

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON RECREATIONAL FISHERY INFORMATION NETWORK DATA AND SAMPLING REFINEMENTS

The Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) was asked to provide input on Recreational Fishery Information Network (RecFIN) data and sampling refinements.

Comments on RecFIN Technical Committee Proposals

The HMSMT reviewed three proposals for Council consideration set forth by the RecFIN Technical Committee regarding procedures for collecting and processing data in the RecFIN database system and offers the following comments. The first proposal is to standardize the method of determining discard mortalities across the three states. The HMSMT believes this would provide a desirable simplification to current practice.

The second proposal asks the Council to endorse RecFIN pooling rules and refinements as the best estimate of average weights to utilize in the conversion to metric tons landed for management purposes. The pooling rules address the need to express recreational landings in metric tons, despite management rules which prohibit bag retention for some species. In such cases, sampling has been used to produce an estimated mean weight to convert landings to metric tons for each estimation cell in the RecFIN classification scheme, for comparison to allowable catch quotas. The HMSMT recognizes RecFIN's qualifications to conduct the evaluation of conversion factors and is comfortable with this recommendation.

The third proposal requests that allowable catch quotas for recreational groundfish be presented in numbers of fish, and that RecFIN and the states will henceforth report monthly catches in numbers of fish as the official method for monitoring the groundfish quota. Although this proposal only applies to groundfish, the HMSMT is interested in the potential resolution of this issue for highly migratory species (HMS) species in case Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requirements for annual catch limits apply to HMS species in the future.

Other HMSMT Recreational Data Concerns

In addition to commenting on the proposed RecFIN procedural changes, the HMSMT would like to alert the Council to various recreational data concerns which the HMSMT has recently discussed. One such concern is the existence of several known gaps in HMS catch sampling. The HMSMT notes a need for better sampling of HMS catch by the private recreational vessel (non-commercial passenger fishing vessel) fleet. California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS) is aware of the problem of inadequate sampling of private vessel HMS catch, and is currently addressing what level of additional ongoing sampling effort is necessary to adequately address the data gap. Increased data collection effort would require additional funding to cover the cost.

The HMSMT notes that several HMS tournaments take place annually, including thresher and mako shark tournaments, tuna tournaments and billfish tournaments, which represent high effort events with no current data sampling program. This year is the first time that thresher shark

tournaments have taken place in Southern California, with no available data on catch, landings, releases or mortality rates for released fish. HMS managers on the Atlantic coast have addressed a similar situation through federal regulations that require tournament directors to report catch and effort from the tournaments, including released fish. The HMSMT suggests consideration of using add-on sampling or other available means to sample tournament effort.

The HMSMT notes the existence of multiple sources of billfish catch data, including the billfish catch records compiled via the Southwest Fisheries Science Center Billfish Program and Billfish Club records which some practitioners regard as a more accurate reflection of the actual catch. The HMSMT would like to raise the issue of whether adjustments of historical billfish catch records could be improved by considering how best to reflect the information from multiple data sources in recreational billfish catch data.

The HMSMT recently learned of a possible availability of funding from the Ocean Protection Council for additional data collection initiatives, and a proposal was recently submitted for a project to document harvest in California's recreational fishery for pelagic sharks. The HMSMT has additionally been informed about likely future availability of funding from NMFS headquarters for recreational survey improvements, such as HMS shark catch sampling at private access marinas. The HMSMT will plan to keep the Council informed about additional potential funding sources for data collection initiatives as we become aware of them.

Finally, the HMSMT has recently discussed potential enhancements to RecFIN which would facilitate ongoing management and reporting needs. Given the existing harvest guideline for thresher and mako sharks, the HMSMT believes it would be beneficial to have an annual table produced by RecFIN that provides tonnage estimates for these species. A similar need is likely to arise for tuna catch in the foreseeable future, given the exercises currently underway to characterize albacore effort and to define daily tuna bag limits.

The HMSMT has also discussed whether it might be possible to modify the RecFIN reporting system to produce custom reports to satisfy recurring data reporting assignments, such as producing the annual HMS Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation report, and also whether timely recreational data summary reports of interest to the recreational angling community could be included on the RecFIN website in a user-friendly format.

PFMC
05/25/07