New England Fishery Management Council

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Monkfish: Council Receives Report on Estimating Discards for TAL Calculations; Directs Committee to Consider Next Steps

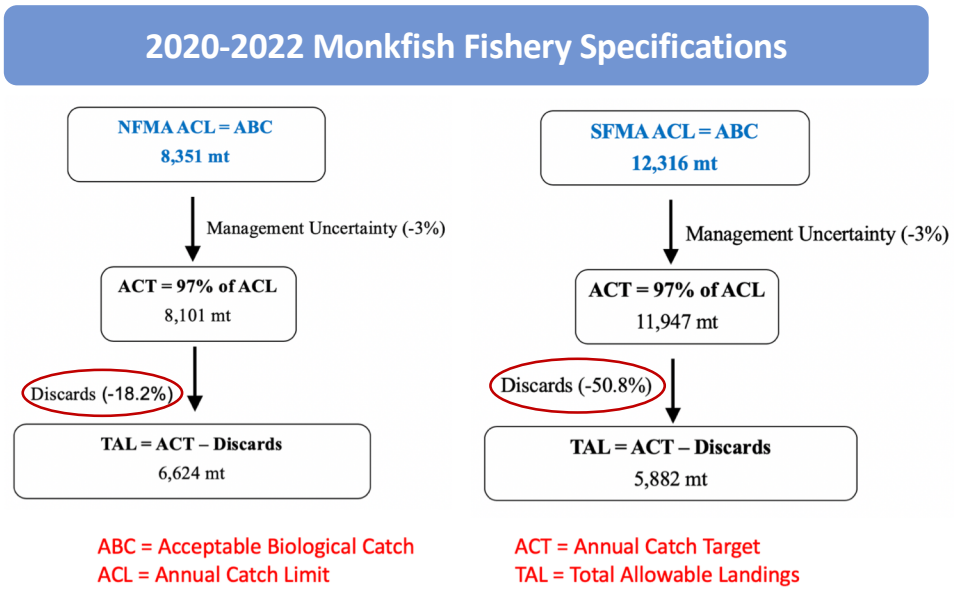
The New England Fishery Management Council has received a new report that provides insightful information about monkfish discards and how alternative approaches for projecting future discards might be used when setting limits on total allowable landings (TALs) in the fishery.

The Council sets monkfish specifications every three years using data from the previous three years. In September 2019, the Council signed off on 2020-2022 specifications using data from 2016-2018. Discards during that three-year period were notably higher than the past period, increasing from 13.9% to 18.2% in the Northern Monkfish Management Area and from 24% to 50.8% in the Southern Management Area.

Since discards are subtracted from the annual catch target to get to the landing limit for fishermen (see flow chart below), the large change in discard estimates was concerning, especially in the southern area, because the estimates were reflective of a high discard period that was not expected to continue in the future.

In an effort to get a better grip on what was happening with discards, the Council voted last December to make it a 2020 monkfish priority to investigate whether alternative approaches to calculating discards might be better and, if so, to consider adjusting specifications for the 2021 and 2022 fishing years.

This spring, the Council issued a contract to Fishery Applications Consulting Team, LLC to conduct the analysis. The resulting report is called *Evaluation of Methods to Estimate Monkfish Discards for Calculating Total Allowable Landings*.



The Council received a presentation on this report at its June meeting and learned that an especially large 2015 year class of monkfish led to higher than normal discards. Those fish were one, two, and three years old during the 2016-2018 period used to calculate discards for the 2020-2022 specifications. Many of

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the small fish were discarded during that period. However, fish from the 2015 year class have grown. They began entering the fishery in 2019 at a marketable size. Although the landings information isn't fully available yet, the assumption is that fewer fish are being discarded now.

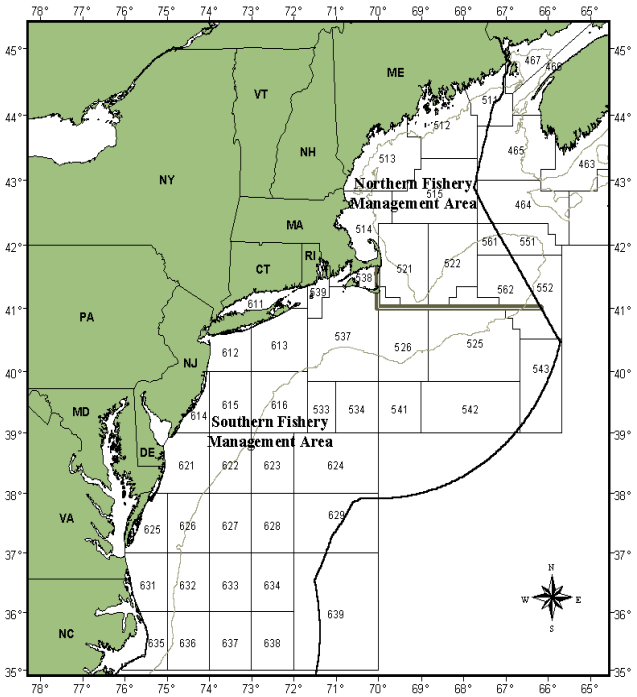
The analysis considered numerous factors, including gear specific discards, growth information, survey data, and more. Also, the report notes that monkfish discard mortality currently is assumed to be 100% for all gear types, but that assumption is surrounded by "uncertainty" since some published studies have found the percentage to be lower.

Based on the available information, Fishery Applications Consulting Team concluded that: (1) the current approach for calculating discards, which averages recent data to predict future discards, "performed well when discards were stable but did not perform well after the strong 2015 recruitment event"; and (2) longer-term discard estimates could be used to set TALs with periodic review of monkfish recruitment indices "to justify a temporarily increased discard rate assumption for future specification periods."

What Will Happen Next?

The Council voted to send the report to its Monkfish Committee and Monkfish Advisory Panel (AP) for further discussion and consideration of "next steps while developing fishing year 2021 priorities this fall."

The Council emphasized that reviewing 2019 data is essential to confirm that discards were actually lower than projected in 2019, as is expected. The Council will review the Monkfish Committee and AP recommendations during its September meeting.



The thick green line in the map above divides the Northern and Southern Fishery Management Areas for monkfish.

Age 1 monkfish grow to roughly 25 centimeters (cm) or 9.8 inches. Age 2 monkfish grow to roughly 40 cm or 15.7 inches and begin to reach maturity. Age 3 monkfish grow to over 43 cm or 16.9 inches and are more valuable to the commercial fishing industry. – NOAA Fisheries photo

Visit the Council's monkfish webpage here.

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