A HISTORY OF THE FLATFISH BIOLOGY CONFERENCE

The genesis of the Flatfish Conferences was a March 1986 memo from Tony Calabrese, then Chief of the Experimental Biology Branch at the National Marine Fisheries Service-Milford Laboratory to Mike Sissenwine, then Chief of the Fisheries Ecology Division and Vaughan Anthony, then chief of the Conservation and Utilization Division of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Given the number of people in the northeast and mid-Atlantic regions that had been working on this species at the time, Tony suggested that the agency host a winter flounder biology workshop. The idea was later discussed among federal and state attendees at an April stock assessment workshop and Tony received positive feedback. The first workshop Steering Committee was then formed, consisting of Tony, Alan Beck of the EPA-Narragansett Laboratory, Ambrose Jearld and Steve Clark of the Woods Hole Laboratory, Ann Studholme of the Sandy Hook Laboratory, Arnie Howe of Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, Eric Smith of Connecticut DEP Marine Fisheries, and Chris Powell, representing Rhode Island Fish and Wildlife. Tony, Ambrose, and Chris have served on the Steering Committee ever since.

In early December 1986, the first conference, or workshop as it was then called, was held in Mystic, CT, and was devoted solely to winter flounder. Sponsored by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, all aspects of its biology were topics for discussion, with the exception of stock assessments covered in other NMFS meetings. Tony and Allen Peterson, then Director of the Northeast Fisheries Center, introduced the concept of these meetings. Welcoming us on behalf of the center in subsequent conferences were Bob Murchelano, Mike Sissenwine, John Boreman, and Frank Almeida. The first workshop started with summary statements whereby participants were invited to briefly communicate current status of their winter flounder studies. Following this were more formal presentations of papers and posters. In all, 16 papers and 14 posters were scheduled.

The Committee decided to give the topic a 3-year rest and the next meeting was in 1989. The Steering Committee remained intact, but with some changes. Don Danila of Millstone Environmental Laboratory was invited to join and Penny Howell replaced Eric Smith. Northeast Utilities-Millstone Power Station and the Electric Power Research Institute joined NEFSC as co-sponsors of this particular meeting. Through Northeast Utilities or now Dominion, Millstone remained as a sponsor of most conferences in following years. Summary statements by participants again led off the 1989 meeting, followed by an Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission update presented by Penny Howell. Nineteen papers and 14 posters were presented, all devoted to winter flounder. Throughout the years, the number of posters appears to have been limited by the number of easels retained by the Rhode Island Fish & Wildlife Department and kindly supplied by Chris Powell. Also, the concept of holding the poster presentations around the hotel pool along with food and drink had been established.

Two years later in 1991 Jay Burnett replaced Steve Clark on the Steering Committee. Eighteen papers were on the agenda, but only 3 posters completed the conference.

In 1994, after another 3-year hiatus, Tony and the conference organizers decided to include biological research devoted to any of the flatfishes. This led to a doubling of the number of papers to 35 along with 13 posters. The geographical extent of the participants also increased. During the first three conferences, most authors and attendees were from the northeast US along with a few hardy travelers from eastern Canada. Subsequently, we had greater national and international participation. Counting all meetings, presenters have come from 22 US states and the District of Columbia, 8 Canadian provinces, and 9 other countries in the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

The flatfish conference maintained its momentum with 28 papers and 10 posters given in 1996. In 1998, the conference agenda peaked with a schedule that included 39 papers and 16 posters. As many may remember, the infamous Best Western construction project rattled eardrums and interrupted the session, but the presentations were moved on the fly from the hotel's conference room into the restaurant to continue the presentations.

Due to the success of the flatfish meetings, in 1999, Tony, along with many of the steering committee members, initiated the son of the flatfish conference: the biology of the tautog and cunner meeting. Chaired by Eric Schultz of the University of Connecticut, there was a good response with 24 papers and 10 posters in the program. However, it was subsequently decided there would not have been enough interest to repeat this concept.

2000 saw continued interest in flatfishes with 31 papers and 6 posters presented. Ann Studholme, Arnie Howe, and Alan Beck left the Steering Committee after many years of distinguished service and Renee Mercaldo-Allen joined. The Southern New England Chapter of the American Fisheries Society also joined as a sponsor with its monies used ever since to help lower registration fees of student attendees. The conference has always attracted student participants and we hope we've supplied a supportive and nurturing environment for many a first scientific presentation.

In 2002, Mark Dixon, who always helped out at these conferences, particularly with A/V issues, joined the Steering Committee. The conference venue was moved from Mystic to Westbrook and Renee replaced Tony as Steering Committee chair. The 2002 meeting was held on December 10th and 11th, a bit later than the other conferences, and 22 papers and 15 posters were presented.

In 2004, Deb Pacileo replaced Penny Howell as the CT DEP representative and Sandra Sutherland took over for Jay Burnett of Woods Hole. For the first time, the conference abstract booklet was published as a Northeast Fisheries Science Center Reference Document. With the conference scheduled on the first 2 days of December, the meeting went back up to a full 2-day schedule, with 35 papers and 20 posters accepted, the second-most and most, respectively, of all flatfish conferences.

Tom Munroe joined the Steering Committee for the 2006 conference. This "20th Anniversary" meeting was held November 29th and 30th with 26 papers and 8 posters on the schedule. A number of participants attended all ten meetings over the past two decades. Although numerous institutions have been represented, the Milford and JJ Howard (a.k.a. Sandy Hook) Laboratories were recognized in particular for their many contributions over the years. With regard to individuals, only a few have authored or co-authored papers or posters in all or nearly all of the ten meetings through that date. The winner of the Bronze Medal was Ken Able, who was listed as an author or co-author in 8 of the 10 conferences held at the time. Ken only missed having a presentation in the very first workshop and in the 2006 meeting. Chris Chambers received notice as the Silver Medal award for presenting at all meetings except 2004. All alone in winning the Gold Medal by having a paper and/or poster at all ten of the conferences held through 2006 was Larry Renfro of the University of Connecticut. Both Larry and Chris were recognized and received a small token of appreciation from the Steering Committee for supporting this series of meetings.

The 11th conference was held on December 3-4, 2008, with 31 talks and 13 posters listed in the agenda. Abstracts from the first 10 conferences were published as a NEFSC Reference Document so that the content of these early meetings would now be accessible to the wider scientific community.

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center convened the 12th Flatfish Biology Conference on December 1st and 2nd, 2010 with 38 speakers and 17 poster presentations listed on the program. The Dominion Millstone Power Station and the Southern New England Chapter of the American Fisheries Society continued their long-time sponsorship, encouraging student participation through a reduced registration fee.

The 13th Flatfish Biology Conference was held on December 4th and 5th, 2012 in Westbrook CT. Thirty-seven speakers and 20 poster presentations included international participants from China and Norway. Dominion and SNEC-AFS maintained their strong sponsorship of the conference. The Northeast Fisheries Science Center convened the conference and published the program booklet as a reference document. Elizabeth Fairchild joined the 10 member steering committee.