



St. Thomas Fishermen's Association

Protecting our Natural Heritage and Culture

31 August 2009

Dr. Bonnie Ponwith, Science Director
Southeast Fisheries Science Center
75 Virginia Beach Drive
Miami, Florida 33149

Dear Dr. Ponwith;

This communication will service to address several inaccuracies and misrepresentations contained in “your” letter of 11 August to Eugenio Pinero regarding proposals by the STFA for development of ACLs.

First and foremost, you have made it abundantly clear that the SEFSC is not interested in ANY suggestions or proposals originating from fishermen. The supposed “cooperative process” which you claim to be underway is only between NMFS stock assessment scientists to the exclusion of all interests affected by ACL decisions.

It also sets lie to your later statement that the SEFSC is “moving forward” with its partners in the region, including the STFA and the SCCFA. The SEFSC has no partners in the region. The STFA has decided that until we see the final outcome of the ACL process, we will not be involved in any collaboration with the SEFSC at any level, as collaborators, survey subjects, or data suppliers.

The SEFSC seems enamored with the idea that somehow SEDAR has addressed data issues in a “consensus” manner that included the STFA. The only consensus at any of these meetings has been between NMFS stock assessment personnel who arrive at these meetings with their conclusions already in mind.

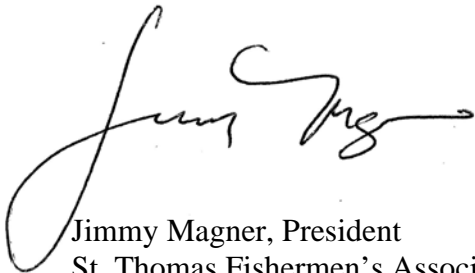
Fishermen and indeed, Territorial representatives, are left on the sidelines and largely ignored except to sign attendance sheets so that SEFSC can allege their participation. Fishermen have volunteered nearly a man-year of uncompensated time to SEDAR. Despite this, there is no point at which their input has resulted in any change in direction or, indeed been acknowledged in any decision making. We wish to correct you on this point, the STFA is totally outside the “consensus” of any of the SEDAR meetings.

Finally your comments on our surplus production proposal exhibit the highest level of bias. Data from existing reports was ignored. No attempt was made to answer some of the questions about assumptions raised in your letter by asking a single question of anyone in the region. Instead assumptions were made with arrogant and total disregard to actual facts on the ground. Again, your conclusions were reached without ever undertaking this simplest of possible analyses, an investment of several hours.

We are finished with all of this. It is clear that we must continue to mobilize opposition since the supposed “objectivity” of SEFSC “scientists” does not seem to exist.

Sincerely,

Thank you;



Jimmy Magner, President
St. Thomas Fishermen’s Association
4003 Raphune Hill, Suite 501, #221
St. Thomas, USVI 00802



Julian Magras, Chairman of the Board
St. Thomas Fishermen’s Association
4003 Raphune Hill, Suite 501, #221
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Cc: Hon. John P. deJongh, Governor
Hon. Donna Christensen, Delegate to Congress
Hon. Madeleine Bordallo, Chairman, House Committee on Insular Affairs, Oceans
and Wildlife
Hon. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA Administrator
James Balsiger, Acting Director, NOAA Fisheries
Sam Rauch, Deputy Asst. Admin. For Regulatory Programs
Roy Crabtree, Regional Administrator
Beulah Dalmeida-Smith, Director Division of Fish and Wildlife
Eugenio Pinero, Chairman, CFMC

Att: Ponwith Letter



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
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August 11, 2009

F/SEC2: TJ

Mr. Eugenio Pinero
Chairman
Caribbean Fishery Management Council
268 Munoz Rivera Avenue, Suite 1108
San Juan, Puerto Rico 00918-1920

Dear Mr. Pinero, *Genio*

Please find attached the SEFSC response to the request by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council dated July 15, 2009 to review some of the key points raised in a letter from the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association (STFA). The STFA contends that the only acceptable method for generating advice relating to annual catch limits for the St. Thomas and St. Croix fisheries is a multi-species production model that uses only a portion of the total landings in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This and other points raised in the STFA letter are discussed in the attached document. In addition, the SEFSC wants to highlight the cooperative process currently underway which will lead to benchmark assessments and assessment-based ACLs.

You may contact Clay Porch at (305) 361-4232 or email Clay.Porch@noaa.gov if you have any questions or clarifications.

Thank you for providing the SEFSC with the opportunity to review and respond to the comments received by the SAFMC on the ACL amendment.

Sincerely,

Theo R. Brainerd
Bonnie Ponwith, Ph.D.
Science Director

Cc: F/SEC – Theo Brainerd
F/SEC – Peter Thompson
F/SEC – Clay Porch
F/SEC – Tom Jamir
F/SEC – Sophia Howard
F/SER – Roy Crabtree
F/SER – Joe Kimmel
CFMC – Miguel Rolon

SEFSC Response to CFMC Request to Review Proposal by STFA (from letters to the CFMC dated July 2 and July 17, 2009)

**NOAA/NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center
11 August 2009**

This document responds to a request by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council to review several points raised in a letter from the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association (STFA). The STFA contention appears to be that the only acceptable method for generating advice relating to annual catch limits for the St. Thomas and St. Croix fisheries is a multispecies production model that uses only a portion of the total landings in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This and other points raised in the STFA letter are discussed below. In addition, the SEFSC wants to highlight the cooperative process currently underway which will lead to benchmark assessments and assessment-based ACLs.

REVIEW OF PROPOSED PRODUCTION MODEL

The SEFSC is in agreement with the SEDAR Procedures Workshop 3 (SEDAR-PW3), the CFMC ACL group, and the CFMC SSC, that it is not scientifically defensible to apply a production model to existing USVI data for assessment purposes, including setting ACLs. The basis for this conclusion is summarized below:

Appropriateness of data

Production models are inappropriate for assessing the St. Thomas/St. John trap fishery because the minimum data requirement for this analysis cannot be met. In January of 2009 a Caribbean Data Evaluation Workshop (SEDAR-PW3) was conducted in Puerto Rico which was specifically designed to evaluate the adequacy of the available data for assessment purposes in the U.S. Caribbean. This was a Council process that operated on consensus and was well attended by all relevant stakeholder groups, including the St. Thomas Fisherman's Association (STFA). The first term of reference for SEDAR-PW3 was: "1) Review available data and develop recommendations regarding their accuracy and reliability for use in assessing U.S. Caribbean fish stocks." (SEDAR-PW3, pg. 15). The proposed use of a production model requires information on total removals (catch) and either effort or catch per unit effort (CPUE).

Removals (catch)

Total catch is comprised of: commercial landings, recreational landings, and dead discards (dead and alive) from both the recreational and commercial sectors.

Commercial landings

At SEDAR-PW3, data quality for commercial landings was given a score of 0 or "data unavailable or unreliable" for all but conch, lobster and a few species groups which received a score of 3 for "data for more than 10 years, but reliability, comprehensiveness or coverage is questionable." (SEDAR-PW3, pg. 180-181)

Although commercial landings in the USVI have been reported since 1974, no species-specific records are available for finfish prior to the mid 1990's. Only since 1997 (St. Croix) and 1995 (St. Thomas) have landings been reported by species groups. The STFA proposal suggests using an aggregated (total landings for all species in the trap fishery) production model and the use of the

trip interview program data (TIP) to then generate species-specific ACL's. Unfortunately, TIP has historically sampled only 1-2% of the landings and was deemed during both SEDAR 8 and SEDAR-PW3 to be insufficient to separate species groups into species-specific landings. Although, as the proposal indicates, there have been efforts since 2005 to collect additional species-specific data, there is no evidence or reason to believe that the species composition was identical or similar over time, to allow a backward projection on the more recent data.

Recreational catch and dead discards

At SEDAR-PW3 there was agreement that "The recreational harvest of marine species in the US Caribbean is thought to be large, but until recently there have been very few surveys [and these primarily in Puerto Rico] to document the level of recreational catch and effort..." (SEDAR-PW3, pg. 19). This issue was repeatedly discussed by the Caribbean SSC at their February 2009 meeting, as one of the reasons why assessments requiring total removals/catch could not be conducted at this time. No information is available on the amount of dead discards in the USVI.

Effort

The production model proposal suggests developing an effort database using a number of previous studies. SEDAR-PW3 reviewed several attempts and clearly states that this is not a viable option. While some effort data (# of traps/day) are available on the USVI trap fishery since 1990, these first effort records are not particularly informative without the corresponding species-specific, or even species grouping, landings records. In addition, the SEDAR-PW3 report concluded that "Trap effort data from St. Thomas/St. John are unreliable prior to 2003..." without having soak time, or actual fishing time, reported (SEDAR-PW3, pg. 117). A comprehensive CPUE analysis of parrotfish in the St. Thomas/St. John trap fishery conducted during SEDAR-PW3 also concluded that "...the time series was further limited due to incomplete or limited reporting for the first few years the species group and effort data were collected [since 1997]."

CPUE

As a result of the available catch and effort data, the SEDAR-PW3 report provided data quality scores for generating CPUE indices of 0 (data unavailable or unreliable) for most species. Only lobster and a few other species groups received a score of 2 (data for recent years, but reliability, comprehensiveness or coverage is questionable) or 3 (data for more than 10 years, but reliability, comprehensiveness or coverage is questionable). (SEDAR-PW3, pg. 180-181)

Additional Issues

While the lack of appropriate data prohibits the application of any production model, there are additional issues with the proposed approach that are relevant.

- The suggested approach applies an equilibrium-based production model. Equilibrium-based production models have been dismissed by the scientific community in favor of non-equilibrium-based production models. The results of an equilibrium-based model would be biased, overestimating MSY. Williams and Prager (2002) wrote the following: "Equilibrium methods played an important role when computer power was far less available, but there is no reason to use them today. We conclude that equilibrium methods should be abandoned, and abandoned completely."

- The suggested approach lumps many dissimilar species together. Such an approach assumes that all species in the mix have the same life history strategy, occupy the same ecosystem niche, and are equally vulnerable to the fishery. None of these assumptions are satisfied by the diverse array of species captured by the U.S. Virgin Island trap fishery. To the contrary, a pattern of sequentially fishing down the food web has been noted in a number of Caribbean (and other) fisheries; species dominant in the early part of the landed catch history are frequently replaced by less desirable species as the abundance of more desirable species declines. In this way, lumping has potential to create an artificial sense of sustainability if vulnerable species are depleted, and less vulnerable species replace them. Although landings may be sustained, species less vulnerable to fishing might not share the ecological function of the supplanted species, and may not have equal economic value.
- The time series of data are very short and very recent. Production models perform poorly when the time series of catch and effort data are shorter than the duration of several generations of the fish population being studied. This is particularly true when, as in the present case, the data do not include the early exploitation history of the fishery.
- The suggested approach fails to address changes in fishing efficiency or other exogenous features, other than fish abundance, that can influence effectiveness of the fishing effort measure used over time. Frequently, fishing efficiency increases over time due to technology, changes in fishing operations (e.g. increase or decrease in soak times, changes in number of traps per string), regulatory changes (e.g. changes in mesh size), and experience. All of these dynamics which if not accounted for in analysis, can mask serious declines in fish abundance. In addition, the absence of a standardized effort measure and the lumped nature of the landings used in the analysis are serious concerns since in combination (and independent of the nature of the production model formulation used in fitting), they can lead to false impressions of the actual reality as relates stock size. These approaches are considered resource risk-prone by many scientists and managers.

MOVING FORWARD

While a production model is not a viable approach at the current time, the SEFSC is moving forward with its partners in the region, including the STFA and SCCFA, to develop assessment techniques and robust data collection procedures that will be used to more effectively assess the status of USVI stocks and to develop and monitor ACLs.

Effective Stock Assessment Methods

SEDAR-PW3, the CFMC ACL Group and the CFMC SSC each concluded that a non-equilibrium length-based assessment method (Gedamke and Hoenig, 2006) is the most viable approach to pursue short term. This method has very limited data requirements, avoids the assumption of equilibrium conditions, and is expected to produce the first informative assessment results. The SEFSC has continued to develop new methods for application in the U.S. Caribbean, including the USVI.

Improving Data Collection

The SEFSC is participating in a process to design and implement an improved, fishery dependent data collection process in the U.S. Caribbean. The SEFSC understands the importance of working with the fishermen in this process, to create a data collection procedure that provides the information necessary for conducting assessments, but also to set up the procedure in a way that fishermen are willing and able to participate. The cooperation of the STFA (and the SCCFA) is vital to these efforts and the SEFSC values their participation and input.

In addition, the SEFSC is in the process of developing a pilot study to collect fishery independent data in the U.S. Caribbean. This will be a cooperative program between scientists and fishers to collect critically needed data. The inclusion of fishery independent data will greatly improve our ability to conduct informative stock assessments.

LITERATURE CITED

- Gedamke, T., and J. M. Hoenig. 2006. Estimating Mortality from Mean Length Data in Non-equilibrium Situations, with Application to the Assessment of Goosefish (*Lophius americanus*). Transactions of the American Fisheries Society. 135:476-487.
- SEDAR-PW3. Final Report of the Caribbean Fisheries Data Evaluation, SEDAR Procedures Workshop 3, January 26 – 29, 2009, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
- Williams, E. H., and M. H. Prager. 2002. Comparison of equilibrium and non-equilibrium estimators for the generalized production model. Can. J. Fish. Aquat. Sci. 59: 1533–1552.