

# ASMFC's Striped Bass Management Should Reflect Realities of the Fishery

by CHARLES WITEK



One size does not fit all.

Yet too often in fisheries management, we see the same model—managing for a high, if arguably sustainable, yield—dominate discussions, even when it doesn't make very much sense.

While yield may be the proper measure in fisheries for species such as whiting and tilefish, which are dominated by the commercial fishery and are exploited primarily for dead fish on the dock, they are far less appropriate for recreational fisheries where greater emphasis is placed on the mere experience of catching fish, which are then frequently released to be caught again, and harvest is a secondary consideration. In such cases, managing for the highest practical abundance and the long-term health of the spawning stock is a far more important management goal than maximizing landings.

That is a particularly important consideration as the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board prepares to address continued overfishing and the overfished state of the striped bass stock when it next meets on the morning of August 8.

For the past few years, far too much of the conversation at Management Board meetings has focused on yield. **Michael Luisi**, a fishery manager for the State of Maryland, has been driving much of that discussion.

For example, at the October 2015 Management Board meeting, after regulations intended to return spiking fishing mortality to the target level hadn't yet been in force for even one year, he complained that, *"I know that my stakeholders—we've heard from a number of them today—have concerns over the reductions that have been taken as a result of Addendum IV..."*

*"There has been a great deal of hardship in Maryland. The commercial charterboat captains have gone out of business as a result of the actions that have been taken. I would like to have it on the record, Mr. Chairman, in your opinion when will stakeholders have an opportunity and when will this board have an opportunity to look at making management change [to increase landings] for the future or are we expecting to just hold the line where we are indefinitely into the future?"*

*"...we've made the argument before we felt that these reductions were extreme. I've heard the word 'crisis' from my stakeholders. The charter, the recreational and the commercial industry are suffering greatly as a result of the reductions that we've taken."*

A year later, at the October 2016 Management Board meeting, information provided in connection with a new stock assessment update demonstrated that far from "suffering greatly," recreational fishermen in Maryland were killing more striped bass than they had been before Addendum IV was adopted. Instead of reducing fishing mortality by 20.5%,

compared to the 2012 base year, as they were obligated to do under the amendment, anglers in Chesapeake Bay actually increased their landings by over 50%. And they were allowed to maintain such high landings despite the Addendum's explicit terms.

Apparently, even that wasn't enough.

Since the 2016 stock assessment update found that fishing mortality in 2015 was 0.16, slightly below the fishing mortality target of 0.18, Mr. Luisi, supported by a few other Management Board members, including John Clark, a fishery manager from Delaware, wanted ASMFC's Atlantic Striped Bass Technical Committee to determine how much the regulations could be liberalized in order to increase fishing mortality by *two hundredths* of a one digit, *an amount so small that it was well within the margin of error of the original calculation.*

Mr. Clark and Mr. Luisi apparently believe that leaving even one extra striped bass in the ocean, to survive and to grow and contribute to the spawning stock, when that fish could have been killed without exceeding the fishing mortality target, is akin to creating an Eighth Deadly Sin.

Because he seems to believe that high harvest levels are the only attribute of successful fishery management, Mr. Luisi argued, *"...if we were to move from 0.16 to 0.18, it would be a small tick, maybe a 5 to 8 percent liberalization, in terms of numbers. Maybe that's what it would be. I don't have the number to refer to in front of me. But what I'm thinking about and what I'm looking at, is the fact that perhaps just that very small change could be something that saves a few of the fishermen in my state."*

*"A half an inch in minimum size could mean a lot to our fleets, our charterboat and recreational fleet; more so to the charterboat community. I've been thinking about this and thinking about what we could do as a next step."*

Again, **it's hard to understand why the Maryland recreational fleet needed a half-inch reduction in the minimum size limit, when they were already grossly overfishing their share of the landings** under Addendum IV, but Mr. Luisi never seems to be too concerned about such overage.

He actually convinced the Management Board to task the Technical Committee with providing an idea of what sort of management measures would achieve a .02 increase in the fishing mortality rate, although in the end, such changes were never adopted.

Even so, that sort of harvest-oriented thinking has dominated the striped bass debate at ASMFC, to the point that the Management Board has given substantial consideration to creating a new amendment to the management plan that would lower the biomass target and threshold and allow higher levels of landings, even though that would increase the long-term risk to the spawning stock. **(to page 35)**