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July 13, 2012

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL &
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Dr. William Karp
Director
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543-1026

Re: GB YT Assessment

Dear Bill:

We recently attended the Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee (TRAC) meeting that discussed the Georges Bank yellowtail flounder (GB YTF) assessment on behalf of the Fisheries Survival Fund (FSF). First, we want to emphasize that we have profound respect for all of the hard work that NMFS scientists put into stock assessments and acknowledge the difficulty of the work. Despite all of the hard work of the GB yellowtail stock assessment team, those of us at the meeting were presented with a seriously flawed assessment. We are writing to implore NMFS to state that the assessment is not viable for use as a basis for catch advice, to propose that NMFS and the NEFMC use alternative catch strategies to set the allocation for GB YTF and to request that NMFS embark upon an expanded biological research program for GB YTF. Let us be clear, FSF is not advocating for a new benchmark assessment or against a justified reduction in catch. FSF is advocating for an open and objective process in setting catch, and we are convinced that the process before us now is arbitrary.

During the discussion of the GB YTF assessment, the TRAC discussed whether the assessment should be used for providing catch advice. It was clear that, with no clear set of guidelines to make the judgment and no clear alternative path for giving catch advice, members of the TRAC were reluctant to reject the assessment, despite overwhelming evidence of its unsuitability.

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As you are aware, the GB YTF assessment has been problematic for some time. The last benchmark assessment for GB YTF occurred in 2005. The Base Case model, or single series model, was developed during the 2005 assessment and quickly began to show a retrospective pattern. In an attempt to account for the retrospective pattern, in 2009, the assessment team presented the split series model, where the trawl series was given a different catchability rate starting in 1995. By splitting the time series, the assessment team was able to mask the retrospective pattern as the change in catchability successfully accounted for the unknown aliases that were causing the retrospective pattern. This split series model fix proved to be ineffective as a strong retrospective pattern quickly emerged again, to the point that the split series was not used to provide catch advice in 2011.

Now, in 2012, the retrospective patterns in both the single series and split series model have both increased significantly and the TRAC promptly agreed that neither model is useful for catch advice. (Single series rho values ranged from .72 to 2.48 and split series rho values ranged from .5 to 1.62). To the assessment team's credit, they explored ways to correct the model. The exploration led to the team conducting three separate model runs that mechanistically changed the catch rate, the natural mortality rate and both the catch rate and the natural mortality rate, to ascertain if they could eliminate the retrospective pattern. What they found is that they had to change the catch rate by as much as five times and the natural mortality rate by as much as four times to remove the retrospective pattern.

These three adjustments were each chosen to minimize retrospective patterns. It was, however, agreed that their magnitudes were all too great to be regarded as plausible explanations for the patterns in the data. Thus, there remain as yet no mechanisms hypothesized that lead to a (VPA) model with results consistent with these patterns. In these circumstances, where there is the absence of plausible VPA models that fit the data satisfactorily, the available models should not be used as the basis for catch advice; the catch advice should instead be formulated using other approaches such as ones based on trends in indices.

NMFS scientists argued instead that the adjustments made constitute adequate surrogates for the currently unknown underlying mechanisms leading to these patterns, and therefore constitute a sufficient basis to provide catch advice. This view is extremely problematic, as it is contrary to the conclusions of the 2008 Retrospective Pattern Working Group that only recommended this approach in the case of a moderate pattern. No one is arguing that the present retrospective pattern is moderate. Therefore, the agency is asking the industry to accept a 50% reduction in quota, on top of a 50% reduction in quota from the previous year, on the basis of a model run that scientists need to adjust with the use of implausible catch and M rates to fit the model to the data, and with techniques that are contrary to NMFS' own stated position.

Also, the diagnostic tests of the split series VPA continue to decline, as denoted in figure 24 of the TRAC working paper. FSF understands that we do not know what is causing the

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retrospective pattern and that the VPA is not equipped to handle other, unknown parameters that are causing the retrospective pattern. However, FSF cannot agree with the use of implausible assumptions to mask the unknown aliases that are causing the problem as a basis for catch advice. As a general rule, when an assessment displays a retrospective pattern, it is considered inaccurate and should not be used for fisheries management purposes. Chris Legault, Chair of the NOAA Retrospective Working Group, in their January 2008 Report wrote: "A strong retrospective pattern is grounds to reject an assessment model as an indication of stock status or the basis for management advice." Does NMFS intend to follow its own advice?

If the model is not capable of accounting for the unknown aliases, the answer is not to put one's head down and go forth into that statistical night; rather, it is to accept the limitations of the model and acknowledge the obvious: we are currently in a place that is beyond the capability of the current model, making the model no longer useful for catch advice. As stated before, this letter is not intended to plead for more fish, the intent is to plead for a proper process that is defensible and not arbitrary. If there are to be cuts in the fishery, so be it, but it must be done in an open and justified manner. Is this assessment actually capable of clearing any objective diagnostic analysis of its ability to provide accurate catch advice?

In this situation, where we no longer have an assessment that can provide accurate catch advice, the use of alternative catch setting strategies is required. Let us be clear, FSF is not asking for, nor would FSF support, a new benchmark assessment of GB YTF until there is new data or understanding of the stock to make it a worthwhile enterprise. For GB YTF, there are four separate surveys and plentiful catch data that can allow for an informed decision on catch advice. While providing catch advice based upon a projection from the assessment is always the preferred route, in the instance of an unreliable assessment, using survey and catch indices is the proper scientific course of action as an interim measure until a reliable assessment is made available.

A reliable assessment is the real key to this issue, and a change of course by NMFS is needed to get us there. It appears that all too often NMFS takes the approach of trying to solve an assessment problem by reworking the existing data and using numerous statistical tools. NMFS has exhausted the statistical tool box in the case of GB YTF. We will not improve our understanding of GB YTF until we ask and answer some fundamental questions about GB YTF biology. For instance, the data show a disturbing trend of the disappearance of age 5 and 6 year fish. Until we can reasonably explain what is happening to those fish, there is little hope of having an accurate assessment model. NMFS needs to redirect its limited resources away from the computer models and towards field research. FSF is ready and willing to partner with the agency and use RSA scallop funds to improve our understanding of GB YTF. Our hope is that we can collectively design and execute a research program for YTF.

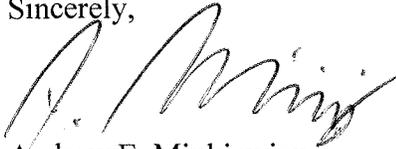
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In conclusion, we are not looking for the agency to just “give us more fish,” nor are we asking for a new and rushed benchmark assessment. What we are asking for, and believe the fishing industry and nation deserve, is a defensible process for setting catch quotas and a partner in moving forward to improve our understanding of this critical stock. To wit we ask that:

- NMFS acknowledge that the current GB YTF assessment is not suitable for providing catch advice;
- NMFS provide the public with an objective set of criteria to judge the viability of an assessment;
- As an interim measure, NMFS and the Council provide catch advice using alternative catch advice strategies that rely on survey and catch indices; and
- NMFS work with FSF and other interested parties in developing and executing a research program for GB YTF with the goal of creating a credible stock assessment.

FSF does not wish to enter into a contentious fight with NMFS over the status of GB YTF, but we cannot and will not sit back passively and accept catch advice that is based upon an indefensible and ultimately arbitrary assessment. FSF is offering a constructive path forward and we are hopeful that NMFS will join us in our mutual endeavor to better manage our nation’s fisheries.

Sincerely,



Andrew E. Minkiewicz
David E. Frulla

cc: Samuel Rauch
Daniel Morse
Rip Cunningham
Senator Begich
Senator Snowe
Congressman Fleming
Congressman Sablan