



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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For Immediate Release
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NEW YORK LOOKS TO CUT BLACKFISH SEASON IN HALF RFA Says Tuesday Night MRAC Meeting Will Decide 2012 Regulations

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) is calling for a 53% reduction in the coastwide harvest of blackfish effective January 1, 2012, a measure which has the potential of creating economic disaster along the Atlantic Coast, particularly in New York.

Based on the ASMFC's requirements, New York's coastal anglers are facing the very real possibility of seeing a complete closure of the spring tautog fishery in 2012, with a fall season of between 24 and 46 open days beginning as early as October 1. Currently, New York's saltwater anglers actively fish on a fairly modest 159-day blackfish season with a four fish bag and 14-inch size limit. Next year, fishermen can expect to see an extra inch or two added to the minimum size limit in addition to the reduction of fishable days.

Last week, several dozen New York saltwater fishermen got a sample of what's in store for the future, as the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC) conducted a hearing at Stony Brook University on July 6, once again pitting recreational and commercial fishing interests against the bigger issues of rampant poaching, minimal enforcement and "fatally flawed" science.

"Drastic reductions on fishing days are proposed by NYDEC for both the recreational and the commercial sector, so nobody's getting off easy," said Jim Hutchinson, Jr., Managing Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA). "Anglers took the entire 28.7% reduction in New York as required by ASMFC back in 2008 and those faulty stock numbers barely moved. Clearly the blackfish problem isn't exclusively the fault of sportfishermen as the staff at ASMFC continues to claim," he said.

On Tuesday, July 12th at 7 p.m., the New York Marine Resources Advisory Council (MRAC) will meet to discuss the 2012 blackfish options, which include the following possible scenarios or New York's 2012 tautog season (options are not final and have not yet been approved by the ASMFC):

NY Reduction Options For 2012

1. October 1 - November 15, 16 inches, four fish
2. January 17 - April 30 & October 1 - November 12, 16 inches, four fish
3. January 17 - April 30 & October 1 - November 15, 16 inches, three fish
4. January 1 - April 30 & October 1 - November 25, 16 inches, two fish
5. January 17 - April 30 & October 1 - October 28, 15 inches, four fish
6. January 17 - April 30 & October 1 - October 24, 14 inches, four fish

RFA reminds members of the recreational fishing community, both private anglers and marine business owners that the preliminary options put forth by the NYDEC were meant as starting points for discussion at the July 6th meeting and that more possibilities will be made available at Tuesday's meeting at the Marine Resources office in East Setauket, Long Island.

"After the debate at Stony Brook fiasco last week, folks can expect to see additional options presented which could extend the fall season, possibly into December," said Hutchinson who attended the recent hearing as president of the New York Sportfishing Federation as well as on behalf of RFA-NY. "The issue with extending the fall fishery of course is that it would result in a delayed October opening when many anglers are in the process of taking their boats out," Hutchinson added.

RFA and the Federation are encouraging bottom-fishermen to attend Tuesday's hearing to register express their particular preference.

According to RFA's Executive Director Jim Donofrio, New York anglers and the NYDEC itself have little recourse right now but to follow the ASMFC directive given the mid-July deadline for submission of state options. However, he said RFA will be looking to press the issue further at the federal level in the coming weeks. "NOAA Fisheries uses emergency actions all the time to stop us from fishing, so we think it's time for a similar moratorium on any more debilitating closures based on obsolete harvest data," Donofrio said.

RFA said that harvest data collected through the federal Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey (MRFSS) had been deemed "fatally flawed" by scientific peer review in 2006, and was to be replaced by Act of Congress as of 2009. Donofrio said he doubts that most federal legislators are even aware that the Commerce Department has failed to deliver as required.

"NOAA's Eric Schwaab just told a national sportfishing magazine that the new methodology 'could' be ready for rollout sometime in 2012," Donofrio said, adding "I hope that Mr. Schwaab understands that we all 'could' be out of business by the time his agency gets around to meeting their requirement."

In a 2010 letter to NOAA Fisheries, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY) urged the Department of Commerce and its fisheries agency to issue such a moratorium on any flawed data, calling MRFSS "extremely dangerous on a year to year basis," while officially requesting "that NMFS dismiss future recreational overages predicted by MRFSS until the new system is fully implemented and calibrated by NOAA." The senator went on to call it "patently unfair to punish anglers by reducing their quota due to erroneous landings estimates produced with a broken system."

RFA points to a recent study by noted Connecticut researcher Dr. Victor Crecco showing how MRFSS' 2008 angler estimates were up to 400% higher than actual license sale figures and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates. Dr. Crecco's findings "strongly suggest that the MRFSS has severely overestimated the number of saltwater anglers and fishing trips particularly in recent years, and by extension, has severely inflated the true recreational catch and harvest of all finfish species."

Donofrio said this MRFSS data is used not only to monitor annual catch limits in the recreational sector, but that it also has an impact on scientific stock assessments. "When you consider that biomass estimates for blackfish incorporate this hopelessly flawed harvest data, it's ludicrous to think that our ASMFC representatives could possibly actually entertain such laughable mandates against our community," he said.

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA's Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.