

MENHADEN REPORT (from page 1)

Board discussion of Reference Points (RPs) was not honest

One amazing thing that occurred during the Menhaden Board's discussion of RPs was that states opposed to Ecological Reference Points (ERPs) used data from the Technical Committee (TC) to scare other representatives into thinking that ERPs were going to do more damage to the menhaden stocks than good. Of course this couldn't be further from the truth.

Because of the very high allowable catch projected by the TC for the "Threshold" (maximum possible harvest) under ERPs, those against ERPs said those harvest levels were too high, so you must reject Option E. Everyone failed to say that management is to the Target and that level of harvest is actually 25% below current harvest levels.



I believe that some states' representatives were truly concerned about what they were hearing regarding ERPs and how ERPs may actually be less conservative. The TC did nothing to explain these issues so the opponents of ERPs just kept hammering away.

When it was suggested that they could pass ERPs and set the quota at the *status quo* (current) level of 200,000 metric tons (MT) those opposed said no, you can't do that because that would be allowing harvest at a level higher than the Target level calculated by the TC (147,000 MT).

Once Option E was rejected, Robert Boyles from South Carolina offered an amendment that would allow what VA and others wanted, Option B – continued use of "single species management," but would cap the TAC at current levels of 200,000 MT for 2018 and 2019.

This was calling the bluff of the states that just want to take more fish and they fell right into Mr. Boyles' trap and said "No, we can't vote for a 200,000 MT TAC, that's too low" even though they had just been arguing that Option E was not conservative enough! Total dishonesty!

Technical Committee (TC) swayed the vote

Although the TC is supposed to be the science arm of the Management Board and provide the Board with the scientific information that they need to make good decisions, in this case there was clear prejudice from the TC to reject interim ERPs.

It is not clear if the TC somehow thought that their many years of work developing menhaden specific ERPs would be diminished in importance if Option E passed or for some other

reason, but it was clear that the answers from the TC were incomplete and misleading in the direction of defeating Option E.

The first concern is the TC said they don't know what the effect will be on fecundity of the stock (ability to produce offspring) with Option E because it does not track the various age groups and therefore does not track how many larger breeding menhaden may be harvested. This was used by opponents of ERPs to say that fishing could reduce fecundity under Option E when the real story is that the TC just didn't have data on this and if Option E passed there would be no big change in how menhaden are fished, so there would be no sudden shift to taking large adults over taking younger fish.

As mentioned above, the second issue from the TC used by opponents of Option E was the high harvest rates projected by the TC for the Threshold under Option E. Threshold is basically the maximum that could ever be allowed before the fishery would have to be shut down.

For some reason the models used by the TC predicted the Threshold would not be reached unless harvest level were at 744,000 MT. This is absurdly high and it seems to be some strange quirk of the model. It makes no sense when you look at the TC numbers showing that the current fishing level (200,000 MT) leaves 46% of the unfished biomass in the water and the Threshold requires that you leave 40% of the unfished biomass in the water. How could the difference between leaving 46% now and leaving 40% for the Option E threshold yield a harvest increase from 200,000 MT to 744,000 MT? It makes no sense.

In answer to a leading question asking, "Isn't it true that we are now fishing under single species management and the menhaden stocks are just fine?" The TC basically answered yes. They never clarified that we are not really managing under the single species model, but rather at a conservative level that is half of the allowable harvest because the Board recognizes that menhaden are an important forage fish and if we were fishing at full allowable levels under single species management the stocks of menhaden would be much lower.

Finally, when the Board was discussing the Target for Option E of 147,000 MT the TC never clarified that the 147,000 MT is for achieving 75% unfished biomass in 1 year – 2018, and if 2 year or 3 year options were calculated they would allow a higher TAC, possibly closer to the current harvest level of 200,000 MT.

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