



## WITEK: STRIPED BASS (from page 8)



The remainder of the issues discussed in the PID were less critical to the overall health of the striped bass stock, but were nonetheless important.

A proposal to investigate the possibility of regional management measures was unpopular, largely because there is no existing, peer-reviewed population model that would support such an approach. Many commenters left the door open to regional management when, and if, such a model was ever developed.

**Very few people who spoke at any of the meetings had anything good to say about conservation equivalency**, the doctrine that allows states to adopt measures different from those adopted by the Management Board, so long as they are calculated to have a similar conservation benefit.

Much of the opposition arose out of a belief that states abused the conservation equivalency process, and the fact that the Management Board doesn't follow the dictates of the ASMFC's *Interstate Fishery Management Program Charter*, which requires that any conservation equivalent measures "achieve the same quantified level of conservation" as the measures adopted by the Management Board. Such failure was most recently illustrated in February 2020, when the Management Board, in approving states' questionable conservation-equivalent measures, reduced the probability that *Addendum VI to Amendment 6 to the Atlantic Striped Bass Interstate Fishery Management Plan* (Addendum VI) would succeed in reducing fishing mortality to its target level from an already marginal 50% to a mere 42%, rendering such addendum more likely to fail than to achieve its goal.

**Recreational fishermen were also very opposed to the PID's focus on recreational release mortality, even though it accounts for 48% of all striped bass fishing mortality.**

While just about everyone agreed that anglers have a responsibility to handle the bass they catch carefully, and practice good release techniques, they felt that it was inappropriate to single out recreational release mortality as a particularly serious problem.

**To rebuild the striped bass stock, all forms of fishing mortality, including commercial and recreational landings, must be reduced.**

Commenters noted that the release mortality rate for striped bass is only 9%, and that Addendum VI's requirement that circle hooks be used when fishing for bass with bait should cause that rate to fall even lower. They pointed out that recreational release mortality is a large part of overall fishing mortality because anglers voluntarily elect to release over 90% of the bass that they catch, and that managers should recognize that while recreational fishermen do take some striped bass home, the fishery is primarily a catch-and-release fishery, and should be managed accordingly.

Probably the biggest disagreement among anglers at the hearings revolved around the issue of **recreational accountability**.

Some speakers, who came from both the recreational and commercial communities, felt that the striped bass can't be effectively managed unless the Management Board establishes a hard-poundage recreational harvest limit and holds anglers accountable when that limit is exceeded. Others felt that recreational accountability should be linked to conservation equivalency, with only anglers in states that adopt conservation equivalent regulations held accountable when such regulations fail to accomplish the needed fishing mortality reductions.

Still others argued that if anglers abide by all relevant management measures, and nonetheless kill too many bass, it would be inappropriate to hold them accountable because they remained within the bounds of the law.

The one issue that didn't receive too much discussion in most of the hearings was whether the commercial allocations should be revisited, although allocations were discussed in Delaware, where commercial fishermen are seeking a larger share of the landings. However, as anglers dominated most of the hearings, commercial issues that did not directly impact the health of the striped bass stock were generally given short shrift.

Anglers expressed widespread support for the current goals and objectives of the management plan, as well as the current biological reference points, management triggers, and rebuilding times, and clearly want the Management Board to react quickly when threats to the striped bass arise. Such comments conflicted with what the PID called the three "guiding themes" of the Amendment 7 process: management stability, flexibility, and regulatory consistency.

While few, if any, commenting stakeholders had any objection to the theme of regulatory consistency, which would militate against the use of conservation equivalency and all of the problems that it generates, management stability and flexibility were viewed as problematic. Maintaining management stability would require the Management Board to take no action, and so perpetuate existing management measures when falling recruitment or rising fishing mortality suggest an impending threat to the stock, while the concept of flexible fishery management would take that inaction one step further, and allow the Management Board to ignore a management trigger that had been tripped by declining abundance and/or increasing fishing mortality.

Comments on the PID were taken until April 9. All comments will then be summarized by the ASMFC staff, and provided to the Management Board, which is expected to act on them at its next meeting, which was scheduled for Wednesday, May 5, from 1:00 to 4:30 p.m.

Hopefully, the stakeholders' comments will influence the decision.

*Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, "I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim."*