

RI Marine Fisheries Council Summer Flounder Advisory Panel Meeting Minutes
February 20, 2014
URI Bay Campus, Coastal Institute

R. Hittinger, Chairman	M Bucko*
D. Fox ^A	E. Cook*
N. Lazar*	F. Blount*
S. Anderson	J. Barker
G. Latos	P. Heaney
D. Monti	R. Bellavance
C. Donilon	S. Medeiros
R Tellier	J. Taylor
J. Hovanesian	D. Valerin
R. Ballou - RIDEM	J. McNamee, DFW staff

(*primary advisory panel member; ^A alternate member)

R. Hittinger began the meeting. He stated that J. McNamee of the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW or Division) had a presentation which covered the first several agenda topics. R. Hittinger stated that after the presentation the panel would discuss any proposals they may have for recreational management for summer flounder in 2014.

J. McNamee began with a discussion about stock status for summer flounder. The stock was rebuilt and overfishing was not occurring, though the stock has now dropped back below the biomass target. The summer flounder stock went through a benchmark assessment in 2013, and the benchmark passed peer review. He then went over recreational fishery performance in RI in 2013. The fishery went well in 2013 and RI came in under their harvest target, which normally would have allowed for a small liberalization in 2014 (~10%). In 2013 though, the ASMFC Summer Flounder Management Board approved Addendum XXV to the Summer Flounder Fishery Management Plan. This addendum establishes regional recreational management for 2014, instead of state by state which had been the process before. The approved summer flounder regions are Massachusetts and Rhode Island; Connecticut through New Jersey; Delaware through Virginia; and North Carolina. As stated by the board, the addendum was initiated to address a concern that current management measures were not providing recreational fishermen equitable harvest opportunities along the coast. Under this approach, all states within a region are required to have the same possession limit, size limit, and season length. The goal is for the regions to collectively achieve, but not exceed, the recreational harvest limit for the coast. This adaptive regional management approach has been approved for the 2014 fishing year only. J. McNamee concluded with four options that would meet the metrics for the RI & MA Region as noted above:

1. **Min size = 17"; season = 132 days; bag limit = 5 fish**
2. **Min size = 17"; season = 132 days; bag limit = 8 fish**
3. **Min size = 16.5"; season = 132 days; bag limit = 3 fish**
4. **Min size = 16.5"; season = 132 days; bag limit = 5 fish**

R. Hittinger went to the panel for discussion. M. Bucko asked why the recreational harvest limit (RHL) was only 200,000 fish for the two state region of RI and MA. J.

McNamee noted that the various regions were adjusted so that all of the regions had as similar of regulations as possible, which adjusted the regional RHLs from what they would have been if you simply added up the previous state by state RHLs. He went on to note that even though there were regions, each state was still accountable for its previous state by state conservation equivalency RHL. D. Fox and D. Monti asked clarifying questions about how the addendum would work under various scenarios. The gist of the discussion was that it was risky to adopt regulations that would dramatically increase the harvest in RI.

N. Lazar noted that one positive aspect of the regions was that it improved the harvest estimates of MRIP above what it was for a single state alone. E. Cook asked about additional options. J. McNamee stated that other options could meet the required metrics, but he had developed a range to give the panel something to review.

D. Fox stated that RI would be crazy to go along with the regional approach. He felt it was very risky and could create impacts beyond the recreational fishery, namely it could impact the commercial fishery as well.

F. Blount stated that MA would probably be willing to go to 17", but they would want to increase the bag limit. Despite that, he recommended status quo for RI as he was nervous about dropping the minimum size a whole inch. S. Medeiros agreed and felt they should try to stay as close to status quo as possible. J. Barker also agreed with remaining at status quo as the best approach for RI.

R. Bellavance asked about how much impact there might be for dropping the minimum size an inch. J. McNamee showed some of the calculations, but it would be a significant increase. N. Lazar suggested adopting the region but then implement a more restrictive management plan, which had been allowable in the past. J. Barker noted that we were under our harvest limit so he did not think RI should have to take any cuts, we had been good stewards of the resource both in the previous year and for several past years with very conservative management.

M. Bucko made a motion to remain at status quo and to encourage MA to also adopt their status quo regulations. The motion was seconded.

R. Hittinger asked for discussion on the motion. R. Bellavance stated he was opposed to any regulation that adopts different regulations for RI and MA since customers may decide to go to MA. D. Fox supported the motion and stated that RI should draw a hard line as he feared the precedent that RI would be setting as this could then go in to commercial summer flounder and then other species. N. Lazar supported the motion.

F. Blount made a motion to table the previous motion. This motion was seconded. The vote on the motion to table was 4 to approve and 1 abstention.

F. Blount made a motion to go in with the highest minimum size, bag, and a season from May 10 – September 15. The motion was seconded. The vote was 4 to approve and 1 abstention. The motion passed.

There was an additional proposal offered for management. The proposal was called the

fish for the future proposal (attached). R. Hittinger asked for discussion on the proposal and R. Bellavance discussed it. F. Blount feared that if this goes forward to the summer flounder management board, it could weaken the argument being made for the management idea the panel just voted on. P. Heaney asked about some of the program logistics. D. Monti gave his perspective as a member of the previous program that used RSA. He liked the program, it worked well for his business, and he felt it was a highly accountable program that produced many conservation benefits.

F. Blount asked a question about whether if the minimum size went down for the general recreational fishery if the proposal was still attractive. R. Bellavance stated that his answer was yes because there idea was to prove the concept with this pilot program.

E. Cook stated that RISAA was opposed to the proposal and read a statement developed by RISAA (attached). M. Bucko stated that he supported the program. He thought it was progressive and produced good data. He did state that the program had a serious perception problem though. He brought up a point about MRIP sampling and how the program would deal with that, and the potential problems the program could create if one of the program boats were sampled. He did feel that if the pilot was a stepping stone for a larger program for the whole mode, he was supportive. R. Bellavance stated that they were intentionally keeping it small to test the concept, but if it proved to be a benefit and manageable, he thought it could be applied to the whole mode. P. Heaney supported it if the idea was to expand it.

F. Blount continued to be concerned that it would impact the options discussed earlier in the meeting. J. McNamee stated that the concept was that they would still be fishing for the same number of fish, just taking them in a different way, so he would make that point to the TC when they reviewed the program. In other words, it should not impact the overall harvest.

D. Fox did not support the program because he felt sectors had not worked well on the commercial side and he also did not like the idea that a small group would be given a possible advantage over other groups.

N. Lazar liked the program because it would develop a program that was more like a census rather than collecting the data through the traditional MRIP avenue.

F. Blount asked if the fish were transferable and if so, could one boat end up with all the fish. R. Bellavance said yes but that this was not likely because it was not pragmatic.

F. Blount made a motion to move the proposal forward to the RIMFC for further discussion. The motion was seconded. The vote was 4 to approve and 1 abstention.

This concluded the discussions and R. Hittinger adjourned the meeting.