

WITEK: WORDS MATTER (from page 7)

It provides that, “If the commercial quota was less than 10.6 million lbs, the quota could be increased up to 10.6 million lbs if the recreational fishery was not anticipated to land their allocation for the upcoming year.”

The key word in that provision is “land”; as the management plan is written, the goals of the recreational fishery are deemed to be the same as those of the commercial fishery—harvesting bluefish. No consideration was given to the catch-and-release fishery at all.

That’s important in the case of bluefish which, because they can be strong-tasting, particularly if not bled and iced down as soon as they are caught, are not particularly valued as food. However, they are valued for their fight, and many anglers are completely content to catch and release bluefish all day, without keeping a single fish.

The Bluefish Allocation Amendment could end up punishing anglers for releasing fish that they don’t intend to eat. It is somewhat ironic that if recreational fishermen killed more of their catch, and used the unwanted fish for fertilizer or just dumped them at the local landfill, as happened far too often in the past, no one would be talking about reallocation. But because the anglers are returning live fish to the water, to help maintain abundance, provide good fishing in the future, and perhaps bolster the spawning stock, they could be subject to a punitive reallocation.

Reading the [Scoping and Public Information Document, Bluefish Allocation Amendment to the Bluefish Management Plan](#), which kicked off the public comment process on the amendment, makes the bias against, and nonrecognition of, catch and release fishing clear. The scoping document notes that

“A coastwide time series of recreational harvest and catch (harvest and *discards*) in numbers of fish is provided... [emphasis added]”

Four more times in the text, the term “discards” is used, including one sentence noting that “*Discards* in the recreational fishery remain relatively high throughout the time series. [emphasis added]”

Discards.

The word “releases” is *not used one single time* in any section of the document describing the fishery or the possible

goals of the amendment. It is as if, to managers, the catch-and-release fishery did not exist at all, and was unworthy of consideration if it did.

Since anglers don’t seem to value bluefish—after all, they “discard” most of their catch rather than, at the least, taking them home and feeding them to the tomatoes—some fishery managers would just shift recreational quota to the commercial sector, which apparently values the species enough to want to kill more of them. (It should be noted here that few commercial fishermen support reallocation, so this is not criticism of them, but of the management mentality that makes such reallocation a worrying possibility.)

That sort of thinking is possible because federal fishery management is strangely schizophrenic when it comes to catch-and-release angling. One of the clearly stated purposes of the [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#), which governs all fishing in federal waters, is “to promote domestic commercial and recreational fishing under sound conservation and management principles, including the *promotion of catch and release programs in recreational fishing*. [emphasis added]”

The law also defines “bycatch” to include “fish which are *harvested* in a fishery, but which are not sold or kept for personal use, [including] economic discards and regulatory discards. *Such term does not include fish released alive under a recreational catch and release fishery management program*. [emphasis added]”

Both “economic discards” and “regulatory discards” are also defined, but Magnuson-Stevens does not define any other sort of “discards” that would seem to include those fish voluntarily returned to the water by anglers. And since released fish are, by definition, not “harvested,” it doesn’t seem that they’d be bycatch, either.

Looking at the letter of the law, it would seem that a released fish should be treated by managers as, well, a released fish, and not as a discard.

But that’s not the way things have played out. Instead, [regulations adopted by NMFS in 2008](#) state that

“A catch-and-release fishery management program is one in which the retention of a particular species is prohibited.

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