

## WITEK: ASMFC MENHADEN (from page 8)

Capt. McMurray then touched on an issue that lay at the heart of the question.

He said that the Management Board “should be [adopting the 176,800/187,400 metric ton catch limits)...for the integrity of the Commission.”

But the Commission stopped worrying about its integrity long ago—or, if it still worries about such things, it never lets such concerns get in the way of promoting short-term economic gains.

It became completely clear that the Management Board was going to make the wrong decision, and abandon its reference point target, when **Stephen Bowman**, the Virginia Marine Resources Commissioner, supported the higher landing limits, saying, “The environmental reference points should have an opportunity to work...**but** at the same time should not be punitive in nature...”

“You also have to consider the people who are involved in this [fishery] as well. [emphasis added]”

Because yes, there is always a “but” at the ASMFC, where people want healthy fish stocks, and they want successful management plans, **BUT** they can’t and won’t make the decisions needed to get there, because they are afraid of causing even minor economic distress.

So long as ASMFC commissioners view science-based conservation measures as “punitive” rather than reasonable and necessary, that will never change.

New Hampshire’s governor’s appointee, **G. Ritchie White**, might have been alluding to that unfortunate truth when he asked, early in the meeting, whether the ASMFC had actually succeeded in managing any species to or above its target level.

There was a sort of awkward silence after the question, then a staff reply that the ASMFC was “trying” to do that with striped bass—although no one mentioned that it was failing miserably in such attempt, with the striped bass stock now overfished and the latest management measures having only a 42 percent chance of reducing fishing mortality to the target level—and another staff comment that

“I know that’s the goal...”

But the only species the staff mentioned as being managed to target were spiny dogfish and a very few others, all managed not just by the ASMFC, but also by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, which is prohibited by law from adopting

management measures that are more likely to fail than succeed. If one only considers fish that are managed solely by the ASMFC, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to find even one that is at the target level of abundance.

And the debate over the menhaden catch limit illustrates why.

The ASMFC just doesn’t take the idea of biomass or fishing mortality targets seriously.

Maybe it’s because I’ve been a hunter and a recreational rifle shooter for most of my life, going back to when I got my first BB gun at the age of 9, but I’ve always thought of a target as something that you try very hard to hit.

You might not succeed. Maybe you misjudged the distance to the mark, and hit high or low, the equivalent of scientific uncertainty, or you misjudged the wind, which might be more or less analogous to management uncertainty. But when you press the trigger, you do so expecting to center the shot.

ASMFC seems to view targets differently. It sets them up, then maybe doesn’t try to hit them at all (take a look at the ASMFC’s history of tautog management before 2017) or, as in the case of the current menhaden target, just takes sloppy shots that are likely to fly wide. If it does hit a target, it’s largely through luck.

And despite the comments about management to the target level being “the goal,” the fact that the ASMFC suffers no consequences for repeatedly failing to hit its mark doesn’t provide any incentive to improve the accuracy of its management efforts.

So the ASMFC’s recent failure to adopt a catch limit with a realistic chance of achieving the fishing mortality target shouldn’t have come as a surprise to anyone. We should have expected the Atlantic Menhaden Management Board to break the promise it made last August.

Because that’s just what the ASMFC does. And unless Congress steps in to make things right, that’s very unlikely to change.

*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.”*

## NEWSLETTER DEADLINES

Articles and submissions for the RISAA newsletter must be received by the 15th for the next month’s publication. Items received after this date will be held until the following month.

Questions? Call the RISAA office at 401-826-2121 or send email to [Editor@risaa.org](mailto:Editor@risaa.org)



**Don't Settle for Less  
State-of-the-Art  
Rescue Towboats  
Based in:**

**Narragansett Bay • Point Judith • Block Island**

**SAFE/SEA**

**401-295-8711 [www.safesea.com](http://www.safesea.com)**