

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Fishery Management Plan for the Atlantic Surf Clam and Ocean Quahog Fisheries (FMP) directs NMFS, in consultation with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), to specify quotas for surf clams and ocean quahogs on an annual basis from a range to represent the OY for each fishery.

In a 1992 policy, the Council selected annual harvest levels that would allow those harvests to continue for at least 10 years for surf clams and 30 years for ocean quahogs. As a further refinement of the 1992 policy, the Council voted in 1993 that, within the biological constraints imposed by the finite resource, annual quotas would be set at levels that will meet estimated annual demand.

For surf clams, the quota must fall within the OY range of 1.85 million bu (652 thousand hectoliters (hL)) and 3.40 million bu (1.2 million hL). For ocean quahogs, the quota must fall within the OY range of 4.00 million bu (1.4 million hL) and 6.00 million bu (2.1 million hL).

In proposing the 1995 quotas, NMFS considered the available stock assessments, data reported by harvesters and processors, and other relevant information concerning exploitable biomass and spawning biomass, fishing mortality rates, stock recruitment, projected effort and catches, and areas closed to fishing. This information was presented in a written report prepared by the Council and adopted by the Director, Northeast Region, NMFS.

Proposed quotas as recommended by the Council are: Surf clams—2.565 million bu (933.8 thousand hL); ocean quahogs—4.9 million bu (1.73 million hL). These proposed quotas represent decreases from the 1994 quotas of 2.85 million bu (1.0 million hL) for surf clams, and 5.4 million bu (1.9 million hL) for ocean quahogs.

On January 30 and 31, 1995, the Northeast Fisheries Science Center presented a new stock assessment of surf clams and ocean quahogs. Copies may be obtained from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, 166 Water Street, Woods Hole, MA 02543, telephone: 508-548-5123. Results of this stock assessment were not available to the Council at the time the proposed 1995 quotas were established.

NMFS is concerned that the overfishing definitions for these two species, as contained in the FMP, may be inadequate to protect the long-term productivity of these resources, based on the findings of a recent Scientific Review Committee. Therefore, NMFS will advise the Council that prior to setting the 1996 quotas, it should revise

these definitions to ensure they have a biological basis.

Surf Clams

The proposed 1995 quota for surf clams of 2.565 million bu (933.8 thousand hL) was recommended by the Council staff.

The potential harvest of 300,000 bu (105.7 thousand hL) from the Georges Bank area, which constitutes nearly 20 percent of the surf clam biomass, was not added to this proposed quota on the assumption that the area east of 69° W. long. will remain closed to fishing in 1995 due to the continued danger of paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP).

Under the current FMP, the Mid-Atlantic, Nantucket Shoals, and Georges Bank areas are combined. Therefore, the 300,000 bu (105.7 thousand hL) from Georges Bank could be safely harvested in other areas west of 69° W. long. However, with the decline in abundance of surf clams in the Mid-Atlantic region, and the absence of a significant year class since 1976 off New Jersey and 1977 off the Delmarva peninsula, the Council concurred with staff recommendations that the conservation of the resource is best served by reducing the present quota to 2.565 million bu (933.8 thousand hL).

Ocean Quahogs

The proposed 1995 quota for ocean quahogs of 4.9 million bu (1.73 million hL) was recommended by the Council.

Council staff had recommended a 1995 quota of 4.6 million bu (1.6 million hL) due to a lack of significant recruitment to the population for the past several decades, and strong indications that the proportion of quahog resource available to the industry is dwindling. As with surf clams, the quahog resource on Georges Bank remains unavailable for harvest due to PSP.

In 1993, the Council adopted as a quota setting policy that the quota should be set within the OY range (4.0 million—6.0 million bu (1.4 million—2.1 million hL)) at a level that will allow fishing to continue at that level for at least 30 years.

Based on that policy, Council staff recommended a 1995 quota of 4.6 million bu (1.6 million hL). The recommendation was based on a determination that current estimates (1992) of the total EEZ ocean quahog abundance indicate a supply that would support current catches for 22 to 32 years. The Council staff also provided an analysis, which indicated that the average annual landings from 1984 to 1993 were 4.6 million bu (1.6 million hL). This amount was used as an

estimate of quantity demanded for ocean quahogs.

At the Council meeting, discussion focused on the quantity of quahogs that can be sold in the market. Average annual landings were used as an indicator of that quantity. Annual landings for the 10-year period 1984 through 1993 averaged 4.6 million bu (1.6 million hL). If, however, data from the last 3 years are used, average annual landings were 4.9 million bu (1.73 million hL). At this higher exploitation rate, the stock of ocean quahogs is expected to support landings for 20 to 30 years. Within the above constraint, the quota should be set at a level that will meet estimated annual demand. The Council voted in favor of a proposed quota of 4.9 million bu (1.73 million hL).

Continued recruitment failure in this fishery and the difficulty in resolving the PSP problem for the Georges Bank portion of the stock warrant a conservative biological stance with regard to the likely long-term supply of quahogs. Nevertheless, NMFS is specifically seeking comment on the appropriate approach to consideration of market demand in establishing annual quotas for species managed under individual transferable quota.

While quotas are set for maximum sustainable yield, the social implications of the quota must be addressed as well. If the quahog quota were to be set significantly in excess of current market demand, it would result in a segment of the industry being unable to sell part or all of its allocation, as vertically integrated operations would buy preferentially from their own boats. Current market demand would allow for a quota level of between 4.8 million bu (1.69 million hL) and 5.0 million bu (1.76 million hL). The proposed quota of 4.9 million bu (1.73 million hL) serves to strike a balance between the yield of the resource and the effects on the industry.

The proposed quotas for the 1995 Atlantic surf clam and ocean quahog fisheries are as follows:

PROPOSED 1995 SURF CLAM/OCEAN QUAHOG QUOTAS

Fishery	1995 proposed quotas (bu)	1995 proposed quotas (hL)
Surf clam	2,565,000	933,800
Ocean quahog ..	4,900,000	1,730,000

Classification

This action is authorized by 50 CFR part 652, and these proposed