

Deep sea red crab

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***Editor's Note: The authors of this red crab report added italicized text to this chapter, summarizing the Peer Review Panel Report (that full report is available at <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/nefsc/saw/>).**

Executive summary

Deep sea red crabs in the northwest Atlantic represent a data-poor stock because they inhabit deep water, are rarely caught in NMFS bottom trawl surveys, require targeted surveys to collect data on abundance, and little is known about their life history. Data from related species has been considered to make assumptions about the life history. Targeted surveys were conducted in 1974 (Wigley et al. 1975) and during 2003-2005 (Wahle et al. 2008). Two stock assessments have been completed for red crabs (Serchuk 1977; NEFSC 2006a).

This male-only fishery began in the late 1970's. Quality of commercial landings data is variable. The most recent targeted survey (2003-2005) found that there had been a significant reduction in abundance of large male crabs since 1974. In 1974 the minimum acceptable marketable size was 114 mm carapace width (CW). In 2008 the minimum market size of landed crabs was less than 90 mm. The size distribution of the females did not change, indicating that the change in male size frequency was due to harvesting. The male red crab carries the female during mating, and the male must be larger than the female for successful mating. The reduction in large males in the population could reduce mating success. Females might not find males of the right size and sperm shortage might occur.

The deep sea red crab fishery management plan (FMP) was implemented in 2002. The FMP set an MSY (2830 mt) based on the biomass of male red crabs over 102 mm in carapace width. Overfishing is considered to be occurring if catch > MSY, or a proxy thereof. The B_{MSY} calculated for the FMP is 18,867 mt of males, and if biomass goes below $\frac{1}{2} B_{MSY}$ then the stock is considered overfished.

Three options for updating B_{MSY} were considered. The first was status quo (i.e., the value in the FMP), the second was to use an updated MSY (provided there was one) to calculate a B_{MSY} proxy, and the third option was to use the biomass of fishable males from the more recent survey as a B_{MSY} proxy. The review panel did not recommend a new B_{MSY} or B_{MSY} proxy, but they were concerned with the change in size of harvested crabs over time. B_{MSY} for red crabs will remain at the default level of 18,867 mt of males.

Several options for updating MSY for red crab were considered. Two models were used, the depletion corrected average catch model (DCAC) (A. MacCall, pers. comm.) and a 2-point boundary model. Runs made over a range of assumed M values (0.05 to 0.15) estimated sustainable catches from 1785-2004 mt. The long-term average catch (1775 mt) was also suggested as a possible MSY proxy. It was also suggested that MSY could be calculated with an updated version of Gulland's (1970) equation with an F_{MSY} to M ratio of 0.8 and the same range of M values, which gave estimates of 549-1740 mt. MSY values from the new options were smaller than the status quo value of 2830 mt.

The panel rejected the current estimate of MSY (2830 mt) as too high, based on observed changes in population size structure since the beginning of the fishery. Based on congruence between average landings and results from the DCAC model, the panel concluded that MSY ranges from 1700-1900 mt of males.

The review panel did not change the overfishing definition for red crab (i.e. overfishing occurs if catch of males > MSY).

Terms of reference (TOR)

a) Recommend biological reference points (BRPs) and measurable BRP and maximum sustainable yield (MSY) proxies.

- b) Provide advice about scientific uncertainty and risk for Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSCs) to consider when they develop fishing level recommendations for these stocks.
- c) Consider developing BRPs for species groups for situations where the catch or landings can not be identified to species. Work on this objective will depend on, and needs to be consistent with, final guidance on implementing the Reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Act, whenever that guidance becomes available. (This TOR not applicable to red crab)
- d) Comment on what can be done to improve the information, proxies or assessments for each species.

Biological characteristics¹

Information in this section is summarized primarily from Steimle et al. (2001) and Wahle et al. (2008). Deep-sea red crabs (*Chaceon quinque-dens*) are a brachyuran crab (family Geryonidae) inhabiting the edge of the continental shelf and slope from Emerald Bank, Nova Scotia, the Gulf of Maine, and south through the mid-Atlantic Bight and into the Gulf of Mexico. According to Weinberg et al. (2003), genetic differences between deep-sea red crabs from southern New England and the Gulf of Mexico indicate that crabs in the two areas belong to different biological populations (figure 1). Red crabs in Southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic Bight (south of Georges Bank) and the Gulf of Maine (north of Georges Bank) are assumed to be the same stock although fishing occurs primarily off Southern New England. Red crabs in the Gulf of Maine are smaller and the bottom is rough so little fishing for red crab occurs there.

Deep-sea red crabs live at depths of 200–1800 m, where temperatures are between 5 and 8 °C. Adult crabs are segregated incompletely by sex. Adult females generally inhabit shallower water than adult males, and juveniles tend to be deeper than adults, suggesting a deep-to-shallow migration as the crabs mature.

Information on the growth, longevity and mortality of red crabs is scarce. Natural mortality rates were assumed to be 0.2 y⁻¹ in Serchuk (1977) and 0.15 y⁻¹ in the current Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Deep-Sea Red Crab. An assumed longevity of 30 or more years corresponds approximately to M = 0.1 y⁻¹ (see below).

On the basis of limited laboratory data, red crabs are believed to require 5–6 years to attain a size of 114 mm carapace width (CW). Male red crabs are estimated to mature at about 75 mm CW and to reach a maximum size of about 180 mm CW. Females begin to mature at somewhat smaller sizes and reach a smaller maximum size of about 136 mm CW.

As in other brachyuran crabs, the mating male is larger than the female and forms a protective “cage” around the female while she molts and becomes receptive to copulation. The protective copulatory period may last as long as 2–3 weeks in red crabs. The minimum size of males relative to females required for successful mating is unknown. Information about sperm storage is not available for female red crabs.

Fishery and management

Red crabs in the US waters outside the Gulf of Mexico are managed as a single stock located primarily in the Mid-Atlantic Bight to Gulf of Maine region, although red crabs in the Gulf of Maine are not considered in calculation of reference points, biomass estimates or other management analyses.

¹ Based on Steimle et al. (2001) and Wahle et al. (2008).

A small experimental fishery for red crabs was established in the early 1970s. Before the initial targeted survey for red crabs (Wigley et al. 1975), fishery catches were small and sporadic. In the 1980s and 1990s, fishing effort was inconsistent due to market demand. A directed fishery for male red crabs and consistent markets developed in the mid-1990s.

The current US fishery for male red crabs has limited entry and as of 2006 consisted of four or fewer vessels 30+ m long. The fishery uses specially designed traps almost exclusively, although small catches are taken also in lobster traps. Fishing occurs year round and catches are made mainly along the continental shelf from the Canadian border (Hague Line), at the eastern end of Georges Bank, to Cape Hatteras, NC, USA, in depths ranging from 400 to 800 m. Annual US commercial landings of red crabs during the period 1982–2005 ranged from 466 mt (1996) to 4000 mt (2001); there was no fishery in 1994. Since 2002, when the FMP was implemented, landings have been stable at about 2000 t per year. The current fishery is authorized to operate with a target TAC of 2688 mt, and an effort allocation of 780 days at sea. There is no recreational fishery for the species.

Minimum market sizes and fishery size selectivity have decreased since the early 1970s. The minimum market size for male deep sea red crabs in 1974 was 114+ mm CW. The minimum market size for male deep sea red crabs in recent years is about 85 mm CW. Fishery size selectivity has been estimated for the current fishery during 2004–2005 ($L_{50}=92$ mm CW) but no selectivity estimates are available for earlier years.

Based on limited log book, sea- and port sample information, discards of female and undersize male red crabs appear to average about 30% of total catch but can range from about 10% to 69% of total red crab catch. Discard mortality from being brought to the surface and handled on deck averages about 5%. (Tallack 2007). Bycatch of red crab in fisheries directed at other species is minor.

The major fishery related uncertainties for red crab are discards, discard mortality, as well as historical and recent fishery size composition. In addition, the expected response of the stock to fishing in terms of growth and recruitment is uncertain.

The infrequency of stock assessments is another key uncertainty. Only two stock assessments have been completed for deep-sea red crab off Southern New England (Serchuk 1977; NEFSC 2006a). Both were based on camera/trawl surveys completed just prior to the assessment.

Data availability

The principle fishery data for red crab are landings data from dealer reports starting in 1973, logbooks that start in 1994, size composition data for marketable males from routine port samples, and sea sample data for females and all males from a pilot program involving one vessel during 2004–2005. Landings data from dealer reports for years prior to 1982 are less reliable than data for later years. Landings per unit effort data are available from logbooks and dealer reports but are difficult to interpret. The fishery occurs off south of Georges Bank and virtually no fishery data are available for the Gulf of Maine. As described above, discard estimates based on limited sea-, port and logbook data are available and size selectivity estimates for the recent commercial fishery are available from comparison of sea- and port sample data.

The principle fishery independent data for red crab are from camera sled/bottom trawl surveys conducted during 1974 and 2003–2005 on red crab habitat between Maryland and the eastern tip of Georges Bank (excluding the Gulf of Maine). Camera data provide information about red crab density and bottom tow data provide information and sex- and size composition. The survey data for 2003–2005 are generally combined and treated as one survey. Data from a

variety of research bottom trawl surveys are of limited use for red crab because catches are very low. The NMFS Cooperative Monkfish Survey may provide some useful information about red crab in the Gulf of Maine.

Camera and trawl tows in the 1974 and recent surveys were generally from the same or similar sites and sample locations. The two sets of surveys used bottom trawls of the same design and the same trawling protocols, although different vessels were used. Efforts were made to make camera data from the two surveys as comparable as possible but there is uncertainty about the effective area sampled (and therefore red crab density) by images collected during the 1974 survey. Density estimates from the recent survey are believed to be biased low because crab densities were significantly lower in the foreground (close to the camera sled) than in the background of the sampled area suggesting crabs were avoiding the camera, but the extent of the potential bias is unknown. The most reliable survey data are bottom trawl size compositions from both sets of surveys and density estimates from the most recent surveys.

Current stock status

Information in this section is summarized from NEFSC (2006a). The most recent assessment concluded that overfishing was not occurring because red crab landings during 2005 (2013 mt) were less than an MSY proxy (2830 mt, see below). Recent fishing mortality estimates were available but not used to determine overfishing because no F based reference point or proxy for F_{MSY} was available.

Based on the most recent assessment, average fishing mortality rate (landings / fishable biomass) on male red crabs was estimated to be $F=0.055$ (SE 0.008) y^{-1} during 2003-2005. This estimate is probably an underestimate because it does not consider potential mortality due to discarding of undersized male crabs and completely omits mortality due to discarding of females. Fishing mortality estimates are calculated using biomass estimates from surveys during 2003-2005, which are relatively certain but possibly biased low due to avoidance of the camera sled. Red crab biomass is appreciable but catches are currently near zero in the Gulf of Maine.

Alternate fishing mortality estimates including discards and based on best available discard estimates for sea- and port samples are given below (Table 1) for males only, females only and males plus females. Results indicate that total fishing mortality (including discards) during 2003-2005 were $F \leq 0.08 y^{-1}$ for both sexes and for the sexes combined. The alternative estimates are “worse-case” scenarios because they assume that 50% of discarded red crabs die, whereas the current best estimate of discard mortality indicate that about 5% of discarded red crabs die from being brought to the surface and handled on deck (Tallack 2007). Discard rates (discard/total catch) were from sea- and port samples during 2003-2004 (Table D4.5 in NEFSC 2006a). In this exercise, fishing mortality for red crab was approximated as catch (landings + discards) divided by total biomass and catch divided by 90+ CW biomass (the approximation for F are relatively precise because mortality rates are low). Calculations using total biomass may understate fishing mortality because total biomass includes small size groups probably not taken in traps although potential bias may be small because small crabs have low weight. Calculations using 90+ CW biomass may overstate fishing mortality because red crabs of sizes smaller than 90+ CW make up the bulk of the discard.

Based on the most recent assessment (Table 2), fishable red crab biomass during 2003-2005 was about 36,000 mt. Overfished status was not determined for lack of an adequate B_{MSY} estimate or proxy (see below).

Comparisons of biomass estimates from the two surveys are uncertain due to uncertainty about the effective area sampled by cameras during 1974. However, biomass estimates from the two sets of surveys (table 2) indicate that male fishable biomass (based on current fishery selectivity) increased by about 20% during 1974 to 2003-2005. Female biomass (total, 90+ and 114+ CW) increased substantially by 150%-250%. In contrast, total male biomass increased by only 75% and biomass of large (114+ CW) males decreased by about 43%. Size composition data from the surveys indicates that both male and female red crabs have benefitted from recruitment in recent years (figure 2). The loss of large (114+ CW) male biomass and relatively modest increase biomass of males 90+ mm CW can probably be attributed to size-selective fishing (Weinberg and Keith 2003).

Red crab overfishing definitions

The Magnuson-Stevens act includes the requirement that all FMPs “specify objective and measurable criteria for identifying when the fishery to which the plan applies is overfished.” The National Standard Guidelines (NSGs) require the specification of “status determination criteria” (63 FR 24212). These criteria are to be “expressed in a way that enables the Council and Secretary to monitor the stock or stock complex and determine annually whether overfishing is occurring and whether the stock or stock complex is overfished.”

The National Standard Guidelines define overfished stock conditions and overfishing. According to the NSGs, an overfished stock is one “whose size is sufficiently small that a change in management practices is required in order to achieve an appropriate level and rate of rebuilding.” A stock is considered overfished when its size falls below the minimum stock size threshold (MSST). The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires a rebuilding plan for stocks that are overfished. According to the NSGs, overfishing “occurs whenever a stock or stock complex is subjected to a rate or level of fishing mortality that jeopardizes the capacity of a stock or stock complex to produce MSY on a continuing basis.” Overfishing is considered to occur if the maximum fishing mortality threshold (MFMT) is exceeded for one year or more.

Reference point approaches for red crab do not establish a fixed metric or approach to measuring stock biomass or exploitation. Based on the current FMP, overfished stock status and overfishing for red crab should be defined in terms of the best available measures of stock biomass and exploitation or fishing mortality relative to the value of the measures under MSY conditions. Choice of the particular measure or proxy depends on best available data and circumstances but a list of potential proxies and conditions is described in the FMP. In particular, based on the FMP, the red crab stock will be considered to be in an overfished condition if one of the following three conditions is met:

Condition 1 -- The current biomass of red crab is below $\frac{1}{2}$ BMSY in the New England Council’s management area (excluding the Gulf of Maine).

Condition 2 -- The annual fleet average CPUE, measured as marketable crabs landed per trap haul, continues to decline below a baseline level for three or more consecutive years.

Condition 3 -- The annual fleet average CPUE, measured as marketable crabs landed per trap haul, falls below a minimum threshold level in any single year.

Similarly two potential approaches or proxies for identifying overfishing are described:

Proxy #1: F / F_{MSY} -- It is common for data sparse stocks to estimate trends in fishing mortality as an exploitation ratio, i.e., landings or catch divided by an index of abundance, usually from a survey. As a proxy for F_{MSY} , Councils in the past have

selected an exploitation level that existed during a time with no trend in biomass at an intermediate biomass level.

Proxy #2: Landings / MSY – In the absence of other information, overfishing can be defined as catches in excess of an estimate of MSY. Although crude, provides an indication of current fishing effort relative to MSY conditions.\

The FMP describes a default control rule (figure 3) that could be used by managers, although this has proved impractical due to lack of biomass, exploitation, natural mortality and reference point estimates.

Current reference points

Information in this section is summarized from NEFSC (2006b). The reference point used as a fishing mortality threshold is $MSY = 2,830$ mt (6.24 million pounds). The reference point used as a biomass target is $B_{MSY} = 18,867$ mt (41.6 million pounds) of male red crabs 102+ mm CW (4" CW). The reference point used as a biomass threshold reference point $\frac{1}{2} B_{MSY} = 9,434$ mt. A suggested CPUE baseline (presumably for use as a target) is 26-29 market-size crabs per trap, before adjustment for an equivalent number of 102 mm (4") CW market-size crabs.

Logic and justifications

In view of survey data limitations and infrequency of stock assessments for red crab, a landings-based BRP (e.g. estimate of MSY) for overall exploitation is appropriate for use as a threshold for exploitation rates in deep-sea red crab.

Serchuk's (1977) original MSY estimate (1,247 mt or 2.75 million lbs) assumed an underlying Schaefer surplus production model, and used estimated biomass for male red crabs 114+ mm CW from the 1974 camera/trawl survey as an estimate of virgin biomass B_0 (114 mm CW was the minimum marketable size at that time). Based on the Schaefer surplus production model, $MSY = \frac{1}{2}MB_0$ and it was assumed that $F_{MSY} \cong M$. For the original red crab estimate, $M=0.2 \text{ y}^{-1}$ and $B_0=24,948$ mt of male red crabs 114+ mm CW.

The MSY estimate (2,903 mt) currently used by managers was made using the same formula and revised values for M and B_0 . The revised value for natural mortality $M=0.15 \text{ y}^{-1}$ was thought to be a better estimate than $M=0.2 \text{ y}^{-1}$ for red crab. The original B_0 value was adjusted downward to account for part of the survey being in Canadian waters, adjusted upward to include male crabs 102 mm (4") CW and larger, as compared to the 1974 marketable size of 114 mm (4.5") CW, and adjusted upward again to account for the fact that the area fished is larger than the area surveyed. The adjustments took away biomass which now belongs to Canada, and added biomass to account for the area of the fishery south of the survey boundary to Cape Hatteras.

Reference point weaknesses

In the most recent stock assessments (NEFSC 2006) the current MSY and B_{MSY} estimates for red crabs were criticized and judged unreliable due to uncertainty about biological parameters and the model used to calculate MSY. New estimates were not developed due to lack of information about growth, longevity and trends in abundance.

Relatively little new information has become available since the last assessment. However, limited data for related species (*Geryon maritae*; Mellville-Smith 1989) suggest that M may be as low as 0.1 y^{-1} , which is lower than the previous estimates (0.15 and 0.2 y^{-1}).

The assumption that $F_{MSY}=M$ has been criticized recently. Walters and Martell (2004) suggest that F_{MSY} is lower and approximately $0.8M$ for many species.

The assumption that $B_{MSY} = \frac{1}{2}B_0$ (Schaefer surplus production curve) is reasonable if the underlying spawner-recruit relationship is a Ricker curve. However, $B_{MSY} < \frac{1}{2}B_0$ if the underlying spawner-recruit relationship is a Beverton-Holt curve. Beverton-Holt recruitment dynamics are more likely for red crab because there is no known biological mechanism that might result in maximum recruitment at intermediate spawning biomass levels.

The current B_{MSY} estimate of 18,867 mt in the FMP is for male red crabs 102+ mm CW (4") which is not representative of current fishery conditions. The current fishery lands male red crabs 80+ mm and the L50 for current fishery selectivity is 92 mm CW.

The survey biomass for 1974 may be a poor estimate of B_0 because of statistical variance in the estimate (variances are not available for the estimate), uncertainty about effective area sampled by the camera sled, or because some fishing had already taken place prior to 1974. The total biomass for male red crabs during 2003-2005 (56,443 mt) exceeds the estimate for 1974 (32,190 mt) despite consistent fishing indicating that the estimate for 1974 is a poor estimate of B_0 .

The fishery appears to have substantially reduced the abundance of the largest male red crabs. Smaller male crabs may not be able to mate with large females. There is concern that reduced abundance of large male crabs may lead to sperm limitation and reduced levels of egg production if there are no males left in the population to mate with the larger females. Landings per unit of fishing effort data (LPUE) are mentioned in the FMP as a baseline stock biomass indicator for red crab but LPUE data have proven difficult to interpret, particularly as long time series (NEFSC 2006a).

Options and recommendations

This section outlines a range of options for exploitation and biomass based biological reference points to be used managing deep-sea red crab in the management area outside the Gulf of Maine.

The exploitation BRPs described here are thresholds specified in terms of landed weight (yield). Yield based approaches are the only practical approach for red crab because the only fishery dependent or fishery independent data routinely available for red crabs are landings. The options for yield based BRPs are intended as proxies for landings at F_{MSY} .

Options outlined below emphasize the most reliable information sources for red crab, which are landings since 1982 and biomass, abundance and size composition data the most recent camera/trawl survey conducted during 2003-2005, and size composition data from the original camera/trawl survey conducted during 1974. Biomass estimates from 1974 are less reliable and more uncertain because of questions about the effective area sampled by cameras in that survey. Uncertainty about biomass estimates makes trend analysis uncertain. Size composition data from 1974 are more reliable and are comparable to size composition data from 2003-2005 because bottom trawls and towing protocols used in 1974 were well documented and because trawls and protocols used in later years were the same.

Fishing for females

All options outlined in this report assume a male only fishery for deep-sea red crab. None are applicable to fishery involving female red crabs. If a female red crab fishery is ever established, then all yield- and biomass based BRPs should be reevaluated.

Marketable sizes and fishery selectivity

In laying out options for BRPs, we assume that fishery selectivity in the future will be the same as during 2003-2005. As described above, fishery selectivity for red crab has changed over time. Marketable size males were 114+ mm CW during the late 1970s. Based on the last stock assessment, the selectivity pattern in the current fishery follows a steeply increasing logistic pattern with selectivity near 0% at 80 mm CW, 50% selectivity at 92 mm CW and nearly 100% at 120 mm CW. If fishery selectivity changes, then all yield- and biomass based BRPs should be reevaluated.

OPTIONS for a Gulf of Maine stock

The management area for red crab excludes the Gulf of Maine and this situation complicates the development of biomass based BRPs. Red crabs in the Gulf of Maine (where little or no fishing occurs) and red crabs in the Southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic regions where (fishing occurs) are considered to be a single US stock. It is possible that depletion of red crabs south of Georges Bank might be “hidden” by including some level of unfished biomass in the Gulf of Maine as part of the stock as a whole, to the detriment of the entire stock and the fishery. Thus, the separation of red crabs into one management area and an area with no active management complicates specification and probably reduces the potential benefits of BRPs.

Under these conditions, it may be advisable to manage the areas north (Gulf of Maine) and south (Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic areas) as separate stocks. Red crab are a demersal species that migrate ontogenetically and seasonally from shallow to deep but there is no evidence of strong migratory movement of juveniles and adults along the coast. Thus, localized depletion may occur in red crabs due to continuous fishing in areas south of Georges Bank. The shallow waters and geography of Georges Bank effectively separate the Gulf of Maine from other habitat areas along the US coast. Red crabs in the Gulf of Maine appear to be smaller than red crabs in southern areas where the fishery is occurring, suggesting differences in growth rates and other biological characteristics. However, it is unlikely that red crabs in different areas off the northeast coast of the US differ genetically. It is also likely that recruitment is linked to some extent along the entire US coast due to transport of larvae in currents.

Two options are proposed.

Option 1: Continue to manage a single US stock of red crabs. The main advantages of this option are minimization and simplicity of regulations. The main disadvantages are loss or potential benefits from BRPs.

Option 2: Manage red crab in the Gulf of Maine and areas south of Georges Bank (Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic regions) as separate stocks.

Under this option, the exploitation BRP used to define overfishing for the Gulf of Maine stock would be F_{MSY} or the best available proxy. BRPs used to define the biomass target and biomass threshold for the Gulf of Maine would be B_{MSY} and $\frac{1}{2}B_{MSY}$ or the best available proxies. F_{MSY} and B_{MSY} for the Gulf of Maine are currently unknown and would have to be determined if interest in a Gulf of Maine red crab fishery develops. One or more special surveys designed to target red crabs would likely be required.

The main disadvantages of this option are increased regulations and complexity although any increases would be modest. The main advantage would be increased benefits of BRPs for red crab in the area were fishing occurs.

The second option (separate stocks) is recommended because the hypothesis of two stocks is scientifically credible, in view of restricted adult movement around Georges Bank and smaller red crabs in the Gulf of Maine, and because the potential utility of BRPs for the fished and unfished stock areas is increased. Under current legislation, BRPs used to define overfishing and overfished stock conditions must apply to entire stocks. Overfishing definitions for parts of stocks, such as the current management area for red crab, are apparently not allowed. Therefore, meaningful BRPs that address only red crab in the current management area appear impractical.

The review panel did not discuss management of deep sea red crabs in the Gulf of Maine.

OPTIONS to regulate minimum legal size for male red crabs

Minimum size regulations may be desirable and should be evaluated for use in the red crab fishery. Minimum size regulations are used with some success in many crab and lobster fisheries. It is much easier to recommend biomass based reference points once the fishable stock (including minimum size) is clearly established and BRPs for a specified fishable stock are likely to be more meaningful and useful. Moreover, none of the options for exploitation and biomass based BRPs in this report deal effectively with concerns that sperm limitation may result from removal of large males by fishing. Exploitation and biomass based BRPs are indirect approaches to dealing with these potential issues.

Because marketable sizes, fishery selectivity and potential sperm limitation are important, three options for regulating minimum marketable sizes are presented for consideration by managers. Detailed analysis of this topic is an important area for research which should be carried out as soon as possible under any option because the full range of cost and benefits to the stock and fishery have not been identified.

Option 1: No action. The main advantage is minimal impact on the fishery and minimal management costs. There is no evidence of serious problems in the fishery so no actions to regulate minimum legal size may be necessary. Minimum legal size regulations could be implemented in the future if required. The main disadvantage is the potential for changes in marketable sizes that tend to make BRPs for deep-sea red crabs moot. It is also possible that shifts in marketable sizes could exacerbate loss of large males which may be important for successful reproduction.

Option 2: Implement a minimum legal size for red crab that would leave some larger males in the population yet allow for a significant portion of crabs currently landed to remain marketable. This option would prohibit landings of male red crabs less than a specified CW. This minimum legal size should be close to the current minimum marketable size, such as 85-90 mm CW, to minimize fishery impacts yet large enough to leave males suitable for mating with newly mature females. With this option in place further losses of large males and the potential for sperm limitation in the population might be minimized. BRPs for red crabs would be more meaningful and useful if the fishable stock is defined.

Option 3: Defer minimum legal size regulations until more analysis is carried out to determine the optimum minimum legal size from the fishery and biological perspectives. This option is basically a combination of options 1 and 2.

Option 2 is recommended to increase potential benefits of BRPs and to help avoid potential problems with loss of large males. Impacts on the current fishery would be minimal.

The review panel did not discuss minimum legal size for male red crabs.

Biomass based biological reference points

As described above, biomass based reference points can be outlined for red crabs but data limitations and infrequent assessments will probably undermine their utility. Exploitation (yield-based) reference points are likely to be more important in a practical sense for deep-sea red crabs.

Some MSY analyses and estimates described in this report for red crab assume virgin or near virgin biomass conditions during 1974. Many are basically trend analyses which assume that biomass estimates for 1974 and 2003-2005 are directly comparable. The results of these analyses are uncertain to the extent that biomass estimates for 1974 are uncertain because of questions about the area of the sea floor the camera sled was able to illuminate and photograph clearly during the 1974 survey. Biomass estimates from more recent 2003-2005 surveys are better understood, better documented and the area covered by the cameras is well defined. Recent estimates were affected by some avoidance behavior that resulted in negative bias and some underestimation of stock biomass. Avoidance behavior may affect 1974 estimates as well but uncertainty about the effective area of the camera is most important. Biomass estimates for 1974 are also uncertain because biomass estimates for all but large male crabs were substantially higher for 2003-2005 than for 1974, despite substantial fishery removals during 1974-2003.

OPTIONS for biomass based BRPs

Terms of Reference and NSGs require biomass based BRPs that describe target and threshold biomass levels. It is possible to define biomass based BRPs for red crabs but they are likely to be of little use because of lack of stock assessments, lack of useful survey data and difficulties in interpreting fishery catch rates (LPUE). None of the proposed options for biomass BRPs involve commercial catch rates (LPUE) because they have proven difficult to interpret for red crab (NEFSC 2006).

Three proposed options for B_{MSY} estimates that could be used as target BRPs for red crabs are described below. In each case, the threshold BRP would be $\frac{1}{2}$ of the B_{MSY} estimate or proxy.

Option	B_{MSY} (males only)
1	18,867 mt 102+ mm CW
2	16,904 mt fishable sizes
3	36,253 mt fishable sizes

Option 1: Status quo or no action (Listed in red crab FMP, 2002, Section 3.6.4). This gives a biomass based target B_{MSY} = 18,867 mt of male red crabs 102+ mm CW, developed from the approximation $MSY = \frac{1}{2}MB_0$ where B_0 was the estimated biomass of male red crabs during 1974 with adjustments for male

biomass at size and for areas not sampled in the survey. The biomass threshold that defines an overfished stock biomass is $\frac{1}{2}B_{MSY} = 9,434$ mt. Weaknesses with Option 1 are described in earlier section of this report “Reference Point Weaknesses”. Weaknesses are related to underlying assumptions about the spawner recruit curve, what B_0 represents in terms of virgin biomass, and M .

Option 2: Use the updated estimate of MSY (to be selected, see below) and current fishable biomass from the most recent assessment to estimate B_{MSY} . The biomass threshold that defines overfished stock biomass conditions is $\frac{1}{2} B_{MSY}$.

The main advantage of Option 2 is ensuring that biomass BRPs are consistent with exploitation based BRPs. If virgin biomass is very uncertain, then it may be better to base biomass reference points on the MSY proxy or estimate of sustainable catch. The main disadvantage is that it necessitates additional information about stock productivity. In addition, it may provide a poor estimate of B_{MSY} if the F_{MSY} proxy is inaccurate or the estimate of sustainable yield is substantially different from MSY.

In particular, assume $F_{MSY} = cM$ where $c=0.7$ (see below) and the natural mortality rate $M = 0.15 \text{ y}^{-1}$ (see below), then $MSY = F_{MSY} B_{MSY} = 0.7(0.15) B_{MSY} = 0.105 B_{MSY}$ and $B_{MSY} = MSY / 0.105 = 9.52 MSY$. For example, if $MSY = 1775$ mt (the long term average catch and within the range of sustainable yield and MSY proxy options given below), then the biomass target $B_{MSY} = 9.52 \times 1775 = 16,904$ mt fishable biomass and the biomass threshold $B_{MSY} / 2 = 8,452$ mt fishable biomass.

Option 3: Use the most recent estimate of fishable biomass from the last assessment (36,247 mt) as B_{MSY} . The biomass threshold that defines overfished stock biomass conditions is $\frac{1}{2} B_{MSY}$.

The main advantage of Option 3 is that it is based on the relatively reliable 2003-2005 biomass estimate. As described above, uncertainties about the 1974 biomass estimate for red crab may preclude its use in estimating virgin biomass. The stock shows signs of fishing down (reduction in abundance of large males) expected under fishing at MSY levels. Current fishing mortality rates appear to be relatively low ($F=0.055 \text{ y}^{-1}$ in the managed stock area ignoring discards and no more than 0.1 y^{-1} including discards). These fishery induced mortality estimates are comparable to the range of F_{MSY} levels ($F_{MSY} = 0.6 M$ to $0.8 M$, with $M=0.1-0.2 \text{ y}^{-1}$) that might be considered for red crabs and potentially sustainable. The main disadvantage is the possibility that current biomass is substantially larger or smaller than B_{MSY} .

Option 2 (use the updated estimate of MSY to specify B_{MSY}) is recommended by the Working Group because virgin biomass is uncertain. Option 1 is not recommended because it involves poor approximations to F_{MSY} and B_{MSY} . Option 3 is not recommended because it implies $MSY = F_{MSY} B_{MSY}$ levels of about $0.7 (0.1) * 36,253 = 2,538$ mt per year. This estimate is substantially larger than the long term average catch which has a pronounced effect on the relative abundance of large males.

The Peer Review Panel recommended Option 1 for B_{MSY} . The Panel did not recommend changing B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy for red crab, due to concerns about the shifting size of

marketable crabs and fishery-induced size frequency changes in the population. A simple biomass-based B_{MSY} proxy would not be reliable under the present circumstances of the fishery.

Options for exploitation based BRPs

All of the options for exploitation based BRPs in this report are specified in terms of landings (yield) because landings are the only data consistently available for the fishery. Landings based BRPs are also desirable for red crabs because they are simple and easy for managers to use outside the formal stock assessment process and without extensive review.

Ideally, all exploitation BRPs for red crabs based on landings would be MSY estimates or proxies to be used as thresholds that define overfishing. In principal, these BRPs are not used as targets. In particular, current NSGs indicate that managers may specify any annual catch limit (ACL) as long as exploitation is below the exploitation threshold BRP. In other words, managers are expected to consider uncertainties and risks in setting ACLs in addition to not exceeding the threshold reference point. In this report, we focus primarily on uncertainties about the reference points themselves and ignore many of the uncertainties managers face in setting ACLs.

A number of the methods used to calculate potential exploitation based BRPs are estimators for “sustainable” catch levels, rather than estimates or proxies for MSY. There is no guarantee that sustainable catch levels calculated for red crab are near MSY. Sustainable yield estimates are often estimates of average catch with or without adjustments for unsustainable “windfall” catches that may occur as virgin stock is fished down towards B_{MSY} . MSY is the maximum sustainable catch level at biomass levels usually less than $\frac{1}{2}$ virgin biomass.

A number of the methods used in this report to calculate potential exploitation based BRPs are equilibrium estimators that assume constant recruitment, growth and mortality over the period of years in the model. Equilibrium estimators are often used in data poor circumstances but they tend to perform poorly in non-equilibrium situations. Size composition data from surveys during 1974 and 2003-2005 indicate changes in recruitment because small male and female red crabs were abundant during the latter survey. Changes in growth and recruitment would, in fact, be expected as the near virgin stock in 1974 was fished down over several decades. Results of the equilibrium estimators are uncertain to the extent that equilibrium assumptions may have been violated.

We used 4 methods to estimate MSY or proxies thereof:

1) Long-term average catch. We can make the argument that if CPUE in pounds per day at sea has been relatively stable and the biomass of currently marketable red crabs hasn't changed much from 1974 to 2005, then the level of fishing on the population since the 1970s must be sustainable. If summed recorded landings from 1973-2007 (35 years) equal 62,132mt, then the mean annual take of red crab has been 1,775mt, which is slightly less than mean landings since 2002.

2) Updated yield equation. The equation used to calculate MSY for the FMP was $Y = (0.5)(M)(B_0) = (0.5)(0.15)(B_0$ of males $>114\text{mm}$). However, $B_{MSY} < \frac{1}{2}B_0$ if the underlying spawner-recruit relationship is a Beverton-Holt curve. Beverton-Holt recruitment dynamics are more likely for red crab because there is no known biological mechanism that might result in maximum recruitment at intermediate spawning biomass levels. Secondly, the ratio of F_{MSY} to M at maximum sustainable yield has been found to be less than one for most fisheries (Walters and Martell 2004). A coefficient c should be applied to M that is often 0.8 but for stocks more

vulnerable to overfishing can be as low as 0.5. To update the equation to match the conditions of the current red crab fishery, the B_0 must be for males smaller than the >114mm CW it was originally calculated for. So that leaves the equation $Y = (0.4)(c)(M)(B_0 \text{ fishable males})$. We used a range of M values and calculated MSYs based on both the 1974 and 2003-2005 survey biomass of fishable males.

3) Depletion-corrected average catch (DCAC) model. The addition of a second survey allowed us to run two models which use length frequency or abundance data from two points in time to look at potential sustainable yields. The DCAC model input consists of summed annual landings, an estimate of M , an estimate of the F_{MSY} to M ratio, the amount of depletion between the two surveys and the number of years between them. It calculates a sustainable yield of a population after accounting for the “windfall” which occurs at the beginning of a fishery. We ran the model using several different estimates of M . For model details see appendix 2.

4) Two-point boundary model. This approach also uses abundance data from 2 points in time, and was run using various values of M . Estimates of median recruitment of males and females of various sizes, average F , and catch at equilibrium were derived for male and female red crabs from the 1974 and 2003-2005 surveys, and landings from 1974 to 2003. For model details see appendix 3.

Most of the yield based reference points presented in this report (Table 3) are lower than the current estimate of MSY (2830 mt) and target TAC (2688 mt). Most are lower than the observed catches during some years. Most of the estimates are reasonably consistent, possibly because they are based on average landings or because they assume fishable stock biomass levels were similar during 1974 and 2003-2005. The similarity of many of the new MSY estimates (figure 4) to the long-term average catch (from 1973 to 2007, 1775 mt) supports the idea that this level of landings is sustainable. Recent catches from 2002 to 2007 (mean 1853 mt) have been in this range, yet declining over the last few years. We recommend a catch limit that mimics both recent and long term mean annual landings, and suggest the current MSY of 2830 mt is not sustainable.

The review panel agreed that the MSY calculated for the FMP (2,830 mt) is not reliable. If the assumption that the changes in red crab population structure were caused by fishing is true, then previous higher catches have not been at sustainable MSY levels. The review panel concluded that, using the best available scientific information, estimates of MSY for male crabs only was in the range of 1700-1900 mt. The depletion corrected average catch model (DCAC), which estimated MSY to be very similar to the long-term mean catch, was deemed an acceptable model for this rarely-surveyed resource. The panel found no reason to change the overfishing definition of catch > MSY.

The panel noted that the change in the size distribution of landed male crabs over time may introduce uncertainty in the DCAC model. Even though the data were standardized to the same size structure, it is unclear how the removal of smaller and smaller male crabs over time may affect the model estimates of BRPs.

The review panel suggested that BRPs based on size and sex ratio may be useful in the future due to the importance of preventing sperm limitation in the red crab population. Unfortunately, that would require regular surveying, since fishery-dependent data does not give an accurate picture of the whole population as large males are targeted and the crabs are generally segregated by sex.

Since there is evidence the red crab fishery may be moving southward into previously lightly-fished areas as large males are depleted in the traditional fishing areas, the review panel noted the estimated BRPs are for the current area being fished and/or the extent of the surveys.

Scientific risks and uncertainties

Risks and uncertainties regarding BRPs for deep-sea red crabs are described below which are important in the context of choosing among BRP options, and in setting ACLs once BRPs are chosen. Risks to the stock due to overharvest and to the fishery due to foregone harvest are described in general terms but have not been quantified (no formal risk analyses were carried out).

Biomass based BRPs are difficult to evaluate for red crabs at this time due to lack of routinely available information about biomass levels and trends, and infrequent stock assessments. Therefore, risks and uncertainties regarding exploitation based BRPs are particularly important.

The following key uncertainties are listed in approximate order of importance.

- a) There is a great deal of uncertainty about fundamental life history parameters in red crab, including longevity and natural mortality, growth and maturity, and reproductive biology. There is also uncertainty about whether red crabs have a terminal molt and the extent to which females can store sperm.
- b) There is no available information about the spawner-recruit pattern and recruitment variability in red crab. There is uncertainty about the potential productivity of red crab due to uncertainty about fundamental life history parameters and recruitment.
- c) Minimum marketable sizes and fishery size selectivity have changes since the early 1970s and processors now accept smaller male red crabs. There are no management measures regulating minimum size. Thus future fishery selectivity patterns are uncertain.
- d) Based on the last stock assessment (NEFSC 2006a; 2006b), there is no evidence of serious problems in the red crab population (fishery induced mortality rates are $< 0.1 \text{ y}^{-1}$) and recruitment was apparently occurring during 2003-2005. However, survey size composition data from 1974 and 2003-2005 show reduced abundance of large males (114+ CW) probably due to fishing. There is little uncertainty about reductions in occurrence of large males. There are questions about the potential importance of large males in spawning. In particular, loss of large males may affect reproductive capacity of the red crab stock. These questions have a sound logical basis but have not been fully investigated.
- e) Discards of undersize males and females are thought to be about 30% of total catch but the estimates are uncertain. Mortality of discarded crabs was relatively low in a recent study (~5%) but the estimate is uncertain and may be higher during routine fishing.
- f) Some of the methods used to calculate biological reference points in this report rely heavily on landings data collected during a period when exploitation levels were relatively low. Historical catches may understate MSY to the extent that fishing mortality has been less than F_{MSY} during recent years. Thus, there is appreciable risk that reference points in this report will result in unnecessarily foregone catches.
- g) Some of the methods used to calculate biological reference points in this report involved equilibrium assumptions that may not be justified for red crab. The potential effects of the equilibrium assumptions are uncertain.

- h) As noted above, biomass estimates from the camera/trawl survey during 1974 are uncertain because of questions about the effective area searched by camera. Uncertainty in the 1974 biomass estimate increases uncertainty in BRP calculations that evaluate long term biomass trends or use the 1974 survey to characterize virgin or near-virgin stock levels.
- i) Recent red crab biomass estimates from surveys during 2003-2005 have a negative bias due to a statistically significant level of red crab avoidance behavior. The magnitudes of red crab avoidance behavior and bias have not been evaluated.
- j) There is uncertainty about whether new NEFSC bottom trawl surveys will provide useful information about red crabs. Available data from comparative fishing experiments provide little evidence one way or the other in this regard.
- k) Changes in fishing locations have occurred during recent years, presumably due to localized depletion.

The review panel, in their report under “advice about scientific uncertainties” emphasized what they thought were the most significant sources of uncertainty. Under “observation uncertainty”, they listed aspects of the biology, the survey and the fishery for red crab. Regarding red crab biology, the most significant sources of uncertainty were the lack of basic knowledge of life history, especially maximum age, growth per molt, intermolt period, and the occurrence of a terminal molt. Seasonal changes in distribution were also noted as a source of possible uncertainty.

Uncertainties involving the surveys exist because only two have been conducted (30 years apart). Also, there are concerns about comparability of the two surveys because of uncertainty about how crab counts from the illuminated area in the first survey were expanded and extrapolated to estimate the number of crabs in the entire region.

There is also uncertainty surrounding the fishery and the distribution of effort both spatially and temporally, and whether the distribution of the crabs was affecting the behavior of the fishery. The panel noted that an assumption of all the red crab analyses was that the pattern of harvest was from a stationary population.

In terms of “process uncertainty”, the panel emphasized several possible sources. The first was that there is no knowledge of the influence of male to female ratios, in both number and size, on reproductive potential. The removal of a significant portion of the large males over time may have significant consequences on the population as males must be larger than females to mate. Other process uncertainties are the fact that the fishery may be changing its distribution and thus changing availability patterns, and the unreliability of the VTR discard data.

Research recommendations

- a) Establish a regular schedule for surveys that provide useful information about deep-sea red crab. This is the most important research recommendation for red crabs.
- b) Develop practical survey approaches for red crab in deep water. Recent cooperative work indicates that towed body video surveys are accurate and useful for sea scallops. It is likely that the same equipment and approaches would be useful for deep-sea red crab.
- c) Evaluate the importance of large male red crabs in reproduction considering the size distribution and molting cycle of females, sperm storage, length of the mating season, duration of population and other key parameters.
- d) Studies to refine estimates of growth parameters, longevity, natural mortality and reproductive parameters are needed.

- e) Place scientific observers on board fishing vessels during routine fishing trips to collect data about discards.

The review panel recommended several additional research needs and general suggestions which would reduce the uncertainties in the BRPs:

- a) *Consider additional fishery-independent surveys, with continued industry support and involvement. These cooperative surveys might include standardized trap-based sampling or HABCAM (cameara) surveys. The panel noted that the industry is already supporting a sizeable tagging program.*
- b) *Additional information on relative sizes of mating pairs and its consequences on reproductive potential (sperm limitation) would allow for the inclusion of additional size-based BRPs*
- i) *Consider simulation modeling to explore the response of the population sex ratio to different exploitation patterns to determine whether sex ratios may serve as a tool to inform management on current catch rates. The review team noted that such an approach would only work if knowledge of the population wide sex ratio was indexed.*
- c) *Studies of brood production, incubation period, and pattern of sperm storage would be helpful.*
- d) *Studies to refine growth (intermolt period and growth per molt) and longevity estimates would improve understanding of stock dynamics.*
- e) *Assessment of whether females, in particular, exhibit a terminal molt would help development of growth models.*
- f) *Information on movement and behavior of crabs within their range would be of utility.*
- g) *Abundance-habitat relationships.*
- h) *Role of economic factors in crab and other fisheries may alter distribution and interpretation of fishing effort.*

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