

MID-ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Richard B. Robins, Jr.
Chairman

Lee G. Anderson
Vice Chairman

800 North State Street, Suite 201
Dover, Delaware 19901-3910

Tel: 302-674-2331
Toll Free: 877-446-2362
FAX: 302-674-5399
www.mafmc.org

Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D.
Executive Director

March 4, 2011

Dr. Nancy Thompson
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543-1026

Dear Nancy:

Thank you for Dr. Paul Rago's presentation regarding the Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Sea Day Prioritization for 2011. Based on the information presented, the Council is concerned that the proposed sea sampling intensity for the fisheries prosecuted in the Mid-Atlantic region will not be sufficient to produce acceptably precise bycatch estimates in most of our fisheries. This lack of information directly impacts the Council's ability to evaluate and manage bycatch in these fisheries as mandated by National Standard 9.

The Council is particularly concerned that the proposed sampling intensity in the small-mesh trawl fisheries in the Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic regions will not be sufficient to obtain acceptable precision for butterfish bycatch estimates in the directed *Loligo* fishery. Table 5 of the report indicates that the 2011 prioritized coverages of the New England and Mid-Atlantic small mesh fleets represent only 12% and 42%, respectively, of the SBRM standard level of coverage for these fleets. The Council has indicated previously that adequate coverage of the *Loligo* fishery is one of its highest priorities and requests that the NEFSC allocate the necessary sea days to achieve at least a 30% CV for estimates of butterfish bycatch in the *Loligo* fishery.

In addition to the need for sufficient discard estimates to operate the butterfish mortality cap program in the *Loligo* fishery, precise estimates of butterfish discards have become increasingly important in the specification of ABC for butterfish. The Council has severely restricted the directed harvest of butterfish in recent years due to the perceived low level of abundance of this species based on the results of recent stock assessments. As a result of these management efforts, most of the fishing mortality for butterfish in recent years has resulted from incidental catch in non-directed fisheries (most of which is discarded). Since most of the fishing mortality for butterfish now results from discarding, the uncertainty about discard estimates for the species is among the most critical considerations in the specification of ABC. The recent ABC specifications for butterfish by the Council's SSC reflect, to a large degree, the low precision of butterfish discard estimates. Maintenance of butterfish ABCs at low levels due to uncertainty about butterfish discards may have immediate negative consequences for the *Loligo* fishery because performance in that fishery is now linked directly to the ABC specification for butterfish through the butterfish mortality cap program.

In addition, in a December 2009 letter to Secretary Locke, the Council requested that observer coverage of New England and Mid-Atlantic fisheries be increased to a level that provides adequate estimates of river herring bycatch. The Council is considering improved monitoring of its small mesh fisheries related to river herring and shad incidental catch but a critical element of any monitoring

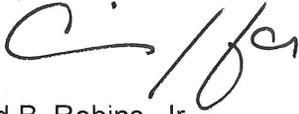
system will be sufficient at-sea observer coverage.

As in previous years, prioritization and funding for observer coverage within the SBRM Program continues to be dedicated to compliance monitoring for New England groundfish fleets at the expense of bycatch monitoring in the Mid-Atlantic. Generally poor coverage of Mid-Atlantic fisheries continues to hamper the ability of the Mid-Atlantic Council to effectively manage the fisheries under its jurisdiction, especially for species where discards comprise a significant component of fishing mortality.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the SBRM Sea Day Prioritization for 2011. Any positive action on our requests to increase levels of observer coverage in the small mesh otter trawl fisheries in the New England and Mid-Atlantic areas will be appreciated.

Please call me or Chris Moore if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Robins, Jr.', written in a cursive style.

Richard B. Robins, Jr.
Chairman

cc: L. Anderson, E. Berg, P. Kurkul, P. Rago