

WITEK: AMENDMENT 7 UP TO YOU (from page 8)

Yet when Capt. McMurray pointed out that the PID shouldn't include statements that were unsupported by science, not a single Management Board member stood with him to support that seemingly obvious truth.

Meagan Ware, a fisheries scientist from Maine and one of the co-chairs of the Work Group that provided recommendations on the scope of the PID, did admit that she was "uncomfortable" with the PID's statement about the reference points, and added the following qualifying words to the section:

"given current objectives for fishery performance."

I'm not sure whether that made it better or worse, since the qualification essentially admits that the only reason that the reference points might be "unattainable" is that at least some states' "current objectives for fishery performance" is simply to harvest as many bass as possible, without regard for the health of the stock.

On the other hand, the current "objectives for fishery performance" **spelled out in the management plan** include:

- "Manage striped bass fisheries under a control rule designed to **maintain stock size at or above the target female spawning stock biomass level** and a level of **fishing mortality at or below the target exploitation rate**, [emphasis added]"

- "Maintain fishing mortality to maintain an age structure that provides adequate spawning potential to **sustain long-term abundance** of striped bass populations [emphasis added]" and

- "Establish a fishing mortality target that will result in a net increase in abundance (pounds) of age 15 and older striped bass in the population, relative to the 2000 estimate."

There's certainly nothing in any of those current objectives - **which were all formally approved and adopted by the ASMFC** - that would render the current reference points "unattainable."

All it takes is summoning the courage to follow through with what the Management Board had promised the public it would do when Amendment 6 was adopted in 2003.

So far that sort of moral courage has been in notably short supply at the Management Board.

It was definitely lacking on February 3rd, when no one other than Ms. Ware and Capt. McMurray was willing to admit that there might be something wrong with foisting a scientifically unproven statement off on an unsuspecting striped bass fishing public (and there were more such statements included in the PID but not discussed, including one warning that "management measures focusing on reducing discards could discourage participation from anglers that value food fish and negatively impact the industry that caters to those anglers"), and then seeking their comments in response.

I couldn't help but notice that those who typically champion "conservation" in the abstract were notably absent from the discussion of that particular topic.

Yet, when you look at the history of the ASMFC, there's nothing new about a handful of Management Board members wanting to kill too many bass, and the rest of the Management Board letting them do it.

I can still recall the fight over Amendment 6 to the striped bass management plan that took place twenty years ago. There was one contingent who wanted to focus on yield, and set the

target fishing mortality rate at 0.41, which was thought, at the time, to approximate maximum sustainable yield. I was part of another contingent who, armed with data developed by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, recommended setting the target somewhere between 0.20 and 0.25, which would have allowed more large spawning females to survive, and so increase the number of larger, older fish in the spawning stock.

The Management Board ended up cutting the baby in half, setting a compromise fishing mortality target of 0.30 that supposedly "provides a higher long-term yield from the fishery and adequate protection to ensure that the striped bass population is not reduced to a level where the spawning potential is adversely affected."

But cutting the baby in half, while perhaps a fair compromise, doesn't do the baby much good, and the current state of the striped bass population pretty well shows us how such compromises typically work out for the bass. The latest benchmark stock assessment informs us that the appropriate fishing mortality rate is about 0.20—at the low end of the range that we were arguing for back in 2001.

So yes, the Management Board had reason to know that they were allowing too many bass to be killed back in 2003, and so also has reason to know, today, that if proper regulations were put in place, the current reference points would probably not be "unattainable."

But they also know that it could be politically unpopular among some constituencies and in some states to adopt such rules, and maybe that's why they had no problem letting the bad language stand.

Now that the PID has been approved for release, it's up to you—up to us—to shepherd a reluctant Management Board down the right path, and keep them from exposing the already-depleted striped bass stock to additional hazard.

It's not going to be easy.

Maryland seems to have a lot of sway with the Management Board, and Michael Luisi, the Maryland fisheries manager, has already begun his push for a bigger kill.

John Clark, his counterpart from Delaware, is just as avidly looking to reduce the biomass target and increase Delaware's commercial landings—at that meeting, he took full credit for putting the "unattainable" language in the PID.

And New Jersey, well, you know where they always stand.

To steal a line from President George W. Bush, those three states constitute an "axis of evil" on the Management Board, that will continue to threaten the long-term sustainability of the striped bass stock unless they are decisively defeated.

Twenty years ago, when Amendment 7 was being drafted, we faced the same sort of opponents of striped bass conservation—in one or two cases, it's still the same people who are calling for a bigger kill. Back then, we didn't get the fishing mortality target that we wanted, but we also prevented the target from being set at 0.41, which in itself was a sort of win. And we convinced the Management Board to adopt the objectives of maintaining the age structure of the spawning stock and increasing the number of older, larger fish in the population. Those were wins, too, even if they were smaller wins than we were hoping for. **(to page 32)**