



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

NEWS RELEASE

Vision: Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

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Atlantic Sturgeon Benchmark Stock Assessment Indicates Slow Recovery Since Moratorium; Resource Remains Depleted

Norfolk, VA – The Commission’s Atlantic Sturgeon Management Board reviewed the results of the 2017 Atlantic Sturgeon Benchmark Stock Assessment, which indicate the population remains depleted coastwide and at the distinct population segment (DPS) level relative to historic abundance. However, on a coastwide basis, the population appears to be recovering slowly since implementation of a complete moratorium in 1998. Despite the fishing moratorium, the population still experiences mortality from several sources but the assessment indicates that total mortality is sustainable. The “depleted” determination was used instead of “overfished” because of the many factors that contribute to the low abundance of Atlantic sturgeon, including directed and incidental fishing, habitat loss, ship strikes, and climate changes.

Atlantic sturgeon are a long lived, slow to mature, anadromous species that spend the majority of their life at sea and return to natal streams to spawn. While at sea, extensive mixing is known to occur in both ocean and inland regions. The Commission manages Atlantic sturgeon as a single stock, however, NOAA Fisheries identified five DPSs of Atlantic sturgeon based on genetic analysis as part of a 2012 Endangered Species Act listing: Gulf of Maine, New York Bight, Chesapeake Bay, Carolina, and South Atlantic. Accordingly, this benchmark assessment evaluated Atlantic sturgeon on a coastwide level as well as a DPS-level when possible.

Atlantic sturgeon are not well monitored by existing fishery-independent data collection and bycatch observer programs, and landings information does not exist after 1998 due to implementation of a coastwide moratorium. Because of this, Atlantic sturgeon are considered a “data-poor” species which hindered the Stock Assessment Subcommittee’s ability to use complex statistical stock assessment models, particularly at the DPS-level. Based on the models used, the stock assessment indicated the Atlantic sturgeon population remains depleted relative to historic levels at the coastwide and DPS levels. Since the moratorium, the probability that Atlantic sturgeon abundance has increased coastwide is high and total mortality experienced by the population is low. The results are more mixed at the DPS-level due to sample size and limited data, but the Gulf of Maine and Carolina DPS appear to be experiencing the highest mortality and abundance in the Gulf of Maine and Chesapeake Bay DPS is not as likely to be at a higher level since the moratorium.

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 diadromous species.

The Board approved the 2017 Atlantic Sturgeon Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Reports for management use and discussed the need to support management actions that have contributed to recovery seen to date (e.g., the moratorium, habitat restoration/protection, better bycatch monitoring) and continue to work on improving them (e.g., identifying bycatch and ship strike hotspots and ways to reduce those interactions). It is important to note there has been a tremendous amount of new information about Atlantic sturgeon collected in recent years. Although this does not resolve the issue of the lack of historical data, it certainly puts stock assessment scientists and fisheries managers on a better path going forward to continue to monitor stocks of Atlantic sturgeon and work towards its restoration.

Atlantic sturgeon are managed through Amendment 1 and Addenda I-IV to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic Sturgeon. The primary goal of the amendment is to achieve stock recovery via implementation of a coastwide moratorium on Atlantic sturgeon harvest and by prohibiting the possession of Atlantic sturgeon and any parts thereof. The moratorium is to remain in effect until 20-year classes of spawning females is realized and the FMP is modified to reopen Atlantic sturgeon fisheries.

The Atlantic Sturgeon Benchmark Stock Assessment, as well as the Stock Assessment Overview (which is intended to aid media and interested stakeholders in better understanding the Commission's stock assessment results and process), will be available the week of October 23rd on the Commission website, www.asmfc.org, on the Atlantic Sturgeon webpage under stock assessment reports. For more information on the stock assessment, please contact Dr. Katie Drew, Senior Stock Assessment Scientist, at kdrew@asmfc.org and for more information on management, please contact Max Appelman, Fishery Management Coordinator, at mappelman@asmfc.org or 703.842.0740.

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