



## New England Fishery Management Council

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### MEETING SUMMARY

#### **Skate Advisory Panel** Hilton Garden Inn, Boston, MA March 28, 2018

The Skate Advisory Panel met on March 28, 2018 in Boston, MA to: discuss the alternatives considered in Framework 6, which would prolong the skate wing fishery, and make recommendations for preferred alternatives to the Committee.

**MEETING ATTENDANCE:** Mr. David Wallace (Chair), Mr. Greg Connors, Ms. Sonja Fordham, Ms. Andrea Incollingo, Mr. Gregory Mataronas, Mr. William McCann, Mr. Paul Parker, and Mr. John Whiteside; Dr. Matthew McKenzie (Committee Chair); Mr. Lou Goodreau (NEFMC staff) and Dr. Fiona Hogan. In addition, approximately 10 members of the public attended.

**KEY OUTCOMES:**

- The Advisory Panel recommended as preferred the option that reduced the uncertainty buffer to 10%.
- The Advisory Panel recommended not adjusting the skate wing possession limit.

**PRESENTATION: SKATE FRAMEWORK 6**

Staff provided the Advisory Panel with a summary of the options analyzed by the PDT that would reduce the uncertainty buffer and modify the skate wing possession limit. The PDT concluded that the buffer included both management and scientific uncertainty. The PDT constructed a table of all sources of uncertainty, any improvements that have been made, and what effect that had on uncertainty. The PDT analyzed reducing the management uncertainty buffer by 5%, 10%, and 15%. Reducing the buffer could increase fishing effort, as the TAL would increase, which could have negative impacts on protected resources and essential fish habitat because of the potential for increased interactions with both. Allowing additional landings could have some positive economic impacts but increased mortality on skate may have some low negative impacts on the stock. The Committee tasked the PDT to analyze an intermediate skate wing possession limit as part of Framework 6. The PDT analysis used FY2015 data because it was the last full year of “natural” fishing behavior; the incidental possession limit was implemented in both FYs 2016 and 2017. It is not possible to know what trips restricted to 500 lb would have actually landed if there was no restriction. The analysis did not result in the TAL being achieved for any of the options to reduce the uncertainty buffer. The intermediate skate wing possession limit would be expected to be implemented in both seasons under FY2015 effort patterns as the FY2018 TAL as set in Framework 5. This could result in a maximum of 6 possession limits in place within a single fishing year, which enforcement identified as a concern.

**AGENDA ITEM #1: SKATE FRAMEWORK 6**

The Northeast skate complex has not had a benchmark assessment since the Data Poor Working Group reviewed the assessment in 2009. An AP member requested clarification as to why the TAL was not projected to be achieved under any of the uncertainty buffer options. Staff explained that under the conditions used to analyze the buffer options, the incidental possession limit was triggered and reduces the ability of the fishery to reach its TAL. Another AP member was concerned that FY2015 conditions are no longer representative of fishing patterns since the fishery has seen increased effort in recent years and informed the AP that 80 additional vessels landed skate in FY2017. Staff explained that it is impossible to make a suitable assumption about what a trip that was restricted to 500 lb would have landed if they were not restricted by the low incidental possession limit. There is no behavioral model that would provide that information. Another AP member did not know of additional participants in the skate fishery in recent years and thought effort could be down with Sector 9 not being able to land their quota. The information regarding additional vessels landing skates came from a data request of GARFO. The incidental possession limit was implemented because the quota was reduced to a level below what historical landings had been. The open permit system in place for skates allows anyone to catch skate right now. It was thought that vessels were landing skate instead of discarding them because the price went up.

An AP member did not think the science was incapable of keeping up with what fishermen are seeing on the water but that skates haven't been a priority. It was suggested that the AP should make a recommendation that a benchmark assessment should be held. There were also issues with survey vessel reliability.

AP members were generally in favor of a 10% uncertainty buffer because it increased what they could land. An AP member thought that effort would be less in FY2018 while the number of skates encountered has never been higher. Another AP member considered that since barndoor will be landed in the future, the amount of winter skate that is landed will be affected. Another AP member wanted to note that the stock is data poor and that some of the skate species have low reproductive potential and some have low biomass. The lack of a buffer between the ABC and OFL should be accounted for. The AP member thought those factors should lead the group to take a precautionary approach and recommend an uncertainty buffer of 20%. Another AP member disagreed and thought that catch history going back to the 1960s provided a lot of data and the existing triggers and incidental possession limit could be used to react quickly and slow the fishery down.

#### **Public comment:**

- Matt L. – I fish for skates year round. I would support the 10% buffer. I think things will get thrown over anyway. Doesn't make sense that things will go over anyway. Data is so terrible on this species that we can't get a stock assessment out of it. I think the effort has gone up. It's gone up 30% in our town since 2013 because skates are easy to catch and close to the beach. I support limited access but the data is very poor on this and there are more skates than I've ever seen. It's ridiculous now that you have to go to 100 fathoms to get away from them. There are gear conflicts. There has to be some changes made and some will get hurt but can't keep getting along like this every year. They got hit pretty hard this winter without fish to process and it really impacts a lot of people when you can't keep fish year round. I told 3 guys that work for me that we're off for a while. They have bills. We have to have some stability in this fishery. The lease prices on groundfish and we can't catch enough. When you lease groundfish out and make more money doing that than catching it then you have to go catch something else. You need to analyze what boats are catching a lot of skate or not, what will it affect limited access. Right now there's a wild west. We're close to the skates in summer time and easy to catch them. If the price in 2013 it wasn't great but in 2016 it was great so a lot of boats got into it in 2017.

**1. MOTION: Whiteside/Connors**

Recommend to the Committee to reduce the uncertainty buffer to 10%.

**MOTION #1 CARRIED 6-1-0.**

Staff explained that if the AP recommended modifying the skate wing possession limits, limited action would be delayed further. An AP member did not want limited access to be delayed further and supported moving forward with a 10% uncertainty buffer but not modifying possession limits. Another AP member thought that modification of the possession limits might not be needed if the TAL increases as a result of reducing the uncertainty buffer. An AP member was concerned that by pushing off modifying the possession limits the incidental possession limit could be implemented earlier in the fishing year. An AP member suggested lowering the possession limit in the summer and fall (e.g. to 3800/3900 lb) to extend the season.

**2. MOTION: Parker/Connors**

Recommend to the Committee to go with status quo possession limits.

*Rationale:* We need to expedite limited access. Any work on possession limits would further delay development of a limited access program.

Staff clarified that the Council had only included one skate framework in its 2018 priority list. If there was interest in modifying the possession limits, this would be the only opportunity unless the Council revised its priority list.

**Public comment:**

- Matt L. – I think it should go with the status quo just the rationale is we got through the last 2 years with the shut down so more beneficial in the future to go with limited access so I can dictate when I go fishing and not you telling me when I can and can't go. Easier for my business plan.

**MOTION #2 CARRIED 7-0-0.**

An AP member had a question regarding whether it was necessary to land winter skate in order to keep barndoor skate. Staff explained that the barndoor possession limit was based on a percentage of the overall skate wing possession limit. The way the regulations were drafted did not require winter skate to be landed in order to keep barndoor skate. The AP member also asked what the skate wing possession limit was when fishing on a Monkfish Only DAS. Staff thought vessels had access to the full wing possession limit but would confirm that.