

**Summer Flounder Advisory Panel
Meeting Minutes
February 19, 2007
Division of Fish and Wildlife
Wakefield, RI**

There were 19 people in attendance (*primary advisory panel member; ^ alternate member)

David Preble, Chairman

Frank Blount*

Jim Low*

Al Conti*

Chris Brown*

Ed Cook*

Bob Neilson

Steve Fena

William George

Ed Kearney

Steve Medeiros, RIMFC

Robert Redinger

Robert Gandet

Doug MacPherson

Mike Bucko

George Allen

Bill ??

Kevin ??

Brian Murphy, RIDFW

Regulations on recreational season, bag limit, and minimum size for summer flounder in 2007

D. Preble called the meeting to order at 6:05 PM. He then explained the options available to the AP for setting size, bag, and season limits for the 2007 recreational fishery. The 2006 catch statistics were discussed, along with the large unexplained discrepancy between the numbers for the party/charter sector (54% under 2005) and the private recreational sector (65% over 2005), for a total 25% over the state TAC for 2006. This led into a discussion of the inadequacies of the MRFSS data. The consensus among the group was that there are too many flaws with the program and no faith in the accuracy of the data, nor in the requirement for a 47% reduction in the RI recreational TAC for 2007. The panel unanimously agreed that a letter should be forwarded by the Council to ASMFC voicing their objections to the approach taken to achieve reductions in landings.

The panel next discussed the discard and hook mortality problem in the recreational fluke fishery, and agreed that the problem would be greatly exacerbated by the 2007 size increases and that this should also be included in the letter to the ASMFC.

The panel then considered the options necessary for the State of Rhode Island to achieve the required 47% recreational TAC reduction. F. Blount stated that he would prefer a 19" minimum size with a 7 fish bag limit and a season starting on May 18th until whatever closure date was necessary. He questioned if a variation on the season was possible since his proposal was not one of the seasons presented. B. Murphy indicated that the methodology was approved by ASMFC and alternative seasons could be proposed but would have to be forwarded to the technical committee. He also stated that the last day of the season with a May 18 opening would be September 16th. Doug MacPherson proposed an 18" minimum size, 7 fish bag limit and a season from June 24 to September 30th. He stated that he would prefer a smaller minimum size because he primarily fishes in Narragansett Bay where the fluke are smaller than off the coast. Representatives of bait & tackle shops were also in favor of that option. Another individual who fishes from the shore was also in favor since large fluke are not frequently encountered from shore. A third proposal was to split by mode between party/charter boats and private boats. The proposal was a 19" size, 7 fish bag and a season from May 18th to September 16th for party/charter sector and an 18" size, 7 fish bag and a season from June 24 through September 30th for the private recreational sector. A fourth option included an 18.5" minimum size, 7 fish bag limit, and a season from June 10 through September 3.

Discussion ensued regarding summer flounder management and the general agreement was that there is no real conservation benefit associated with the options presented. Increasing the minimum size will lead to an increase in discards and ultimately mortality while shortening the season will impact businesses and tourism. And there is really no savings associated with a smaller bag limit unless it is drastically cut down to one or two fish. In order to reduce the number of discards, C. Brown suggested allowing small fluke caught incidentally to be kept if the hook is deeply embedded and would likely cause fish to die if removed. He stated that the line could be cut and the hook kept in fish for enforcement purposes. He indicated that such options should be considered so that real conservation benefits could be realized.

D. Preble commented that there is more savings associated with higher minimum sizes than with bag limits and suggested removing the proposals that included a minimum size below 19" from the table. The panel voted in favor of removing those proposals. D. Preble then commented that there were two remaining proposals

- #1) Split mode with a 19" size, 7 fish bag, and a season from May 18 to September 16 for the party/charter sector and an 18" size, 7 fish bag, and a season from June 24 through September 30 for the private recreational sector.
- #2) A 19" minimum size; 7 fish bag, and a season from May 18 through September 16 for all recreational anglers.

Other suggestions for the future included mid-season closure windows, a split between Narragansett Bay and offshore State waters, and other strategies to reduce discards. The issue of enforceability was raised and its relevance in adopting alternative strategies. The panel agreed that regulations should be based on conservation benefits rather than ease of enforcement or statistical analyses. The panel unanimously decided to add this point in the letter to ASMFC.

The panel then voted on the two preferred options.

#1) mode split: 3 in favor, none opposed, 2 abstentions

#2) 19" minimum size, 7 fish bag limit; season from May 18 through Sept 16: 2 in favor, none opposed, 3 abstentions.

When asked to select one of the options, three were in favor of option #1 and two in favor of option #2.

There was further discussion of the mode split. B. Murphy stated that the option to split by mode would probably not be approved by ASMFC. The Panel understood but elected to go forward with it anyway.

Regionalized management options were reviewed and it was determined that any region including NY would not be beneficial to RI. There was discussion on the regional approach and the benefits from aggregating the data such as better accuracy and fewer fluctuations in regulations from year to year. Of the regions presented nobody was in favor of including states south of CT. There were no votes in support of recommending any other region. The panel felt that forming a region under crises mode would be both unlikely and undesirable.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 PM.