

Summary minutes - American Eel Technical Committee Meeting January 11, 2000 8:30 a.m.

V. Vecchio introduced Heather Stirratt as the new FMP coordinator. The attendees introduced themselves. Additions to the agenda were solicited but none were mentioned. Jennifer Temple was introduced as the proposed Rhode Island representative on the TC.

V. Vecchio reviewed the results of the last meeting in February 1999, which included selecting preferred measures for the FMP such as:

- CITES Appendix III listing for elvers
- EEZ should be closed
- Recreational and Commercial Regulations.

Since then, the Board has seen the plan, public comment was solicited, H. Stirratt was hired, preferred options were presented to the Board, and they adopted most of the preferred options.

The Board was concerned about the design and purpose of the Young of Year (YOY) survey. They wanted the Technical Committee (TC) to meet and establish protocol. The states have this spring to do some exploratory work, gain experience and try different methods for the survey before they submit a final protocol listing particular sites, gear, etc. to be used.

Discussion - why did the FMP ultimately require that two sites be surveyed each year for the YOY survey, when the TC had decided to require only one when it last met? The statistical justification for the YOY survey with one site per state was discussed, the TC established that it was meant to be a way to detect trends in abundance of elvers over time and was not meant to be used for stock assessment. Various methods for capturing elvers were discussed, including the use of dip nets. Discussion of the operational definition for an elver and problems with the definitions in the FMP occurred.

J. Weeder gave a presentation detailing Maryland's efforts to catch elvers. The presentation stressed that Sheldon traps were not the best gear for capturing elvers in areas where the wings could not be employed to direct the elvers to the trap as they moved upstream in current, and that dip nets would be far more efficient. The lack of elvers caught in the Patuxent River, a Chesapeake Bay tributary, was attributed to the lower density of elvers far up in the Bay. Impoundments and areas where elvers naturally congregate were identified as the best placed to catch elvers in sufficient abundance.

G. Wippelhauser gave a presentation about the long-term study of elver abundance carried out in Maine using fyke nets and Irish elver ramps. She discussed problems they have had and their experiences over the 10+ years of the survey.

Discussion - YOY survey

The importance of pigmentation for determining elver age and its general relevance to the TC was debated. B. Jessop and J. Weeder discussed their experiences with pigmentation and its importance for general understanding of elver movements and ecology, and the conditions under which elvers become pigmented. B. Jessop advocated determining the pigmentation stage of each elver that was weighed and measured. This would require the use of a dissecting microscope, and the elvers must be examined right away after they are freshly anaesthetized or

killed. Various members expressed concern with the immediate examination of elvers and the need to use a dissecting scope.

The TC debated the importance of date standardization across states for the beginning and end of the YOY survey. The TC decided to require a 6 week minimum duration which is already in the FMP.

H. Stirratt discussed the deadlines for state YOY survey plans. For 2000, those who can should do their survey. Others must submit an exemption for 2000. On May 1, 2000, state YOY survey plans and exemption requests are due. Annual reports are due September 1 each year. H. Stirratt explained relevant dates, reports, procedures, and funding in depth.

#### YOY survey discussion

J. McClain described his state's exploration for elvers in spring 1999. He caught eels mainly in March, used a dip net and fished at night. The dip net worked well as long as the number of elvers needed was not very large.

B. Jessop presented a draft sampling protocol for the YOY survey. The group discussed and agreed upon requirements for the survey-

- sites should be close to the ocean if at all possible
- Gear should be suitable for environmental conditions - approved gears were dip nets, fyke nets, Sheldon elver traps, Irish elver ramps, and fishways.

The frequency of sampling was discussed. B. Jessop stressed that elvers should be sampled every day so that the peaks in elver abundance over a season would not be missed. Group agreed that sampling should occur at least 4 days per week, that elvers should be counted volumetrically, and that the length and weight of 60 elvers should be taken on two of the four sampling days. Pigmentation of these 60 eels should be determined if possible. B. Jessop's draft sampling protocol was largely adopted.

There was discussion about whether states with no fishery should be required to conduct such detailed surveys.

V. Vecchio agreed to propose a change to the FMP so that only one river must be sampled, not two, per state.

#### Lunch Break

V. Vecchio distributed the draft YOY survey implementation plan for New York as an example of the format and content expected for each state's plan.

#### De minimis discussion

Many states have not reported landings for 1997 and 1998, so the original means by which de minimis status would be determined is invalid. A new standard must be used (see 'Proposals for determination of De Minimis' memo, V. Vecchio). Various options were presented in this memo. The TC decided to support option D, wherein the Board will be advised that de minimus status cannot be determined based on available data and that each state must collect landings data for twenty four months, after which the percent contribution of each state to the fishery will be calculated and de minimus status will be declared. However, states that do not currently have an eel fishery will be granted de minimus status immediately. The fact that this would allow these states to avoid any fishery independent monitoring that may later be

required was discussed at length.

H. Stirratt announced the nominations of V. Vecchio and J. Weeder to the ICES eel workgroup on behalf of the ASMFC.

V. Vecchio solicited nominations for the stock assessment sub-committee. V. Vecchio, J. Weeder, P. Geer, J. Temple and C. Moore were nominated. Matt Mitro will also be appointed to this committee based upon a request received by Commission Staff.

Discussion, 'Management Board List of Issues for Consideration' memo (by V. Vecchio)

Various issues raised by the Management Board were discussed. G. Wippelhauser was asked to research the possibility of a fall run of elvers and bimodal spawning. J. Crumpton was asked to draft new descriptions of the life stages of the American eel for the FMP. The lack of a distinct difference between yellow and silver eel fisheries in several states including Maryland was discussed. The distinct silver eel fisheries in Maine and other states were discussed. A poll was taken of the confidence that each state has with the accuracy of 1. the landings data collected by their state and 2. the landings data collected by all states, combined. The confidence scale was from 1 to 5. Confidence in each state's landings ranged from 1 to 4, while confidence in the landings overall was 0. This was because some states have extremely poor reporting requirements and groundtruthing procedures, and their inaccurate data was thought to decrease the reliability of the whole data set.

Lewis Gillingham described his state's acquisition of thousands of small eels last summer, provided by a permit holder with an elver hatchery in Virginia. Tagging options and difficulties for these fish were discussed, as was the possibility of using them for restocking and the possible ecological and political effects of stocking or not stocking these eels. L. Gillingham offered to provide eels to interested biologists next summer pending availability and sufficient abundance.

Meeting adjourned 4:30 p.m.