

Furthermore, the environment in the Gulf of Maine is in flux, Margaret Hunter of the Maine Department of Marine Resources and chairwoman of the assessment subcommittee, said Thursday.

As the Gulf of Maine warms faster than most areas of the world, the shrimp are already at the southern edge of their range and are finding the gulf a less hospitable climate as it endures “the really rapid and extensive effects of climate change,” Tom Miller of the University of Maryland Chesapeake Biological Laboratory and chairman of the Scientific Peer Review Panel, said. They’re also coping with increased predation.

“The stock has a low likelihood of ever recovering,” G. Ritchie White, a New Hampshire commissioner, said.

“You don’t have many tools before you to impact the biology of this species,” Miller said. “You’ve just asked the central question: Is there anything you can do as fisheries managers to promote the recovery of this stock? I must admit, I don’t have very much to say to you that says the northern shrimp panel has many tools in its toolbox to do that.”

He asked them to consider their goal: to prevent the stock from further declining or to rebuild it. And he asked what risk they were willing to take.

“Is the goal no longer to rebuild to that stable period, or is the goal to stay where we are, at a more modest level?” he said.

But Patrick Keliher, Maine’s marine resources commissioner and vice chairman of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, said “the most aggressive approach” — a moratorium — “has not worked.”

He asked if staff could present the risk of further depletion of the stock if the commission reopened the fishery at different harvest levels.

“We only have 752 tons of spawning stock,” Mike Armstrong, a commissioner from Massachusetts, argued. “A 750-ton fishery would take every shrimp in the water.”

Keliher said he wasn’t suggesting any particular amount, “But is there a number out there that would allow some sort of a fishery?”

With environmental factors not helping the stock to recover, he said, “either we shut it down and move away from any sort of management ... or we try to see if there’s something we can do that allows for some economic [benefit].”

White of New Hampshire said he doesn’t see the possibility of a shrimp season “without taking a huge risk,” although Dennis Abbott, also a New Hampshire commissioner, said he’s not opposed to having “some sort of fishery.”

“But if we come back with a survey result and updated information that we have done harm, and we see that we’re even further depleted, where does that leave us?” he asked.

“We are backing into a place no fishery has ever gone, and that’s accepting that a depleted state is the new norm,” Armstrong said. “I think we’re already there. It could be we could rebuild the stock, but I don’t think we can.”

The Northern Shrimp Advisory Panel will incorporate Thursday’s discussion — including what risk is carried by different quotas — into the report and return in November with recommendations.