Scallops: Council Receives 2021 Survey Season Overview; Updates on Framework 34 and Other Work Priorities

The New England Fishery Management Council received a high-level overview of the 2021 scallop survey season when it met by webinar for its September 28-30, 2021 meeting. It also received a progress report on Framework Adjustment 34 to the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan and short updates on: (1) the Scallop Survey Working Group’s recent meeting; and (2) a project to evaluate the scallop fishery’s rotational area management program.

Scallop survey coverage this year was extensive throughout the range of the resource. Several surveys were conducted on Georges Bank and in the Mid-Atlantic. These were done by three survey partners under the Scallop Research Set-Aside Program (RSA) and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Participating RSA partners included:

- Coonamessett Farm Foundation;
- UMass Dartmouth’s School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST); and
- The Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS).

SMAST and the University of Maine also conducted RSA surveys in the Gulf of Maine, including on Stellwagen Bank.

Snapshots from 2021 VIMS surveys: (1) upper left, measuring scallops collected during the Closed Area I and II surveys; (2) the commercial dredge coming up from a tow in the Mid-Atlantic Bight; and (3) scallop muscle and digestive gland samples collected to investigate feeding ecology of scallops in the Mid-Atlantic Bight.
Overall, the survey groups discovered that biomass in the Mid-Atlantic Access Area is down substantially. While blips of pre-recruit scallops occasionally were found, the survey teams did not see signs of another strong incoming year class. Most of the remaining scallops in this area are nine years old, stemming from the exceptional 2013 year class, which has run its course. As such, 2022 fishing activity in the Mid-Atlantic Access Area is expected to be minimal, and the Scallop Plan Development Team (PDT), Scallop Committee, and Scallop Advisory Panel are discussing the possibility of reverting this area to open bottom.

**Two Bright Spots**

Survey teams did find evidence of recruitment in the New York Bight and Nantucket Lightship West areas. The Council is considering establishing rotational closures to protect concentrations of small scallops in both locations. Closures such as these are the premise behind rotational management. Areas with small scallops are closed to fishing activity to give the animals time to grow to a harvestable size. A few years down the road, the closure areas are reopened and fishing is allowed to take place on larger scallops.

The New York Bight area that’s under consideration for a closure (see blue box in map at right) contains multiple years classes, including many smaller scallops with growth potential that will not recruit to the fishery in fishing year 2022 (see closeup shots below at right). Establishing a rotational closure in the New York Bight would provide an opportunity to improve yields for all scallops, especially the smaller ones, and increase the potential for downstream recruitment to the Hudson Canyon and Elephant Trunk areas in the Mid-Atlantic, as...
recent research suggests is possible.

Surveys conducted by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center and Coonamessett Farm Foundation using a Habitat Camera Mapping System (HabCam) showed high densities of very small scallops – less than 35 millimeters in shell height – in the western portion of Nantucket Lightship (see graphics below). HabCam is a towed underwater camera that takes a constant stream of images along the seafloor. It is a survey tool that can help identify new beds of very small seed scallops, also referred to as spat.

The Scallop Plan Development Team will analyze establishing a second rotational closure to cover Nantucket Lightship West in addition to the New York Bight. If the new year class of seed scallops in Nantucket Lightship West survives and continues to grow, these scallops should be ready to start contributing to the fishery several years down the road.

**Current Biomass**

The highest concentrations of harvestable biomass were found in Nantucket Lightship South and within Closed Area II on Georges Bank. These are the areas the PDT will analyze for possible access area fishing in 2022.

Most of the scallops in Nantucket Lightship South will be 10 years old in 2022. These slow-growing scallops continue to be available in dense concentrations and, despite their smaller size, have drawn high prices on the market.

Survey teams saw some modest signs of recruitment in Closed Area II in the southeast portion, extension, and Habitat Area of Particular Concern (colored orange above).
As part of its work on Framework 34, the Scallop Plan Development Team is analyzing several possible configurations for Closed Areas II access area trips under two trip limit options – 18,000 pounds and 15,000 pounds – with trading allowed in 9,000-pound and 15,000-pound increments. The PDT also will provide a range of possibilities for open area fishing days.

Biomass in Closed Area I is no longer high enough to support an access area trip for the limited access fishery. However, the PDT is looking at two options for this area: (1) reverting it to open bottom; and (2) reserving the area for LAGC IFQ access area fishing and RSA trips. LAGC IFQ is the acronym for the limited access general category individual fishing quota component of the fishery.

**Northern Gulf of Maine (NGOM)**

In the Gulf of Maine, most of the biomass is located on Stellwagen Bank. The portion of the biomass that’s inside the Northern Gulf of Maine Management Area, meaning north of 42º 20’, is protected by a closure that will remain in place until changed by Framework 34. The biomass on Stellwagen Bank south of 42º 20’ is open bottom and available for fishing by the limited access and LAGC IFQ components of the fishery.

**Framework Adjustment 34 – What’s Next?**

Framework 34 includes 2022 fishing year specifications, 2023 default specifications, and other provisions. It also is the vehicle that will put in place measures developed under Amendment 21, which is under review by NOAA Fisheries. The amendment and framework are expected to be implemented concurrently by the start of the new fishing year, which is April 1, 2022.

The Council will take final action on Framework 34 during its December 7-9, 2021 meeting. Between now and then, the Scallop PDT, Committee, and Advisory Panel will hold several meetings to prepare final recommendations for the Council’s consideration. Keep tabs on the Council’s scallop webpage for a list of upcoming meetings.

- Meeting materials used during the Council’s September scallop discussion are posted [HERE](#).
- View the [presentation](#) for a quick overview of what’s in Amendment 21 and the timeline for implementation of the amendment and Framework 34.

**Recent Scallop Landings, Projections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fishing Year</th>
<th>Total Landings (Pounds)</th>
<th>Projected Landings (Pounds) from Framework</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>58,461,465</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>47,524,175</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
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Source: [year-end catch reports, updated August 3, 2021](#).

The Scallop Plan Development Team has not developed an estimate of projected landings for the 2022 fishing year yet. Based on 2021 survey results, 2022 scallop landings are expected to be lower than in 2021.