

**RI Marine Fisheries Council
 Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Advisory Panel
 Meeting Minutes
 February 2, 2011, 6:00 PM
 URI Bay Campus, Coastal Institute**

R. Hittinger, Chairman	M. Bucko*
M. Ambrosia	R. Bellavance - RIMFC
F. Blount*	J. McNamee, DFW staff
J. Grant*	

(*primary advisory panel member; ^A alternate member)

R. Hittinger began the meeting. Due to the poor weather the meeting was lightly attended, but because of the timeliness of the items he decided to hold the meeting anyways. He stated that J. McNamee of the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW or Division) had a presentation which covered the first 3 agenda topics for both meetings. He stated that J. McNamee would go over each species one at a time, beginning with summer flounder. He went on to state that after each presentation the panel would discuss any proposals they may have for recreational management for each species in 2011.

J. McNamee began with a discussion about recreational summer flounder fishery performance in 2010. He started by indicating that the data was incomplete for 2010, wave 6 data was not available. However, RI historically did not have very high landings in wave 6 and he felt confident in the projections that had been made for landings in those waves. What he indicated was that RI had come in under their harvest target by approximately 40% in 2010. The implication for 2011 was that RI could liberalize its regulations by 122%. J. McNamee indicated that while this was the maximum amount the state could liberalize, RI indicated to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) that they would be building in a number of conservative measures in an effort to not overharvest in 2011. This resulted in a smaller liberalization, approximately 83.9%. Before moving on to discussing management options in 2011, J. McNamee went over summer flounder stock status. The status of the summer flounder stock was in very good shape, was not overfished, overfishing was not occurring; however the stock was not yet rebuilt.

J. McNamee finished by indicating that the DFW supported any measures that stayed within the bounds of the approved methodology for liberalizing, which included the added conservation measures. The DFW went on to caution, however that the RI performance over time had lead to harvests that averaged 200,000 fish per year, under many different management configurations. The target for 2011 was beginning to approach this number (target = 193,000 fish), but was still not quite at that level. He stated that making efforts to constrain landings and protect against overharvest in 2011 would be in the best interest of the state. That being said, the state would have the ability to liberalize quite a bit even while being conservative. The Division had presented an option with a minimum size of 18.5 inches. J. McNamee stated that while this at first made him uncomfortable, as he analyzed the data he became more comfortable with this

option for a number of reasons; 1. whether 19 or 18.5 inches, this was basically the same year class of fish so probably wouldn't matter which one was picked as far as the increase in harvest was concerned, 2. the analysis still fell under the harvest liberalization target by a fair margin, and 3. effort had a decreasing trend over the past several years possibly due to things like high fuel prices and a bad economy. M. Bucko added that the salt water license also contributed to the decrease in effort.

R. Hittinger began to take comments on the presented options or any options that anyone else wanted to bring up. He began the discussion by indicating the RI Saltwater Angler Association (RISAA) supported the option of May 1 – December 31 at an 18.5 inch minimum size and a 7 fish bag limit. They felt that all of the conservation measures taken in the analysis would allow for this additional bag limit increase without jeopardizing the management plan. In this way the increased bag would be a benefit to the party and charter mode and the difference in the minimum size would help the recreational fishery at large. J. McNamee indicated that the increased bag would add an additional 1.5% in to the liberalization calculation so would still fall under the maximum allowance.

F. Blount reiterated the words of caution about liberalizing too much; indicating that past performance, specifically 2007 and 2008, was higher than 200,000 fish at similar management measures. R. Hittinger stated that the noise in MRFSS data made him nervous.

R. Hittinger asked if anyone had a preference for one option over another. M. Bucko indicated that he preferred option 1 as presented by the Division. He was hesitant to increase the bag limit because it would allow some cap on potentially increased effort, but he liked how the decreased minimum size would re-enfranchise the shore fishermen to some extent.

R. Bellavance stated that he preferred option 3 with the ½" drop in size and the bigger bag limit. Not dropping a full inch provided some level of safety from overharvest and the increased bag, while not impacting the actual harvest by much, was a benefit to the party and charter sectors from a marketing perspective. F. Blount stated that he preferred option 3 as well; again stating that not dropping the full inch will provide some safety. F. Blount asked a follow up question about uncertainty in the harvest estimate. His question was, if a state overharvests and that overharvest falls within the envelope of uncertainty, does the state still have to adjust in the following year? J. McNamee stated that the ASMFC summer flounder technical committee has made this same argument to the ASMFC summer flounder management board, but at this point in time states are responsible to account for any overharvest incurred in any given year.

The group had a discussion on alternate management measures such as maximum total inches of fish per vessel, slot limits, or a tagging program. These were measures that were being discussed at a number of different levels but nothing that was ready to be implemented at this point. F. Blount stated that the state could purchase some research set aside to potentially account for any overage that may occur. J. McNamee stated that this was an interesting comment and he would look in to this. There was also discussion on

MRFSS and add-ons. J. McNamee stated that it was indicated to him that the Division was looking in to some level of take-over of the MRFSS implementation in the state. He was unclear as to what this would result in for 2011.

R. Hittinger asked if there was a consensus comment the group wanted to bring forward. **After a bit of discussion on the various options presented through the evening, the panel consensus was to prefer the RISAA proposal of a May 1 – December 31 season, an 18.5 inch fish, and a bag limit of 7 fish.** No vote was taken due to the lack of quorum.

The next species discussed was scup. J. McNamee began with a discussion about recreational fishery performance in 2010. He started by indicating that the data was incomplete for 2010 as was the case discussed for summer flounder. In comparison to summer flounder, wave 6 is important for the recreational scup and black sea bass fisheries in RI, therefore it was difficult to make determinations about the 2011 fishery at this point, though projections had been made. Before moving on to discussing management options in 2011, J. McNamee went over scup stock status. The status of the scup stock was that it was in very good shape, was not overfished, overfishing was not occurring, and was considered to be rebuilt. For scup, RI is grouped in with 4 states referred to as the Northern region (NY, CT, RI, MA). The Northern region had harvested approximately 34% over their 2010 target. The implication for 2011 was that the Northern region, and thereby RI, had to reduce its catch by implementing more restrictive regulations in 2011. However, at their last board meeting, the ASMFC scup management board decided to increase the coastwide total allowable landings (TAL), thereby allowing the rec fishery to remain at status quo in 2011. The Division supported remaining at status quo for 2011.

F. Blount stated that the regional approach has not worked in the best interest of RI. He suggested supporting the status quo option, but wanted to also forward along the request to dissolve the regional approach for RI. The other panel attendees voiced support. M. Bucko stated that one drawback would be that the mode split may have to end because at the state level, the precision of the data would not meet the fishery management plan requirements. **The panel made a consensus statement that the Division should pursue removal from the regional approach. Further, they supported going to state by state conservation equivalency as the alternative to the regional approach.**

Understanding that the status quo option was the only option that was approvable under the ASMFC management agreement, the group decided to recommend an option that would be best for RI. **F. Blount stated that the season should be shortened at the front end and then added to in to the fall end of the fishery. So, they should take whatever is needed off the beginning of the season to extend the 10 fish season from the end of the bonus season until December 1st.** RI's big fishery was in the fall and this is the season that they were being cut out of under the current regional management. There was discussion on how the conservation equivalency would be figured for RI. J. McNamee stated that he was not sure how this would be, or was, configured. **The proposal indicated by F. Blount was a consensus recommendation from the group.**

J. McNamee brought up the other consideration for this increase in the scup TAL, and that was that the commercial quota would go up dramatically. J. Grant asked whether the Division would have the authority to increase the already promulgated starting possession limits for the commercial fishery in RI, or whether this would have to go back out to hearing. J. McNamee stated that the Division could increase the possession limits, but it would be best to resubmit the plan for public hearing. **J. Grant recommended that this be brought back to hearing for re-evaluation. The group did not object to this recommendation.**

The panel discussed other recommendations. **They decided to recommend that the allocation split between recreational and commercial be reconsidered by the ASMFC scup management board as the current allocation was hindering both the commercial sector by flooding the market with scup and thus decreasing the price on the commercial side and for the recreational fishery, the low allocation continued to create fishery overages that had to be paid back each year.**

J. McNamee began the black sea bass discussion. For black sea bass, the recreational measures are set on a coastwide basis. The coast had harvested approximately 70% over their 2010 target. The implication for 2011 was that the coast, and thereby RI, had to reduce its catch by implementing more restrictive regulations in 2010. Before moving on to discussing management options in 2011, J. McNamee went over the black sea bass stock status. The status of the black sea bass stock was that it was in very good shape and was not overfished, and overfishing was not occurring. The stock was considered to be rebuilt. Despite the assessment findings, black sea bass was still experiencing difficulties because of the low tiering of the current stock assessment modeling approach. Therefore status quo quotas had been propagated forward in each of the last 3 years leading to low commercial quotas and overharvest in the recreational sector.

J. McNamee finished by indicating that the DFW supported any measures that met the approved methodology for reduction of catch. However, J. McNamee went on to say that things were still very much in flux at this time. Black sea bass was being re-discussed by the Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the National Marine Fisheries Service, which may or may not result in any changes for 2011. J. McNamee indicated that the DFW would remain engaged in these deliberations. As well, an addendum was currently making its way through the process, though it was not out to the public at this point.

J. McNamee gave the required coastwide option of a 13 inch fish, a season of July 1 – Sept 30 and November 1- December 31, all at 25 fish per person. The panel made the same comments as for scup. The month of October was a very important piece of the RI black sea bass fishery and they were being shut out of that fishery. **F. Blount indicated that the early winter was also a good season and he hoped they could get that re-opened at some point in the future.** There was discussion on a possible northward migration of the bulk of the black sea bass stock and the stock assessment process in general.

R. Hittinger asked for any recommendations. **M. Ambrosia stated that he would like to see at least the beginning of October reopened to transition them from their fluke fishery to their tautog fishery.** R. Hittinger stated that this could also be introduced at the public hearing were M. Ambrosia interested. R. Bellavance stated that problems with the rec fishery will continue because the biomass was so high so a fisherman can't help but catch them. This problem will continue until the stock assessment issues are solved and the quota is increased. There were no objections to either M. Ambrosia's or F. Blount's comments on black sea bass.

D. Costa gave a brief description of the eRec logbook, the electronic recreational logbook program. He implored the group to spread the word about this logbook and stated that this would help the Division in improving their recreational dataset.

R. Hittinger adjourned the meeting.