Seemed pretty reasonable, but that failed quickly because no one state wanted to be on the losing end because another state wasn’t acting responsibly.

What looked like a breakthrough came when it was suggested that each state narrow down their proposals and tell the board what measures they were most likely to implement, so we could at least get an idea of what sort of coastal reduction we might see.

Things seemed to go smoothly as states narrowed down their proposals and told the board what they were most likely to implement.

Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut would go with the coastal measure – one fish at 28” to <35”. Rhode Island said they would keep a different slot size – 32” to <40” – on the table, but seemed to lean towards the 28” to <35” slot, acknowledging the benefits to consistency in regulations between states.

New York would go with the 28” to <35” slot as well, but wanted the option for a 31” min size for charter boat operators in eastern Long Island should they want to opt into that program. That part, however, was voted down.

New Jersey actually narrowed down their large list of conservation equivalency options to one at 28” to <35”, but then offered a second proposal, which was not in their original list – one fish with a minimum size of 33” but no maximum size. And this is when things got ugly. That was voted down because pretty much everyone acknowledged the ineffectiveness of having anglers in NY releasing a 36” fish, only to have it swim across NY Harbor to get harvested by a New Jersey fisherman. As mentioned, slot limits just don’t work unless there’s some consistency amongst states.

So then, NJ’s commissioners somehow managed to convince the board to allow them to develop another slot limit measure, with a high end of no more than 403 but with no lower end stipulated, that would achieve an 18% reduction, rather than the 46% reduction they would take under the 28” to <35” coastal slot. I haven’t seen what they have come up with yet, but from what I’ve heard it will be a 28” to <38” fish, which is much better than what they could have done. That said, New Jersey probably won’t meet the 46% reduction they would have under the coastal slot limit.

Frankly, I don’t know how they slipped that one through, because their argument was really that, “well Rhode Island has a different slot, so why can’t we?” I would point out that NY, of course, voted against this.

Moving on, Delaware will likely go with the 28” to <35”, or a 28” to <38” slot. And then… We get to Maryland. What they’ve put together was described by more than one person as “smoke and mirrors.” Their coastal limit will be 28” to <35”, which is good. But what they’ve come up with in the Bay is unlikely to reduce fishing mortality as much as needed.

There will likely be a “no-target” closure in April and March, which is silly as there would be little release mortality in those colder months anyway, and their projected savings from such a closure are likely WAY too high. There will also be a summer closure in July or Aug, which makes sense as this is when discard mortality is highest, but to be truthful a no-target provision is more-or-less unenforceable, so it’s doubtful this will do much. There will be a 19” minimum size limit and one fish bag for private-boat and shore-based anglers for most of the year, and a 35” minimum during the trophy season. Charter and party boat anglers will share the trophy season with them, but will get two fish per day, both over 19”, but with only one over 28” for the rest of the open season.

All of this considered, Maryland, like New Jersey, is quite good at getting its way despite what often seem like unreasonable proposals. Its measures were approved, but not by consensus. There were certainly states that voted against it.

And then there’s VA, who will go 28’ to 36” in the ocean and 20’ to 36” in the Bay.

Accountability

Lastly, there was a discussion on accountability. There seemed to be ample awareness around the table that some states were putting forth conservation equivalency proposals that were intended to maximize harvest in their states, while not necessarily contributing to the rebuilding of striped bass populations.

There was a motion to review the conservation equivalency measures after a year to determine if they were working, and require states to make adjustments. But a discussion ensued about timelines, data accuracy, paybacks etc. that led the board to agree that, technically, it would be very difficult to assess and determine effects of such regulations based on the limitations of the recreational harvest data and the timing of when such data is released. And so, it was voted down.

Takeaways

While we would have liked to have seen the ecological reference points for menhaden voted on and put into play at this meeting, it’s not terrible that we’re waiting until May to do this. It will be interesting to see how bluefish, weakfish and spiny dogfish affect the model.

With striped bass? Well, it was an ugly process, which clearly exposed some malignant problems with the way the Commission works. In particular, how a few self-interested states can screw-the-pooch for everyone else.

I could be wrong, but I suspect that Addendum VI will fall short of its goal of a a full 18% reduction on a coastwide basis. That said, I also don’t think we’ll be as far off the mark as I had expected we’d be coming into that meeting. I fully expected New Jersey to get everything it wanted, and for other states to choose more risky conservation equivalency proposals. Surprisingly enough, that didn’t really happen.

What stood out was that Commissioners seem to be fed up with states like New Jersey and Maryland, which clearly sought to maximize harvest under the auspices of conservation equivalency, and seemed to care little about rebuilding.

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