

Striped Bass, Here We Go Again....

I know... this is getting tiresome.

Every six months or so, it seems like there is another attempt to “liberalize” regulations – which is a “nice” way of saying “kill more fish” – at the expense of everyone else up along the coast of course.

Here’s the latest.

As you may recall, in 2015 there was a mandated 25% reduction across all states in response to a decline in striped bass abundance, clearly described in a 2013 benchmark stock assessment. As part of such reduction there was a size limit increase in the Chesapeake Bay, from 18" to 20". Earlier this year, the state of Maryland, with the support of Virginia, Delaware and New Jersey, sought to initiate an addendum with the intent to liberalize regulations on striped bass, because the charter boat fleet in some regionally specific-areas of the Chesapeake Bay were allegedly experiencing “economic harm,” because they could no longer kill an 18" fish.

In the end, such “economic harm” was difficult to prove. While there may indeed have been some regional impacts, recreational effort and catch was way up in the Chesapeake Bay, so much so that they exceeded even their pre-reduction harvest target by a large margin.

Furthermore, while fishing mortality was below the “overfishing” target in 2015, initial estimates/projections indicated that it would be above it in 2016 and 2017. And, given the fact that striped bass were just a hair above the “overfished” threshold, there really was no biological justification for any increase. And so, the motion to initiate an addendum to liberalize regulations failed by a few votes. Instead, the board “decided to wait until the release of the results of the 2018 benchmark stock assessment before it considered making changes to the management program.”

Fast forward to now, and scientists are initiating that new benchmark striped bass stock assessment, which is slated for completion in the fall of 2018.

And so, before the Striped Bass Board meeting last month, Commissioners got a staff memo requesting “Board guidance regarding Atlantic striped bass FMP (Fishery Management Plan) goals and objectives.”

As part of the benchmark stock assessment, scientists will “update or redefine biological reference points.” What that means is they will revisit and maybe adjust the “overfishing” and “overfished” targets/thresholds among other things. The intent is to redefine what a healthy stock looks like... What

should the spawning stock biomass target be, and what is the threshold for action should it fall below a certain point? And... at what point is “overfishing” occurring? (i.e. what’s the fishing mortality target, and threshold for corrective action?)

Yes, this is getting a little wonky and hard to understand (for clarification, see Fissues’ Atlantic Striped Bass Species Description, particularly the section about “reference Points” at <http://fissues.org/atlantic-stripped-bass/>). But let’s move on by going back a little here.



As another attempt to increase harvest at the expense of angler opportunity unfolds, it’s imperative we stay engaged

In 2003 the commission passed Amendment 6 to the Striped Bass FMP, with the intent to maximize the overall benefits of the fishery. The focus was to ensure a stock structure that included enough older, larger fish, which would provide a buffer should consecutive spawning failures occur as they did in the late ’70s-early ’80s.

Furthermore, instead of simply managing for yield, the board would manage for “opportunity.” Specifically, leave a few fish in the water so that the angling community, among others, could have a reasonable opportunity to catch some fish, including “trophy” fish.

And so, the “overfished” and “overfishing” reference points that were developed were arguably “conservative.” Some managers, particularly those from MD, VA and DE, and... ahem, NJ, felt they were overly-conservative, and that a greater emphasis should have been put on harvest. If we were asked to interpret that, we would say it means we should allow people to kill more fish so extractive special-interests can make more money, and to hell with everyone else.

Anyway, here we are, at the precipice of another stock assessment, and the Stock Assessment Subcommittee wants “guidance” from the ASMFC Striped Bass Board on goals and objectives, on whether or not they should continue with such conservative reference points that seek to provide broad opportunity along the coast, or whether they should assume more risk and shift the management paradigm towards yield.

Let’s be crystal clear here that the current goals and objectives, as well as the “conservative” reference points were, at least to some extent, the result of two years of advocacy and public comment by the recreational fishing community, who certainly let commissioners know that a great majority of the public wanted striped bass managed conservatively. Because everything had to go through the transparent, public process of Amendment development, including an extended public comment period and public hearings in every state, managers heard us, loud and clear. **(to page 34)**