



Striped Bass Amendment 7: IT'S NOW UP TO YOU

by CHARLES WITEK



On February 3, as expected, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board hastily agreed to approve the Public Information Document for Amendment 7 to its striped bass management plan, and send it out for public comment.

Releasing the **Public Information Document (PID)** is the first step toward drafting and adopting a new amendment to the ASMFC's **Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Striped Bass**, and could result in real and significant changes in the way striped bass are managed for the next couple of decades.

If Amendment 7 gets things wrong, and the bass population goes into steep decline, those of us who lived through the first stock collapse probably won't live long enough to see them recover from the next one—assuming that recovery is on the table.

Now that the Public Information Document has been approved for release, the ASMFC will soon make it available on its website, and begin seeking public comment on the issues raised in the PID. The public comment that results will go a long way toward shaping the rest of the Amendment 7 debate.

Thus, it would make sense for the Management Board to get everything right, and make sure that the PID provides the public with all of the information that it needs to make rational, fully informed comments on striped bass management when they get their chance to do so.

Last week, I suggested—without much hope that it would actually happen—that the Management Board ought to slow down for a while, and not take any more action until the ASMFC can hold in-person meetings on the PID; get reliable data on how Addendum VI to Amendment 6 to the management plank, adopted last October, was impacting fishing mortality; and perhaps even see the results of two important new studies being conducted by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which could provide information that will be very relevant to the Amendment 7 process.

But getting the PID right didn't seem to be as important to the Management Board as getting a flawed document out to the public as quickly as possible.

And the PID is certainly flawed.

Capt. John McMurray, the legislative proxy from New York, did his best to put it on the right track, but found himself fighting alone.

Thus, when the average angler, who doesn't follow fisheries issues very

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McMurray

closely, reads the PID, that angler will be presented with the statement that...

“the 2007 and 2013 benchmark assessments, indicated female [spawning stock biomass] was above the [spawning stock biomass] was above the target for a period of time during the early 2000s. This fits our understanding of striped bass population dynamics, as the population was considered to be at a historically high level during that time period...Given the 2018 benchmark assessment found overfishing was occurring and the [spawning stock biomass] was below the target even during those years that the spawning stock biomass was at a historically high level, the current reference points may be unattainable. [emphasis added]”

Go back and re-read that section, and maybe go back and read it a third time, and let its full meaning set in.

Wade through the words long enough, and you realize that they're arguing that, because fishery managers at the ASMFC knowingly allowed too many bass

to be removed from the population under Amendment 6, the failure of the overfished stock to achieve the target spawning stock biomass proves that such biomass could be “unattainable.”

What the PID doesn't say is that there is not a shred of science to support the statement; the latest benchmark stock assessment, which was peer reviewed by a panel of recognized experts, suggests that if fishing mortality was reduced to target, target spawning stock biomass could be achieved.

Yet the Management Board had no problem sending that sort of biased language out to stakeholders, at least some of whom are likely to believe that it's true.

Worse, because the language in question says that the “current reference points,” and not merely the current biomass reference points, are unattainable, it's also suggesting that it may be impossible to reduce fishing mortality to the target level, something that is patently untrue.

The only reason that fishing mortality is too high today (I can give the Management Board some benefit of the doubt for it being too high 15 years ago, because back then, no one realized how many bass recreational fishermen were really removing from the stock) is because every time it is given a chance to reduce fishing mortality to the science-based target, the Management Board fails to summon the political courage to impose the needed harvest restrictions.

Instead, **it repeatedly caves in to New Jersey and Maryland and anyone else who wants to kill too many striped bass.**

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