



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910  
THE DIRECTOR

MAR 13 2017

Mr. Chris Oliver  
Executive Director  
North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
605 W. 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Anchorage, AK 99501-2252

Dear Mr. Oliver:

Thank you for your letter regarding the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) stock assessment prioritization plan. We appreciate the extra attention that the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and its committees dedicated to this effort. We are also pleased to hear that the results of this collaborative process are helping to determine stock assessment schedules in your region. The purpose of the prioritization process is to provide an objective, efficient, consistent, and transparent process for decision-making related to stock assessment planning at the regional level. Fisheries management in the North Pacific is already highly effective and efficient, and operates within a collaborative and trusting environment. Thus, we do not wish to disrupt this successful process in any way. The prioritization process is not prescriptive and its results are non-binding; it is only meant as an objective tool to help regional planners achieve an efficient use of available resources.

We fully understand and appreciate your concern over reducing the frequency of assessments for certain stocks. However, the results of the prioritization process are being used by the North Pacific Council to set frequencies for what, in your region, are termed "full assessments." For many stocks, assessment scientists will continue to conduct analyses in the off-cycle years to provide updated catch advice to the council process. These analyses will not be as involved as full assessments, but they will include stock forecasts that are informed by the most recent catch information. Updated stock biomass trends will be presented to monitor for unexpected changes, and for certain stocks will be incorporated into the forecasts. Given that annual analyses will be conducted for most stocks and analyses every 2 years for select Tier 4-6 stocks, we are confident that the proposed changes in full assessment frequency will not compromise fishery management in the North Pacific. However, if issues or concerns arise over a particular species, a full assessment can be taken up during an off-cycle year. We have not provided national guidance on what should trigger an off-cycle assessment, because those triggers should reflect regional concerns and priorities. We were pleased to see that your Scientific and Statistical Committee has already started identifying relevant criteria and has tasked the Plan Teams with developing guidance for when these off-cycle assessments should occur.

To address your concern over potential reallocation of resources, the prioritization process will only be applied within regions. The process was designed such that the final ranking and scores cannot be compared between regions, and NMFS has no intention of using the process to justify



redistributing resources between regions. We place a high value on existing data collection efforts and would not eliminate a successful, long-standing survey program to establish new capabilities elsewhere. In fact, funding for stock assessment-related work is largely consistent in each region from year to year, with only a small amount of national funds available to address emerging issues. We are certainly available at the Council's convenience to meet the request for a deeper explanation or briefing on how stock assessment funding is prioritized.

I appreciate the Council's interest and engagement in the stock assessment prioritization process and look forward to continuing to work with you to help the Council best meet its management needs.

Sincerely,



Samuel D. Rauch, III  
Acting Assistant Administrator  
for Fisheries