Testimony of

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before the

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Committee on Resources

U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am John V. O'Shea, Executive Director of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. The Commission is comprised of the fifteen Atlantic coastal states, and carries out a diverse array of programs for its members in order to promote and protect Atlantic coastal fisheries through their wise and effective conservation and management. Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee today to review the health, management, and future of the Atlantic striped bass fishery, a fishery that has been restored to

record levels through the successful efforts of the Atlantic coastal states and their federal partners. The Commission testified before this Committee in 2000 and 2004 and my testimony today will include some of the same points made then, as the issues and concerns still apply. As the Committee considers the future of the Atlantic striped bass fishery, it can do so in the confidence that its leadership has helped the states and the federal agencies maintain and build on this outstanding fishery resource conservation success.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR CONSERVATION WORK

It is with pleasure that I can report to you today that the Atlantic striped bass population is at a historically high level of abundance. The population has expanded in both numbers of fish and overall biomass, and with a current spawning stock biomass of 55 million pounds, the stock greatly exceeds target levels (Figure 1). Concurrent with this abundance increase has been an expansion of the age structure, further strengthening the reproductive capacity of the stock.

As the stock has recovered, the fisheries for striped bass have also grown. Over 3 million fish are harvested annually, an amount that is currently sustainable, and one that far exceeds harvest levels of the mid-70's, prior to the collapse (Figure 2). The commercial fishery accounts for 28% of the striped bass fishing mortality and generates over $12 million dollars annually for our

economy. The striped bass population supports the largest recreational fishery within our Commission. Recreational fishers, responsible for 72% of the striped bass fishing mortality, enjoy millions of fishing trips per year (Figure 3).

However, we must not let the accomplishments of today blind us to the lessons of the past. Twenty-five years ago, the striped bass stock collapsed due to years of over-fishing and habitat degradation (Figure 2). The coordinated actions of our states and our federal agency partners, and the dedication and sacrifice of fishermen up and down the coast, have yielded stunning results. Under the Commission's management plan, the Atlantic striped bass population was fully restored by 1997. Doing so required years of strict, and for many painful, conservation measures borne by both commercial and recreational harvesters.

Despite our successes, there are some concerns about the health of striped bass. A series of studies are being conducted on this issue throughout the stock's range, primarily focusing on two diseases: Ulcerative Dermatitis Syndrome, which results in lesions on the body, and Mycobacteriosis.

Mycobacteriosis is a bacterial infection resulting in a variety of external and internal symptoms including skin lesions, stunted growth, inflammation, tissue destruction, and formation of scar tissue in one or more organs. The infection progresses slowly in fish and has been characterized as a "wasting disease" due to loss

of body mass. Recent Maryland Department of Natural Resource surveys indicate that as many as 60 percent of striped bass in the Chesapeake Bay may have this disease, which does not appear to be common in any other species in the Bay. First diagnosed in the Chesapeake Bay in 1997, at least 10 species of mycobacteria have been isolated from striped bass lesions. Fish are probably exposed to these bacteria early in life with infection rates increasing with age: 11 percent in 1-year-olds and 60 percent in 3- to 5-year-olds. The recovery and mortality rates resulting from this disease within the Chesapeake Bay are not currently known. If the disease were causing significant mortality, an effect would be evident in our stock assessments. So far, we have not seen a rise in natural mortality. Scientists from both Maryland and Virginia continue to study this issue and monitor the situation.

Concern has also been raised over the nutritional needs of striped bass. A number of studies are being conducted to evaluate prey availability and what relation, if any, it might have to the prevalence of disease in the striped bass population. A multispecies model, incorporating predator-prey and competitor interactions between striped bass, Atlantic menhaden, bluefish, and weakfish, is under development. Fisheries scientists and managers will use this model to help determine interspecies relationships and help forecast multiple species abundance trends.

SUCCESS REQUIRES MAINTENANCE

Mr. Chairman, the Committee has heard about the enormous popularity of striped bass. Under our continued commitment to ensure a long-term future for the striped bass resource and the fisheries it supports, the Commission engaged in a deliberative process over a four-year period to develop Amendment 6 to the Atlantic Striped Bass Management Plan. The plan was needed to address key management, science, and policy issues related to the long-term management of this fully recovered stock. Amendment 6 establishes biological reference points appropriate for a rebuilt stock, requires the states to monitor the health of the stock, and provides a suite of triggers requiring rapid management response to population declines or fishing mortality inclines. The Commission and the states recognize that a modest investment to properly monitor and respond quickly to even small downturns in population is far more cost-effective than trying to respond to a collapsed fishery.

As in the past, Amendment 6 grants the states the decision-making capacity over whether to have a commercial fishery. Presently, seven states have commercial fisheries for striped bass, each with a hard quota established by Amendment 6 (Figure 4). Quotas are closely monitored and fisheries are closed when quotas are reached. Any overages are deducted from the following year’s quotas.

The recreational fisheries for striped bass do not have hard caps, but rather operate to achieve a target fishing mortality rate, which has resulted in considerable expansion of the fishery (Figure 2). Creel limits and size limits are the main tools employed to restrict recreational harvest. Each jurisdiction from Maine through North Carolina, including the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, participates in the recreational fishery for striped bass (Figure 4).

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Various measures have been proposed regarding the future of the striped bass fishery such as prohibiting commercial harvest, and relaxing the exclusive economic zone moratorium. As part of the Amendment 6 process, the Commission recommended that the Secretary of Commerce lift the moratorium on the possession and harvest of striped bass in the EEZ.

The Commission concluded that no scientific reason exists to continue the moratorium in the EEZ—the stock is recovered and effective management measures control harvest levels. Commercial landings have remained under tight control since 1995 through hard quotas. The majority of public comments received by the Commission in opposition to opening the EEZ to striped bass fishing cited an expansion of the commercial fishery as the rationale. Under the

Commission management plan, action to open the EEZ would not, in itself, increase commercial landings.

Opening the EEZ to striped bass harvest could benefit the fishery in several ways. During our debates on this issue, the Commission heard anecdotal reports of significant catch and release occurring in the EEZ. Opening the EEZ would provide a mechanism to convert both commercial and recreational discards into landings, potentially reducing overall fishing mortality. Additionally, with the proper control measures in place, the action could disperse the fishing effort without increasing the harvest, resulting in less user conflict.

Opposition to opening the EEZ raises an important public policy question. If it is not prudent to fish in the EEZ on a fully recovered stock, closely monitored and controlled with hard TACs, which stocks should we be fishing on? In addition, one could argue that it may be time, or even past time, for greater cooperative effort to restore several mid-Atlantic species, such as summer and winter flounder, weakfish, and tautog, all of which are below their target biomass levels.

With regard to the coastal commercial fishery for striped bass, management and participation have been left to the states to determine. Proposals to implement federal regulations on the states' commercial fisheries raise concerns from the Commission's perspective. Such policy would impinge on the sovereign right of the

states to manage the resources within their jurisdictions. Cutting commercial harvesters out of a recovered stock raises fairness issues and would likely discourage the commercial sector from participating in future rebuilding efforts for other stocks. Establishing a recreational-only harvest would deny access of the fish-eating but not fish-harvesting community to a public resource.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the Commission recognizes its stewardship responsibilities and the Atlantic coastal states remain firmly committed to maintaining the recovered Atlantic striped bass stock. In considering management proposals for Atlantic striped bass, we ought to ensure that they are based on sound science and sustainable management.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and all the members of your Committee, for your strong leadership on this important fisheries issue. We are grateful for your continued support and encouragement to our Commission and our states as we work towards our vision of healthy, self-sustaining populations for all Atlantic coast fish species, or successful restoration well in progress, by 2015.

I would be pleased to answer questions.

Figure 1

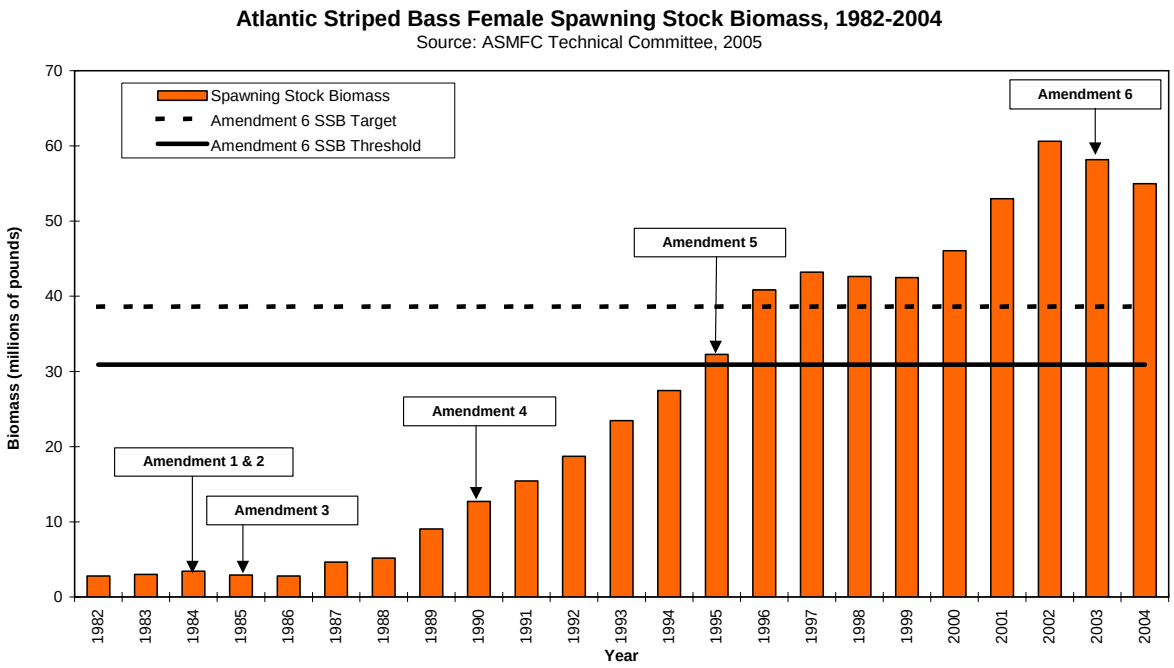

Figure 2

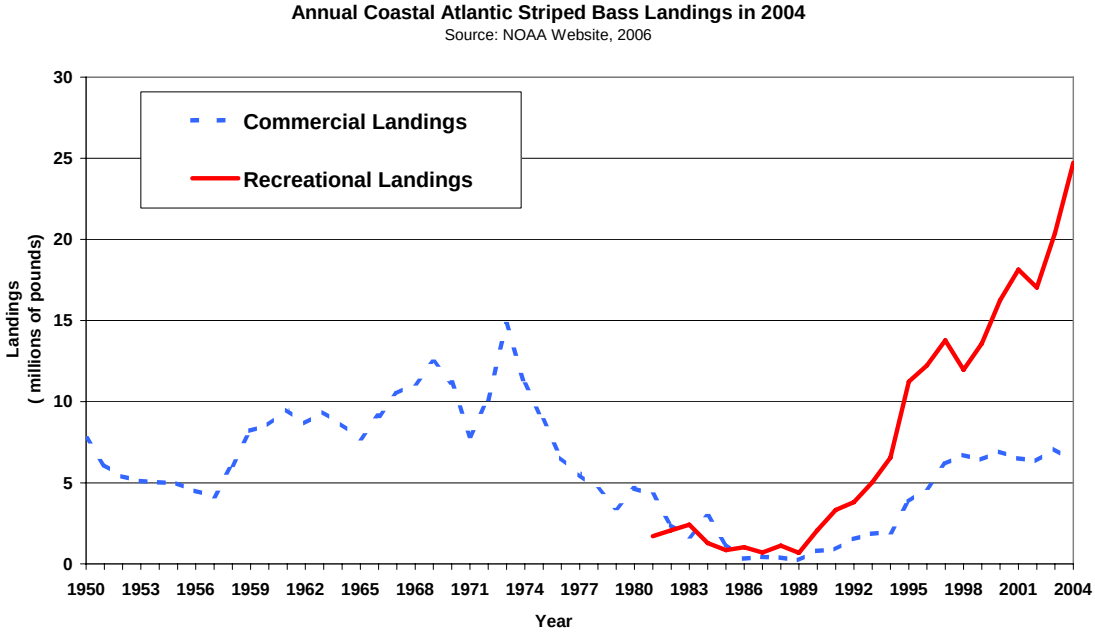

Figure 3

Atlantic Striped Bass Catch in 2004 (5.2 Million Fish)
Source: ASMFC Atlantic Striped Bass Technical Committee, 2005

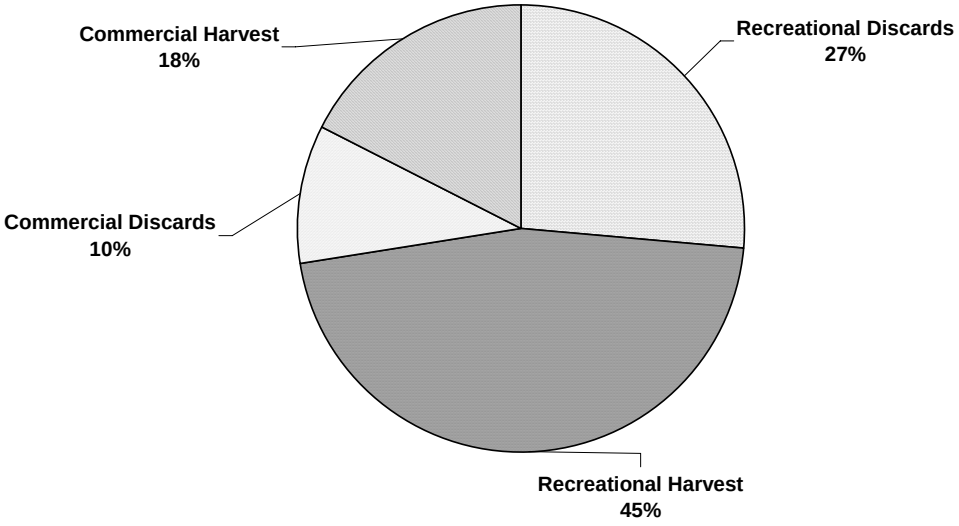

Figure 4

Atlantic Striped Bass Harvest by State/Jurisdiction in 2004
Source: ASMFC Atlantic Striped Bass Technical Committee, 2005