



New England Fishery Management Council

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Council Considers Adjusting Skate Bait Trigger, Possession Limit

The New England Fishery Management Council has initiated a framework adjustment to the Northeast Skate Complex Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to consider alternatives for adjusting the skate bait threshold trigger and possession limit.

The Council's Skate Committee recommended the action, and the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) will provide assistance in developing the document. The framework will be narrowly focused, addressing *only* the trigger/possession limit issues. The Council anticipates taking final action at its June meeting and, if all stays on schedule, NMFS is aiming to implement the new measures in December.

Complications with this winter's fishery led the Council to pursue a framework adjustment. On January 30, NMFS reduced the commercial per-trip possession limits for both the skate wing and skate bait fisheries to the following "incidental" levels:

- **Wings** – 500 pounds, down from 4,100 pounds; and
- **Bait** – 1,135 pounds (the whole weight equivalent of 500 pounds), down from 25,000 pounds.

Under current regulations, the two limits are tied together, so the bait fishery's incidental possession

limit always is set at the whole weight equivalent of the wing fishery limit.



Tagged winter skate, University of New England (UNE) research cruise.
– James Sulikowski, UNE photo

This winter, during skate wing Season 2 and bait Season 3 of the 2016 fishing year, total allowable landings (TALs) reached their respective 85% and 90% thresholds, triggering NMFS to conduct landings projections. Based on the results, the agency reduced possession limits to incidental levels to "prevent the seasonal skate wing and skate bait commercial quotas from being exceeded."

The lower possession limits, however, were preventing the TALs from being attained, partly because fishermen found it uneconomical to fish at such low levels, especially for skate bait. NMFS then *increased* the limits to 4,100 pounds of wings and 9,307 pounds of bait on March 15 so that fishermen would have an opportunity to fully utilize the TALs through April 30, the end of the fishing year.



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The new framework, which will become “Framework Adjustment 4,” will explore options that potentially allow possession limits for the bait fishery to be independent of the wing fishery.

Skate Amendment 5 – Limited Access

The Council held six scoping hearings and accepted public comment through March 6 on Amendment 5 to the Skate FMP, which is considering developing a limited access program for both the skate bait and skate wing/non-bait fisheries.

No clear consensus emerged from the hearings. While some supported limited access, others did not. Many members of the public were neither for nor against limited access, saying they wanted to see more specifics before formulating an opinion. Others preferred to address issues related to the skate wing and bait fisheries without developing a limited access program at all.

Consequently, the Council’s Skate Committee and Skate Plan Development Team will continue working on the amendment to, among other things:

- Analyze the feasibility and/or practicality of dividing the two skate fisheries to develop independent limited access programs for each one; and
- Further investigate whether or not limited access is justified for either fishery at this point in time.

Specifications, Barndoor Skates

The Skate Committee, which is expecting to receive updated skate survey indices this summer, also will be working on a 2018-2019 skate specifications package for the fishery under Framework Adjustment 5.

This action may consider different possession limits for day boats vs. trip boats participating in the wing fishery if further analysis by the Skate Plan Development Team determines that such a measure might be appropriate. TALs for both fisheries will be part of the specifications.

Framework 5 also will contain proposals to allow fishermen to land barndoor skates. Landings currently are prohibited, but now that the stock is fully rebuilt, the Council agreed that allowing barndoor skate landings would be one of its 2017 skate priorities.

Final action on Framework 5 is expected to take place at the Council’s September or December meeting.

Q: What are the seven species of skates that make up the Northeast skate complex?

A: Barndoor, clearnose, little, rosette, smooth, thorny, and winter skates.

Q: Which species are caught in the bait fishery?

A: The bait fishery targets little skate but also catches a small percentage of juvenile winter skate.

Q: What species make up the “non-bait” or wing fishery, sometimes called the “food” fishery?

A: The wing fishery primarily targets adult winter skates.

Questions? Contact Dr. Fiona Hogan, the Council’s skate plan coordinator, at (978) 465-0492, ext. 121, email fhogan@nefmc.org. Skate documents used during the Council’s April 18 discussion can be found at: <http://www.nefmc.org/library/april-2017-skate-committee-report>