N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Release: Immediate
Date: Feb. 14, 2011

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Marine Fisheries Commission Votes to Reopen Ocean Striped Bass Trawl Fishery

MOREHEAD CITY – The N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission has instructed the director of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries to reopen the state's ocean striped bass trawl fishery to allow the remaining quota to be caught.

The commission voted 6-2 Friday to allow the fishery to reopen, adding the requirement for 30-minute tow times, to the previous regulations. The commission based the decision to limit the tow times on cooperative research tows from different fisheries agencies where the discard mortality rate is low.

Previous regulations, setting a 2,000-pound-per-day trip limit will remain. Fishermen will also still be allowed to transfer trip limits to other fishing vessels that hold a striped bass ocean fishing permit for the commercial trawl fishery.

"As we finish out this season, fishermen need to be mindful of the events that have occurred and the concerns that have been expressed by the public and do everything they can to avoid the appearance of waste," said division Director Louis Daniel.

The division has been inundated with e-mails, phone calls and letters since the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday weekend when the agency received reports of thousands of dead striped bass in the water off Dare County. The division was able to confirm that at least one incident occurred off Bodie Island where a trawl boat fishing operation overloaded its net and released between 3,000 and 4,000 fish.

In response to public concerns, the division took steps to reduce the amount of striped bass discards in the commercial trawl fishery by replacing the previous 50-fish-per-day commercial trip limit with a 2,000-pound-per-day trip limit. To avoid the need to throw back dead fish, commercial trawl fishermen were allowed to transfer trip limits to other fishing vessels at sea.

The division received complaints of another occurrence of dead fish on Feb. 3. N.C. Marine Patrol officers responded to the complaints and confirmed a total 251 dead fish that had either washed up on the beach or were seen floating in the water from the air. The striped bass trawl fishery closed Feb. 4, and the division decided to not reopen it until the commission could review the issue.

The division brought forward three options for the commission to consider:

- Do not reopen the ocean striped bass trawl fishery;
- Reopen the ocean striped bass trawl fishery with modifications to the regulations;
- Reopen the ocean striped bass trawl fishery as a bycatch fishery only.

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The commission instructed the director to reopen the trawl fishery by proclamation in one-day increments. Daniel has not yet decided what day to reopen this fishery.

The commission also voted to ask the division to develop a proposal for allowing a commercial hook and line fishery to help avoid waste. The commission will discuss this issue further at a future meeting.

In other business, the commission voted Friday to:

- Continue the spotted seatrout closure for both recreational and commercial fishing until June 15, as was recommended by the division. The commission also added a bycatch allowance of 10 percent of the daily harvest, up to 50 pounds, for the commercial fishery. This bycatch allowance is for weekdays only; the weekend harvest prohibition of spotted seatrout remains in effect for the commercial fishery. The intent of the bycatch allowance was to avoid waste of fish incidentally caught while targeting other species. The reason for extending the closure is to allow as many fish as possible to survive through the height of the spawning season. The state closed all coastal waters to the harvest of spotted seatrout Jan. 14 in response to several cold stun events. A proclamation continuing this closure will be issued today and become effective Thursday.
- Adopt a supplement to the Southern Flounder Fishery Management Plan that increases the recreational minimum size limit to 15 inches and decreases the creel limit to six fish per day. A proclamation implementing this regulatory change will be issued today and become effective Feb. 21.

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nr-6-2011

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