a certain size. The growth rates for George's Bank winter flounder are much higher than the inshore stocks.

Charlie - Great South Bay, NY. Used to be that you could catch a winter flounder at anytime of the year. They were readily accessible. In the mid 80s the fishery seems have gone down hill. Great South Bay used to have lots of winter flounder. Catches of 3 or 4 fish is a big catch. The fish tend to be big, 12, 13, or 14 inch fish, but the regulations don't let you catch anything over 11 inches. A 2-pound fish is a big fish, 3 pounds is huge. The fish are around for shorter periods. Seems like the fishery is better the further west and south you go. Rec fishermen tend to fish inshore and there are fewer fish, but it's hard to compare it to offshore because the rec fishermen stay inshore.

Bill – NH/MA. The small fish are seen in the estuaries but the reach a certain size and then disappear. Winter flounder have not been seen since the 80's. Now you need a small boat and even then it's difficult to find them. There are a lot of stripers and cormorants in Great Bay, probably preying on the winter flounder.

Fishermen have done everything they can to reduce fishing mortality (Days at sea, no mesh smaller than 6 ½ inches, raised foot rope trawl in the whiting fishery, the Nordemore grate in the shrimp fishery, etc). There is some other problem causing the stock decline. Need to look beyond fishing mortality.

Impingement/entrainment from power plants are causing a large source of mortality on winter flounder larvae.

Bud Brown – Maine. Commercial and recreational landings are really low in mid-coast Maine. Fish come in the summer and go out in the fall. Recreational data from Maine is pretty good because the MRFSS data is augmented by the state, more intercepts.

Bud Brown was re-elected as Chair to the Winter Flounder Advisory Panel. Charlie was elected as vice chair to the AP.

The main theme of the public comment is concern over localized status of winter flounder. Need to long at it as a long-term objective. Probably should work with the habitat committee to coordinate all of the data from each of the states. Also, need money to do some more inshore tagging for winter flounder.

Predation. The water quality in NJ has improved; as a result the seals and sharks are showing up in NJ waters. Cormorants and stripers are a great source of predation.

Issue 1: Plan Objectives
Recommend that the Board include an additional goal "restore populations abundance so that a shore-based recreational fishery in its historical area". A slight improvement in stock status is not adequate.

Issue 2: Targets, thresholds, rebuilding goals
AP recommends the TC review the targets and consider targets that can be applied to localized areas.

Commercially the groundfishermen have gone a ways to reduce effort. Need to evaluate the level of reductions resulting from the groundfish suit before deciding whether or not additional effort reductions are necessary. But this will need to be balanced with whether or not these groundfish effort reductions go far enough to improve the winter flounder stock status. The fishermen should not bare the brunt of all the restrictions needed to bring this stock back. Fishing mortality is not the sole cause of the decline of the winter flounder stock.

Issue 3: Standardize between ASMFC & NEFMC
The NEFMC has not given any consideration to the inshore boats, so the ASMFC amendment needs to do something to manage the inshore boats.

ASMFC should implement complementary goals and objectives to that which the NEFMC implements through Amendment 13 to the Groundfish plan.

Issue 4: Predation
AP agrees that predation is a major concern and believes it is a major source of mortality on the winter flounder stocks, but has no recommendations at this time.

The Board should consider looking at the multispecies interactions between winter flounder and other fish species (i.e. striped bass), just as the multispecies model is being used for menhaden, bluefish and striped bass. The model would be even better if it could include sea birds and marine mammals (i.e. seals).

Issue 5: Conservation Equivalency
The AP could make no recommendation due to lack of consensus. Consistent regulations and requirements are appealing for the states with short coastlines and very similar fisheries. There are differences in the stocks and therefore conservation equivalency should be acceptable. Conservation equivalency should be for the recreational fishery only.

Issue 6: Habitat
The Board should consider mitigation programs for power plants.

Issue 7: Nearshore/Offshore Migration
The AP agrees with the staff recommendation.

Issue 8: Stock Definition
There should be more stocks than the two currently identified in the ASMFC plan.

Issue 9: Recruitment
The AP agrees with the staff recommendation.

The AP would like to receive a copy of the AP report given to the Management Board. The AP would also like to have more than a ½ day meeting when we get further into the development process.