

THE BAHAMAS SPINY LOBSTER FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Background

To improve management and sustainability of the lobster fishery to support Bahamian livelihoods, the Bahamas Department of Marine Resources (DMR) has been working with conservation partners, the fishing community and marine exporters to implement a fishery improvement project (FIP) for the Bahamian spiny lobster fishery. The FIP encourages fisheries, businesses, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to work collectively to move the lobster fishery toward meeting the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) standards for sustainable fisheries while preserving a healthy ecosystem (see: www.msc.org). Additionally the FIP will help to improve documentation and management of lobster stocks, help to sustain lobster populations and encourage good stewardship of the marine environment.

In 2009, an MSC pre-assessment was initially done to assess the current fishery status against the MSC standard for sustainable fisheries and identified gaps where improvement is needed. Based on input from stakeholders and experts, a workplan was then developed highlighting priority activities that need to be completed in order to address the gaps identified. These activities include collecting fisheries dependent data; conducting outreach efforts; improving monitoring, enforcement and management strategies; and performing a stock assessment. The Bahamas has implemented a catch certificate program; a zero tolerance policy within The Bahamas Marine Exporters Association (BMEA) against the harvesting and buying of illegal size lobsters; conducted a spiny lobster stock assessment and; established The Bahamas Spiny Lobster Working Group (BSLWG). The BSLWG, endorsed and its members appointed by Government, consists of NGOs, fishermen, and government representatives that will advise the Government of effective strategies that can influence policy making and improve management and governance.

The Bahamas Spiny Lobster Working Group (BSLWG) members include:

- The Bahamas Marine Exporters Association
- The Department of Marine Resources
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Bahamas National Trust
- The North Abaco Fishing Cooperative
- Friends of the Environment
- The BEST Commission
- The Bahamas Commercial Fishers Alliance
- Spanish Wells Fishing Association
- Representative from the Long Island Fishing Community
- Representative from the Grand Bahama Fishing Community

To ensure the Bahamian community is knowledgeable of items that are discussed over the course of the project, the BSLWG will make public a summary of all meeting notes and encourages stakeholders to contact relevant persons should any clarification be needed or questions need to be answered.

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Summaries of BSLWG Meeting Minutes

September 10, 2013

The inaugural meeting of the BSLWG was held on September 10, 2013.

The BSLWG members represent a variety of stakeholders in the spiny lobster industry including fishing cooperatives, fishers, marine exporters, NGO's, and government officials. The meeting was facilitated by the Department of Marine Resources and all attendees were invited to introduce themselves and share their expertise.

First presented was an overview of the 2012 spiny lobster fishery stock assessment and the current status of the PaV1 virus (a virus that has minimally affected some lobster populations) in the country. Several topics were discussed that will be addressed by the BSLWG. This includes the country's efforts to attain the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification as one of the tools to help sustain and effectively manage the lobster fishery. The benefit of gaining this certification is that it will allow The Bahamas to remain competitive in international markets and will lend transparency and credibility to our spiny lobster fishery. The key areas where improvements are needed in order to attain the MSC certification such as improved management, proper data collection, etc., were presented in the pre-assessment results following stakeholder discussions. The main activities that must be implemented in order to address the gaps identified in the pre-assessment were outlined and are shown in the Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) action plan.

The BSLWG then voted on leadership positions for the group. It was decided that Mia Isaacs be appointed the Chair and Lester Gittens as Deputy-Chair. Rules for governing the group were discussed and defined in the draft BSLWG terms of reference.

The second item discussed was the establishment and use of a Harvest Control Rule (HCR). The HCR is a management tool that is triggered if a fishery is approaching unsustainable levels. Target reference points are chosen to ensure that the HCR can be enacted before population levels drop too low to be recovered. This is one of the management strategies being considered following the results of the stock assessment which was conducted to help determine the reference points i.e. the point at which the HCR should be triggered or made active. The stock assessment was completed in 2012 by a stock assessment and fishery management research consultant and is being further revised to improve accuracy.

The third item presented to the group was a draft lobster fishery management plan (FMP) that was done in 2003 by the Department of Marine Resources and the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism, a regional fisheries body for CARICOM states, and the planning process that is undertaken to develop the plan so that members could understand the full process. The group agreed to review the plan, and update and modify the document as needed so that it will be more effective, realistic and relevant to the current lobster fishery status and enforcement capacity.

Next Steps:

It was decided by the BSLWG that the HCR be discussed in detail at the next scheduled meeting when the lead research consultant who developed the HCR based on input from relevant stakeholders will be able to attend.

October 17, 2013

The BSLWG meeting was held on October 17, 2013.

The lead stock assessment and research consultant, who conducted the Bahamas lobster fishery stock assessment in 2012, presented the HCR best practices and how it relates to the MSC certification process, including the long term sustainability of the lobster fishery.

Various types of HCRs and how they could be applied to local fisheries, along with the value of the HCR, were once again presented in more detail. The group was then tasked with developing a potential HCR for the Bahamas spiny lobster fishery. The group discussed various options for the HCR that could be recommended to the Government based on the results of the 2012 stock assessment presented by the consultant. A tentative agreement was made on an HCR that sets an export quota of seven (7) million pounds (of tails) and an average catch per unit effort of fifty (50) pounds per man per day. Catch per unit effort would be determined based on fisheries catch data available to the Department of Marine Resources. If the HCR is in place, and the average catch decreases below fifty (50) pounds per man per day, then the established export quota would have to be decreased. The group agreed on this proposed HCR based on the current stock assessment. However, the stock assessment is to be revisited in 2014 to improve the process as well as to consider additional data available. It will be at that point when the HCR would be revisited if the results of the 2014 stock assessment deem it necessary.

February 18, 2014

The BSLWG meeting was held on February 18, 2014.

The group was informed that the proposed HCR was presented to and, approved conditionally by the Minister of Agriculture, Marine Resources and Local Government. It was stated that the Minister wished to present the HCR to Cabinet for their review, feedback and final approval.

The second item discussed was the importance of having a Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and its purpose. Completion of the FMP is a requirement of the Fisheries Improvement Project (FIP) and is vital to guiding effective management of the lobster fishery. The Bahamas must also show progress with an FMP to qualify for the MSC certification. Therefore the Department of Marine Resources draft FMP completed in 2003 was presented to the BSLWG for review. It was expected that the BSLWG would review the plan in sections and modify the plan as deemed necessary. The group discussed that in order for the plan to be effective, it must take into consideration the current status of the lobster fishery including economic, cultural and ecological status and needs. Management improvements would be made based on stakeholder feedback from the government, the BSLWG, marine exporters and fishing communities as it relates to management of the fishery. The key components of the FMP include:

- A description of the fishery especially its current status and any established user rights;
- Management objectives;
- How these objectives are to be achieved and;
- How the plan is to be reviewed and approved.

During the preliminary review process by the BSLWG, the group made suggestions to revise the proposed management objectives to those that are more applicable. Other sections of the plan were reviewed and discussed but not the entire document. Therefore the plan must still be fully reviewed by the BSLWG and then presented to the fishing communities for their review and feedback before being finalized.

Finally presented was background on the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Programme, fisheries project which aims to improve fisheries management in ACP countries and ensure sustainability. Under the ACP Fish Program II, DMR has been working with fisheries and policy research consultants to advance a new Bahamas Fisheries Act in order to improve management and sustainability of the Bahamian fisheries. The primary responsibilities of the consultant include performing studies and providing assistance for design and implementation of projects in the framework of international co-operation and partnership agreements. As this project advances and the legislation is revisited, the spiny lobster FMP efforts have to be considered and align with revisions made to the Act.

May 27, 2014

A meeting was held on May 27, 2014.

The BSLWG reviewed accomplishments of the FIP and looked at next steps towards improving management of the lobster fishery including:

- Assessing and documenting the level of Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing in the country as well as identifying measures that can be taken to combat IUU fishing;
- The formal adoption of the HCR by the Cabinet;
- Completing the updated 2014 stock assessment and;
- Finalizing the review and adoption of the FMP.

Understanding this, the BSLWG further discussed the FMP objectives in detail and then refined those objectives.

It was reported that the final decision was to be made once the Minister of Agriculture, Marine Resources and Local Government presented the updated HCR to Cabinet for their approval. It was expected that the HCR would be presented to the Cabinet before the end of 2014.

August 21, 2014

The BSLWG meeting was held on August 24, 2014.

During the meeting, some BSLWG members stated that they received anecdotal reports from a few fishers and other relevant stakeholders that the lobster catch was low compared to the previous year and that customs agents had recently made seizures of undersized lobster. This raised the importance of finalizing the HCR and sensitizing government officials to the potential social, environmental, and cultural ramifications of a failing spiny lobster fishery. The BSLWG was then informed that the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Marine Resources notified DMR that the HCR will be presented to Cabinet before the end of the year.

The second item discussed was the completion of the 2014 lobster stock assessment. The group was informed that this stock assessment is still being completed by the lead consultant. Once he has completed his final revisions the document will be circulated to the BSLWG for review. Following feedback from the BSLWG, the report will be circulated for scientific peer review before being considered final.

Another item discussed was the collection of lobster bycatch trap data. BSLWG members began engaging persons from the College of The Bahamas as well as fishers to assist in collecting bycatch data from lobster traps during the open lobster season. The purpose of collecting such information is to determine whether lobster traps are having a significant impact on other marine species. It is expected that a bycatch data collection team will be assembled and bycatch data collected by the next BSLWG meeting.

Finally, members discussed other policies that must be taken into consideration as the FMP is being developed such as improved standards for handling fishery product, and ways to maximize yield from existing catch. However given the timeframe it will take to truly complete the FMP and the timeline for entering the MSC certification process, it was decided that a lobster harvest strategy document be developed. The harvest strategy document nevertheless is not intended to replace the FMP but provides a guide to the management measures currently undertaken by the Department of Marine Resources (DMR) within the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources with support from other agencies and organizations in respect to The Bahamas spiny lobster fishery.

January 15, 2015

The BSLWG meeting was held on January 15, 2015.

At the BSLWG meeting, members began discussing, reviewing and modifying the “Final Draft” of the 2014 Management Performance Review (MPR) document for The Bahamas. There were only some minor modifications made to the document with no content change.

In addition to the MPR document, The Bahamas Lobster Fishery Harvest Strategy document was reviewed. The BSLWG agreed on the fishery specific objectives outlined in the document. Additional changes were made to the document. Some inclusions still needed to be made to the document at a later date once feedback from the BSLWG was received.

Following the review of the documents, the BSLWG was updated on the Government’s decision to adopt the HCR. The Cabinet met with some members of the BSLWG to further clarify the HCR. It was agreed that the HCR be accepted with a caveat that further consultation be conducted with a relevant group of fishers first and their feedback incorporated. A report of the consultation was submitted to relevant agencies within Government as requested and the BSLWG awaits the final decision.

Finally presented was an update on the plans to conduct a bycatch study. Progress was made including confirming persons that will collect the data and securing a fisherman who would assist by providing his boat. During the last week of December 2014, bycatch data was collected however there were some challenges, for example, inconsistency in the data collected. Therefore the group made some suggestions on how to streamline the process to improve the next bycatch study scheduled for March 2015.

April 17, 2015

The BSLWG meeting was held on April 17, 2015.

At the meeting, the group continued reviewing and discussing the Management Performance Review and The Bahamas Lobster Harvest Strategy documents. Further modifications were made based on information shared during the meeting. Once the documents are finalized, they will be made available for the public to review.

Following the review of the documents, the group was verbally informed that the HCR was approved and adopted by The Cabinet. The group discussed the need to present the HCR to various fishing communities so they are aware of the HCR and understand its use. An update was also provided on the bycatch data collection boat trip which was expected to take place in March 2015. The group was informed that the bycatch data was successfully collected during March and all previous data collected was being forwarded to a consultant to be analyzed. Following the analysis a report is to be prepared to share results.

Finally the group was reminded of the upcoming National FIP meeting where stakeholders from various sectors across The Bahamas are expected to participate. Items to be discussed and presented at the National FIP meeting would be the FIP progress to date, outstanding items and project challenges. Additionally, the meeting allows a forum for stakeholders to express their concerns regarding lobster fishery management efforts and ask relevant questions regarding the FIP and MSC.

September 29, 2015

The BSLWG meeting was held on September 29, 2015.

The first item to discuss was the last meeting minutes but unfortunately they were not available for review thus will be circulated and adopted by the group via email. An update was then given on the review status of the following documents: the Management Performance Review of The Bahamas Lobster Fishery 2014 and the Lobster Harvest Strategy 2014. The group was informed that the documents are currently being revised by a partner institution. Also discussed and refined were the meeting minute summaries to date. This updated version will be circulated to the wider BSLWG for review, then finalized and posted on the DMR website. An update on the lobster fishery management plan was also presented to the group. It was stated that the terms of reference to advance the fishery management plan was circulated nationally and internationally in order to source qualified fisheries experts who can assist in developing the plan. Other gaps in information have been identified including:

- A review status of marine endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species in The Bahamas and;
- Identification of marine habitat and ecosystem research and monitoring in The Bahamas.

Therefore the terms of reference to complete the two items mentioned previously will be circulated widely locally and internationally.

In order to move the MSC assessment forward in 2015 outstanding activities were identified and plans to resolve and methods to complete the tasks were discussed. Due to irregular participation,

the group agreed that the terms of reference, new elections and revision of board members should be discussed in detail at the next meeting.

The next meeting has been tentatively scheduled for the third week of January 2016. The draft summary of the meeting minutes for the September 29, 2015 was then completed and the meeting concluded.

April 21, 2016

The BSLWG meeting was held on April 16, 2016.

Eleven out of thirteen members were present at the meeting. Dr. Manoj Shivilani, a Consultant working in collaboration with MRAG Americas presented a work plan to advance The Bahamas lobster management plan. Discussions about the key informant interviews and stakeholder workshops were held. A presentation was then given on the impact of the spiny lobster fishery on endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species and on marine habitats and ecosystems in The Bahamas, based on MSC standards. This assessment was completed by a research consultant who was unable to participate in the meeting.

Updates and discussions took place regarding the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 catch per unit effort estimate in relation to the existing Harvest Control Rule (HCR). Further updates are expected as data analyses are refined. Additionally, updates and discussions took place concerning outstanding lobster Fisheries Improvement Project (FIP) activities and the MSC Assessment. It is expected that The Bahamas lobster fishery Management Performance Review and the Lobster Harvest Strategy will be adopted shortly by the Department of Marine Resources (DMR). DMR is expected to approve the BSLWG minutes summaries which will then be posted on DMR's website by the Department of Information Technology. An update and discussion on the MSC assessment timeline followed.