

# The Allocation Morass

by CHARLES WITEK



Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, "I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim."

Everybody wants more fish.

Commercial fishermen make more money when they can harvest more product, while recreational fishermen have long cast envious glances at the commercial harvest, and tried, by various means, to convert some of those commercial landings into their own.

It's not just an inter-sector conflict. In both commercial and recreational fisheries, there are sub-allocations that divide up the harvest between fishermen in various states, or those fishing from private versus for-hire vessels, or those using different types of gear.

At the same time, deciding who catches the fish, rather than how many are ultimately caught, isn't a conservation issue. A dead fish is a dead fish, no matter who lands it, so as long as the overall annual harvest doesn't exceed sustainable levels, allocation has no impact on stock health.

Allocation of harvest to the various sectors and sub-sectors is the responsibility of the various regional fishery management councils, and of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). In making allocation decisions, fishery managers rely heavily upon "catch history"—historical patterns of harvest—but also give some consideration to various social and economic factors, as well as to the distribution of fish stocks.

Once allocations are set, they very seldom change, despite often significant changes in markets, in the fishery, and in fish distribution.

There are a number of reasons for that, but the biggest one is that fisheries managers just don't like to get bogged down in allocation debates. Such debates tend to be long, bitter and filled with rancor, because allocation is usually a zero-sum game.

Unless some portion of the annual catch limit typically remains unused, the only way to give someone more fish is to take fish away from someone else.

Thus, no matter what fishery managers do, they're going to get someone upset. Most managers, given a choice, would rather avoid the issue.

Some of the recent allocation debates demonstrate why that is so.

On the East Coast, water temperatures are rising, and fish stocks are moving north in response. For fish such as summer flounder and black sea bass, that has created a situation where southern states hold most of the quota, but northern states host most of the fish. As a result, southern fishermen are forced to steam hundreds of miles from port in an effort to catch all of their quota, while northern fishermen are forced to dump hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds

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of dead fish back into the ocean because of the very small quotas assigned to the New England and upper Mid-Atlantic states.

The current summer flounder allocations are based on landings during the years of 1980-1989. Throughout those years, the commercial fishery was largely unregulated, and badly overfished; the spawning stock fell to its lowest level of abundance in 1989. Most of the fish, and so most of the harvest was concentrated at the lower end of the species' range. As a result, the southernmost states of North Carolina and Virginia were awarded 27.4% and 21.3%, respectively, of the overall quota.

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