

WINTER FLOUNDER ADVISORY PANEL MEETING SUMMARY
March 14, 2006

Attendees: George Allen, Chairman, Ken Ketcham, Co-Chair, Laura Skrobe, Robert Smith, Edward Baker, Jerry Carvalho, Bob Morris, Paul Karcz, Steve Travisono, Mike Lanni, Mike Bucko

RIFDW: Najih Lazar, April Valliere

Staff presented an update of winter flounder stock status in RI waters, trends in stock biomass and fishing mortality as they related to current target rates. Data from the monthly and seasonal trawl surveys was presented, along with data from the juvenile beach seine surveys in Narragansett Bay and the Coastal Ponds and data from the adult fyke net survey. Recent on winter flounder from the trawl and fyke net surveys show a slight increase in abundance, while the juvenile seine surveys show a decline. Stock biomass is well below the target Bmsy, however fishing mortality continues to decline. One member requested the ichthyoplankton survey results in the report.

Staff reviewed current winter flounder regulations covering the Coastal Marine Life Management Area, original intent and status of the CMLA since 1996. Landings from the CMLA never exceeded 30% of the allotted quota, and have declined to 200 pounds in 2005. Few permits are issued, and reporting is minimal. The program is an administrative burden to DFW and has not provided any apparent benefit to the recovery of winter flounder in the Bay. Chairman Allen expressed his concerns about fishing effort at the entrance of the bay when fish migrate at the mouth of the Bay at certain times of the year. DFW recently added 2 new stations to the trawl survey, one at the mouth of the East Passage which has produced high numbers of winter flounder. Recent management measures for groundfish, Amendment 13 and ASMFC actions are designed to rebuild the SNE winter flounder stock and increase biomass. The fish need to be protected as they migrate at the entrance of the Bay prior to spawning and during emigration from the Bay.

Motion: Modify the current CMLMA lines, that the current lines be moved south to the COLREGS line. Eliminate the quota, possession limits and permitting requirements for the Bay. Coastal Pond regulations would remain the same.

Motion carried 5:1.

A discussion of bycatch in small mesh fisheries was prompted by discard data presented for observed trips in 2001. DFW recommended that additional data was needed to assess bycatch, as the data was 5 years old and limited to 2 vessels. The WFAP reached consensus that bycatch be verified by observers, and that DFW

commit to provide 2 trained seas samplers to validate the winter flounder bycatch in small mesh fisheries. Two advisory panel members indicated they would assist in soliciting vessels to participate in RI state waters.

DFW reminded the panel of the current tagging study and lack of returns from outside the coastal pond. Returns are coming from recaptures and from recreational fishermen in the coastal ponds. Members were asked to spread the word about the importance of returning tags to the commercial fishery.

An over view of the current dredge window to protect spawning seasons of fish was given. The current dredge window is October 15-January 31, with no extensions. However numerous extensions have been granted to companies based upon their failure to finish the work within the allotted timeframes, sometimes into February. Based upon DFW Ichthyoplankton studies, the critical time for winter flounder eggs and larvae starts around mid-January. Therefore, DFW proposes the dredge window be October 15-January 15th. The AP unanimously supported this proposal and added that no extensions should be included.