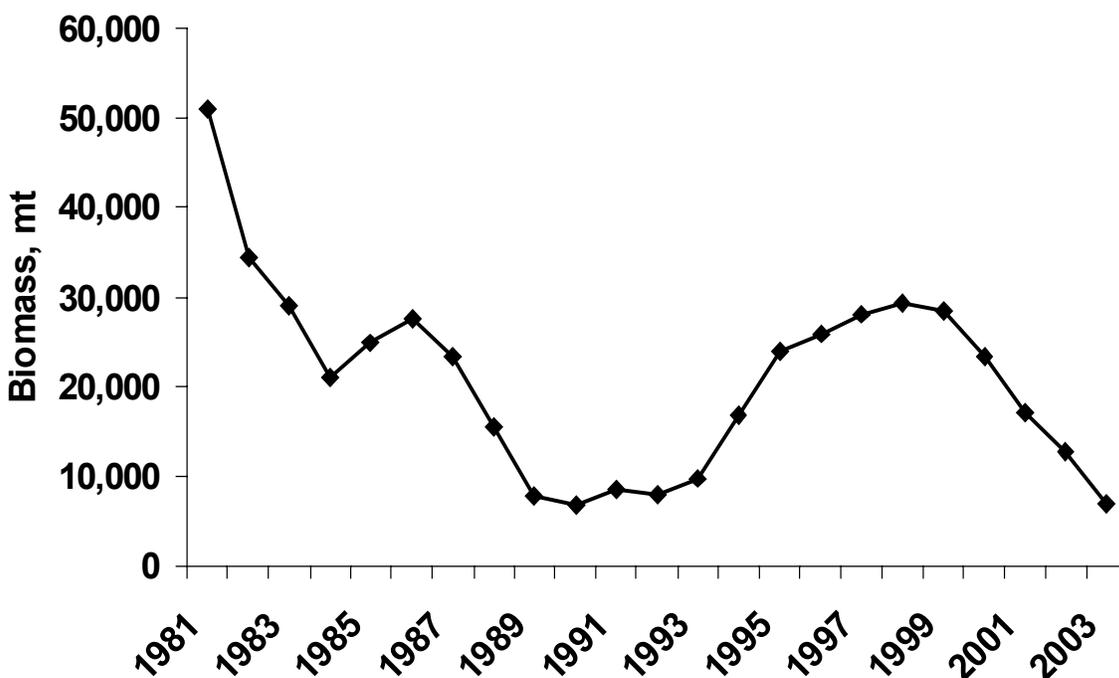


Precipitous Weakfish Stock Declines Trigger Potentially Drastic Action

Introduction

Managers are confronting a growing body of evidence that shows a precipitous drop in weakfish stocks. The most recent stock assessment indicates the biomass has sharply declined since 2000 (Figure 1); the current trajectory would result in a biomass of four percent of its recent peak by 2006. Scientists' conclusions are supported by the disturbing drop in combined commercial and recreational weakfish landings (Figure 2) throughout most of its range. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) is initiating action to develop measures to avoid a stock collapse.

Figure 1. Estimated coastwide weakfish biomass (Source: ASMFC Weakfish Technical Committee, 2005)

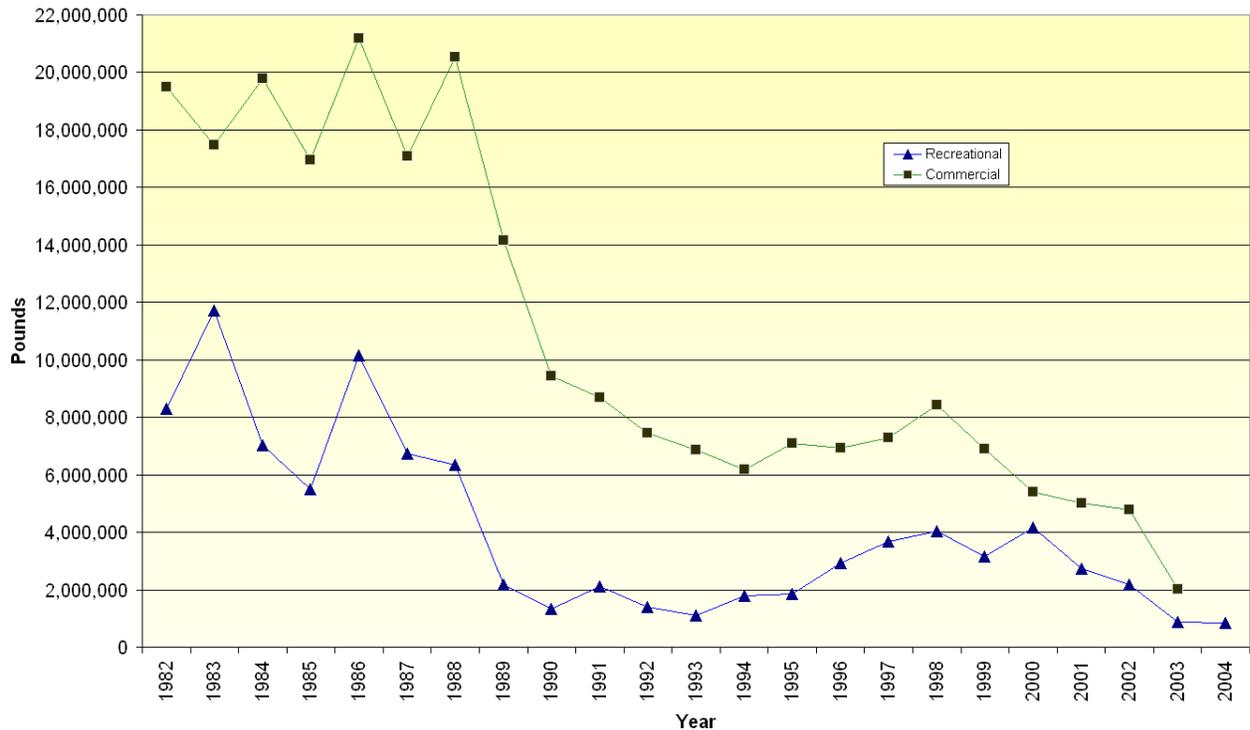


What is causing the decline?

The news of a decline is consistent with what many fishermen have been saying. States have been reporting for several years that landings have been declining. For example, landings in Delaware have decreased from over 635,000 pounds in 2000 to less than 7,000 pounds in 2004. While the drop in weakfish is clear, the cause is not. Scientists report an overall increase in mortality (from fishing and natural causes combined) since the mid-1990s. However, they do not attribute the large decline in weakfish to the slight rise in fishing mortality since 2000. Instead, they believe that natural mortality has risen, becoming a much greater portion of total mortality. While the exact source of the rise in natural mortality is unknown, scientists conjecture that it is a combination of insufficient

forage base and increased predation and competition from other species, such as striped bass, Atlantic croaker, and summer flounder. Regardless of cause, the stock remains less capable of withstanding removal due to fishing.

Figure 2. Coastwide landings of weakfish (Source: National Marine Fisheries Service, 2005)



ASMFC’s response to the decline

Amendment 4 to the Weakfish Fishery Management Plan requires the Commission’s Weakfish Management Board to rebuild spawning stock biomass to 30 percent of the unfished stock within six years or less. This level is currently estimated at 47.7 million pounds based on the 2002 stock assessment and may change given the latest assessment methodology. Measures to rebuild the weakfish are required regardless of the cause of biomass declines. The most effective way to reduce total mortality in the near term is to reduce fishing mortality. One of the dramatic lessons learned in the efforts to recover striped bass was that meaningful restrictions needed to be applied across all harvesting sectors.

Draft Addendum I of Amendment 4 provides options for management, including recreational bag limits, commercial and recreational seasons, and bycatch allowances. The Board will decide what level of reduction in fishing mortality from current levels is appropriate to recover the stock. It will be meeting in late October/early November to review public comment and consider final action on the Draft Addendum. Once approved, the states will develop and promulgate regulations for implementation in

2006. Following implementation, the Board will continue to monitor the status of the stock and investigate all sources of weakfish mortality.

Opportunity for public involvement

Beginning September 26th and running through October 18th, Atlantic coastal states from Rhode Island to Florida will be conducting public hearings on Draft Addendum I. Fishermen and other stakeholders are encouraged to provide input on the Draft Addendum either by attending public hearings or providing written comments. Public comment will be accepted until **5 PM on October 21, 2005** and should be forwarded to Braddock Spear, Weakfish Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at 1444 'Eye' Street, NW, Sixth Floor, Washington, DC 20005; (202)289-6051 (fax) or comments@asmfc.org (Subject line: Weakfish). For more information on the scheduled public hearings or to obtain a copy of the Draft Addendum, contact the Commission at (202) 289-6400 or visit the website at www.asmfc.org under Breaking News.