



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

NEWS RELEASE

Vision: Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

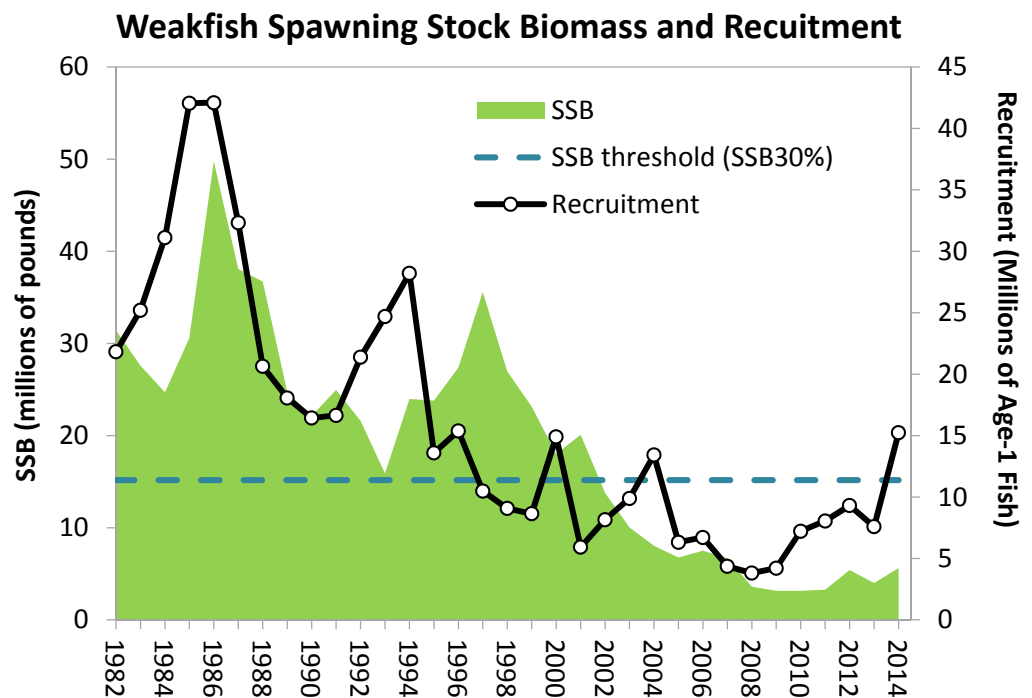
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 5, 2016

PRESS CONTACT: Tina Berger
703.842.0740

Weakfish Assessment Indicates Stock is Depleted and Overfishing Not Occurring

Alexandria, VA – The 2016 Weakfish Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report indicate weakfish is depleted and has been for the past 13 years. Under the new reference points, the stock is considered depleted when the stock is below a spawning stock biomass (SSB) threshold of 30% (15.17 million pounds). In 2014, SSB was 5.62 million pounds. While the assessment indicates some positive signs in the weakfish stock in the most recent years, with a slight increase in SSB and total abundance, the stock is still well below the SSB threshold.

The assessment indicates natural mortality (e.g., the rate at which fish die because of natural causes such as predation, disease, starvation) has been increasing since the mid-1990s, from approximately 0.16 in the early 1980s to an average of 0.93 from 2007-2014. Therefore, even though fishing mortality has been at low levels in recent years, the weakfish population has been experiencing very high levels of total mortality (which includes fishing mortality and natural mortality), preventing the stock from recovering.

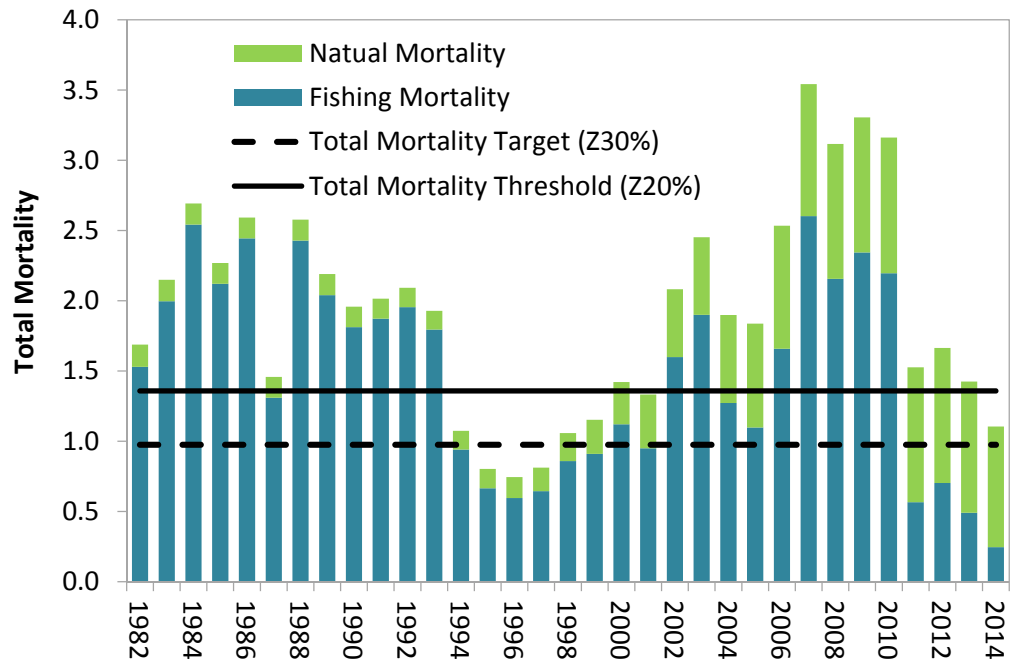


* The stock assessment assumes 10% of the released fish died as a result of being caught and released.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as a deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and anadromous species.

To better address the issues impacting the weakfish resource, the Technical Committee recommends the use of total mortality (Z) benchmarks to prevent an increase in fishing pressure when natural mortality is high. The assessment proposes a total mortality target of 0.93 and threshold of 1.36. Total mortality in 2014 was 1.11, which is above the threshold but below the target, indicating that total mortality is still high but within acceptable limits. This is the first time in 13 years that Z has been below the threshold, and additional years of data are needed to determine whether estimates in Z in the most recent years will remain below the threshold.

Contributions of Fishing and Natural Mortality to Weakfish Total Mortality



Weakfish commercial landings have dramatically declined since the early 1980s, dropping from over 19 million pounds landed in 1982 to roughly 200,000 pounds in 2014. The majority of landings occur in North Carolina and Virginia and, since the early 1990s, the primary gear used has been gillnets. Discarding of weakfish by commercial fishermen is known to occur, especially in the mixed species trawl fishery, and the discard mortality is assumed to be 100%. Discards peaked in the 1990s but have since declined as the result of management measures and a decline in stock abundance.

Like the commercial sector, catch in the recreational fishery has declined from over 11 million pounds in 1983 to roughly 77,000 pounds in 2014. Recreational harvest has been dominated by New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Recreational discard mortality, which is assumed to be 10%, has decreased with recreational catch.

The Board accepted the stock assessment and peer review report for management use, including its proposed new reference points for both SSB and Z. Given the weakfish management program is already highly restrictive with a one fish recreational creel limit, 100 pound commercial trip limit, and 100 pound commercial bycatch limit, and the assessment showed a slight increase in SSB, the Board took no management action at this time. It directed the Technical Committee to prepare for an assessment update in two years, at which time the Board will review the results and consider possible management action.

A more detailed description of the stock assessment results is available on the Commission’s website at http://www.asmfc.org/uploads/file//572b74a22016WeakfishAssessmentOverview_Final.pdf. The final assessment and peer review report will be posted to the Commission website, www.asmfc.org, by mid-May on the weakfish webpage. For more information on the stock assessment, please contact Katie Drew, Senior Stock Assessment Scientist, at kdrew@asmfc.org; and for more information on weakfish management, please contact Megan Ware, FMP Coordinator, at mware@asmfc.org.