

# **Technical Committee Report**

Weakfish

Amendment 4 Implementation Programs and Other Issues

*Prepared by:*

**Weakfish Technical Committee**

Chair: Jim Uphoff

Stock Assessment Chair: Desmond Kahn

*Presented to:*

**Weakfish Management Board**

**February 2003**

The Weakfish Technical Committee held a conference call on February 11, 2003. The purpose of the call was to review state implementation plans and commercial landings data by gear and discuss issues that arose during the review. Below is a summary of the call and concerns and recommendations that the TC would like to bring before the Board.

### **State Implementation Programs and Commercial Landings Data**

The TC felt that all of the proposed state implementation programs for Amendment 4 were sufficient to meet the requirements of Amendment 4. Rhode Island was required to develop new full implementation program because it no longer qualifies for *de minimis* status. Rhode Island's initial proposal was insufficient to comply with Amendment 4. Jim Uphoff gave Rhode Island guidance as to what is necessary to comply. It has submitted a revised proposal that is currently under review by the TC.

The TC reviewed all of the commercial landings data by gear type reported by non-*de minimis* states. The purpose was to determine significant shifts in a state's commercial fishery that may justify changes in closed season strategies. There were changes observed in recent years as compared to an earlier reference period. However, at this point the TC did not see significant changes enough to warrant any new recommendations.

### **Fishing Mortality Reduction Percentage**

The TC reviewed an issue brought up by the PRT concerning fishing mortality reduction percentages. It was noticed that there is a discrepancy, or simply a typo, that has been carried over from Amendment 3 to Amendment 4. Within the text of Amendments 3 and 4, states have been required to achieve a 33% reduction in fishing mortality (F). However, in the Evaluation Guides, as attachments of Amendments 3 and 4, the equation is set up for states to calculate a 32% reduction. After discussion, the TC agreed that a 32% reduction was the intention of the plan as seen in the Evaluation Guides. Most states' reduction falls within the range of 32% and 33%. The TC recommends that states be required to achieve at least 32% reduction in fishing mortality. States that had been fishing at a 33% reduction and will now to fish at 32% must submit their plans to the TC for approval.

### **Amendment 4 Sampling Requirements**

Some members of the TC have expressed serious concerns about the effect of pooling recreational and commercial sampling requirements in Amendment 4 on construction of the catch-at-age (CAA) matrix. This pooling may leave us short on critical length and age information describing commercial harvests in the northern states. Construction of an accurate CAA matrix is fundamentally important to the Weakfish VPA because ADAPT assumes that catch is measured without error. There was general agreement by the TC that otolith samples could be collected from recreational and commercial fisheries. The need for commercial length samples in the CAA matrix outweighs the need to refine recreational length sampling.

Absence of commercial lengths and otolith ages from NJ and NY is of great concern. Combined poundage harvested commercially from these two states equals 29% of the 2001 Atlantic coast

commercial harvest. Both states have higher minimum commercial length limits (NY, 16 inches and NJ, 13 inches most of the season) than MD (12 inch minimum), the nearest state with gear-specific mean weights for trawls (the major gear) that might be substituted to estimate numbers harvested by trawls. Length-frequencies from RI trap nets indicated much larger weakfish were harvested in this region. The substitutions we are forced to make may be overestimating harvest of young weakfish and underestimating harvest of older weakfish. The TC did not support a motion to the Board requesting that length sampling requirements apply only to commercial fisheries. The states represented at the TC meeting agreed to try and collect commercial length samples.

There was some concern about poor sampling of the recreational fishery north of NJ by the MRFSS. Jim Uphoff examined the length frequencies for CT, RI, NY, and NJ. NJ appears to have had a reasonable number of weakfish measured (about 1,200). It appears that less than 20 weakfish were measured in NY and none in RI and CT. However, this small sample reflects the relative size of the recreational harvests in these three states; NY-RI recreational harvest comprised only 2% of the 2001 Atlantic Coast estimate.

### **Sublegal Weakfish Discards**

Loss of sublegal weakfish discards was raised as an issue. These losses are not included in the VPA estimates of directed F. Losses of sublegal discards have always been acknowledged as important to weakfish by the TC, but fell out of the stock assessment after the first SARC. Modest to large sublegal losses could substantially lower the levels of F needed to meet target and limit spawner biomass per recruit. It may be time to gather some information on trends in effort in the south Atlantic shrimp fishery to evaluate the possibility of BRD savings being offset by rising effort. Desmond Kahn informed the TC about an upcoming manuscript he reviewed that describes substantial discard loss estimates for the butterfish and Atlantic croaker trawl fisheries.

This concern over unaccounted for discard losses reflects continued concern by some members of the TC about conflicting signals from the 1981-2000 stock assessment and recent declines in harvest in 2001-2002. Stock size estimates were high and directed F was low in 2000, but preliminary harvest information from DE and MD suggest very poor harvests in 2002. Preliminary MRFSS harvest estimates for 2002 through wave 5 (wave 6 was not available) indicated that Atlantic Coast recreational harvest has fallen by 46% between 2000 and 2002. Mid-Atlantic (the primary region of weakfish harvest) party/charterboat trips and private boat trips fell by 12% and 18%, respectively; effort dropped much less than harvest. All trips were looked at, not just directed trips.

### **Stock Assessment Workload**

The TC discussed the need to keep working on the stock assessment continuously. Desmond described the large amount of work needed to compile the CAA and felt that the task would become too much if several years of data accumulated. Additional help is needed from other members of the TC to put the CAA matrix together. He noted that NC and VA make a large contribution by estimating CAA for their states.