

# Stakeholders tell the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission to rebuild striped bass



by CHARLES WITEK



Throughout the month of March, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) held webinar/hearings, seeking stakeholder comments on future striped bass management measures. The comments were focused on issues raised in the *Public Information Document For Amendment 7 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan For Atlantic Striped Bass* (PID) which, as its name suggests, was seeking input that could be used to shape a new amendment to the ASMFC’s striped bass management plan.

The PID is a wide-ranging document, that addresses nine different issues, including the goals and objectives of the striped bass management plan, the biological reference points that are used to gauge the health of the stock, the triggers for management actions should the biological reference points be exceeded, the timeframe for rebuilding an overfished stock, regional management, conservation equivalency (whether states should be allowed to adopt their own regulations that are different from, but have the same conservation impact as, the management measures adopted by the ASMFC), recreational release mortality, recreational accountability, and commercial quotas.

Stakeholders were also invited to raise any other issues that they felt were relevant to striped bass management.

The ASMFC held hearings on the PID for every coastal state between Maine and Virginia, along with a separate hearing for the Potomac River Fisheries Commission. Just about every hearing saw recreational fishermen turn out in good numbers, and everywhere but New Jersey, where sentiment was split, those fishermen came out strongly in favor of more rigorous striped bass conservation measures.

*[Editor’s Note: RISAA submitted formal written comments on preferred options.]*

There was very broad support for maintaining the current goal and objectives of the ASMFC’s striped bass management plan. The current goal is “To perpetuate, through cooperative interstate fisheries management, migratory stocks of striped bass; to allow commercial and recreational fisheries consistent with the long-term maintenance of a broad age structure, a self-sustaining spawning stock; and also to provide for the restoration and maintenance of their essential habitat.”

The seven objectives intended to support that goal can be divided into biological and administrative items.

The biological objectives would prevent overfishing,

maintain a healthy abundance of striped bass, and maintain a broad age structure that includes many older, larger fish, in order to support quality, economically viable commercial, recreational, and for-hire fisheries.

The administrative objectives stressed the need for consistent management along the coast, cost-efficient data gathering, and regulations that remain consistent over multiple years.

There was equally broad support for the current biomass and fishing mortality reference points, which are based on striped bass stock structure in 1995 and are calculated to achieve the goal of the management plan.

There was almost no recreational support for reducing the biomass target and threshold, in order to increase the fishing mortality rate and resultant landings; some commercial fishermen did support such an approach, while a few members of the for-hire fleet called for management measures that would allow their customers to regularly take striped bass home for food.

Closely related to the initial two questions were the management triggers and rebuilding times. The current triggers require managers to reduce fishing mortality to the mortality target within one year if it rises too high, and to initiate a 10-year plan to rebuild spawning stock biomass to its

target level if it ever drops too low. Such triggers and rebuilding timelines were generally, if not universally, favored by those who provided comment.

However, many recreational fishermen, as well as some for-hire operators, criticized the ASMFC for not taking action quickly enough when the spawning stock began to decline. They pointed out its failure to initiate a rebuilding plan in 2014, even after a management trigger which clearly said that it “must” do so was tripped by the 2013 benchmark stock assessment. And they pointed out that, even though the 2019 benchmark stock assessment found the striped bass to be overfished, no 10-year rebuilding plan had yet been put in place.

The ASMFC representatives present at the hearings did, at times, try to argue that the Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board (Management Board) adopted management measures intended to reduce fishing mortality, and that such reductions represented a “first step” in the rebuilding process. However, they could not deny that the Management Board failed to adopt a rebuilding plan that would restore the stock within a period that “is not to exceed 10 years,” as the management plan requires. **(to page 9)**

---

**...many recreational fishermen, as well as some for-hire operators, criticized the ASMFC for not taking action quickly enough when the spawning stock began to decline.**

---