Flounder season in New Jersey extended 8 days

By RICHARD DEGENEER, Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, July 11, 2013 9:30 pm

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP - The New Jersey Marine Fisheries Council on Thursday compromised in a vote that will extend the summer flounder season by eight days this year.

The council could have extended the season by 11 days, taking advantage of unused quota other East Coast states decided to give New Jersey and New York due to the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy, but there was concern taking more fish this year would lead to cutbacks in 2014. An advisory body to the council had recommended extending the season by just six days.

Councilwoman Eleanor Bochenek proposed the compromise and it passed in a 5-4 vote, with Sergio Radossi, Erling Berg, Barney Hollinger and Walter Johnson voting with Bochenek. Council Chairman Dick Herb, who wanted to follow the advisers’ “preferred option” of six days, voted no along with Joe Zaborowski, Joe Rizzo, and Robert Rush.

The vote means a flounder season set to end Sept. 16 will now end Sept. 24, which is just a few days before the black sea bass season begins. A number of party and charter boat captains were concerned about not having a signature fish to sell to their patrons between flounder and black sea bass seasons.

A large turnout at the meeting, held at the Atlantic County Library branch in Galloway, pushed for the full 11 days.

A councilwoman with the Atlantic County Library branch in Galloway, pushed for the full 11 days. That would have totaled 232,949 pounds of the unused allocation of 809,147 pounds. New York had already taken 565,282 pounds.

Those pushing for the full 11 days said Sandy did so much damage to marinas and boats that the industry is hurting right now. Paul Haertel, of the New Jersey Outdoor Alliance, said 58,000 boats were damaged or lost in Sandy. That means fewer people fishing, which reduces sales of bait, tackle and other businesses that cater to anglers. Haertel said the black sea bass season doesn’t open until Sept. 27.

"We don’t want a gap between fluke and sea bass. There really isn’t much else to fish for," Haertel said.

Those pushing for fewer days were concerned about the federal fish counting method, which few anglers trust, being used to reduce the quota in 2014. The count is released 40 days behind the catches so there is no accurate count at this point in time. Some noted the recent cold water has reduced catches, but others said there were a lot of flounder caught before the ocean water temperature dropped.

"Fishing was pretty good before that," Herb noted. "It will turn northeast and warm up again. It always does. They will use their statistics whether we like it or not."

Herb noted that six days would take the season through another weekend, the weekend of Sept. 21 and 22. Rush, a council member and one of the flounder advisers, pushed for six days.

"I feel everybody’s pain. I own a party boat myself. I can’t support 11 days, because in the long run we’ll take a hit," Rush said.

New Jersey overfished its quota of 1,090,407 fish in 2012, catching 1,153,975 fish. This counts against a state the following year. Several anglers at the meeting, however, said they are seeing significantly fewer private boats on the water this year and the party boats are heading out with fewer customers. If the counting is done accurately, they surmised New Jersey will be well below its quota.

John Toth, of the Jersey Coast Anglers Association, said that between Sandy, record rainfall, cold water and daily thunderstorms, people are not going fishing. He said business at one marina is down 40 percent and party boats are
going out "not even one-quarter full."

Tom Siciliano, also a member of the JCAA but representing several fishing clubs as well, said one fishing tournament that normally registers 200 boats has 39 registered this year. He said his 139-slip marina only has 39 boats in it right now.

"The angler of New Jersey would appreciate the full 11 days," said Siciliano. "Are we really in any danger of coming close to exceeding our quota?"

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