



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

File Number:GF 17-076

Agenda Date 12/4/2017

Agenda Number: C4

Dan Hull, Chairman
David Witherell, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

BSAI Groundfish SAFE Report and 2018/2019 Harvest Specifications

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ACTION REQUIRED:

1. Review the 2017 Ecosystem Considerations report for the Eastern Bering Sea.
2. Approve the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report.
3. Recommend final BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for 2018 and 2019, including:
 - Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks. **[SSC]**
 - Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for all stocks, taking into account the State waters Pacific cod fishery.
 - Annual ABC reserve for three flatfish species.
 - Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits and seasonal apportionments of Pacific halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, *C. opilio* crab, and herring to target fishery categories.
 - Halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs).

BACKGROUND:

At this meeting, the Council will review the Ecosystem Considerations report for the Eastern Bering Sea; adopt the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report; and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits and halibut DMRs, to manage the 2018 and 2019 BSAI groundfish fisheries. Upon publication in the *Federal Register*, the 2018/2019 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications adopted last year for the start of the 2018 fisheries.

BSAI SAFE and Ecosystem Considerations reports. The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team met in Seattle on November 13-17, 2017 to prepare the BSAI Groundfish SAFE report. The SAFE report forms the basis for BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for the next two fishing years. The SAFE introduction summarizes the Plan Team recommendations for each stock/complex. The hyperlinks to the full report, and the Eastern Bering Sea Ecosystem Considerations report (which was reviewed by the Plan Team in September) are posted. The Council will review and adopt the full report at this meeting.

The Plan Team's recommendations for final harvest specifications for 2018 and 2019 are in the SAFE report introduction and also **attached as C4a** (Table 1 OFLs-ABCs). In October, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications of OFL and ABC that were based on last year's stock assessments. In this 2017 SAFE report, the Plan Team has revised those projections due to the development of new models; collection of new catch, survey, age composition, or size composition data; or use of new methodology for recommending OFLs and ABCs. The November 2017 Joint and BSAI Groundfish Plan Team minutes are **attached as C4b**. The SSC and AP recommendations will be provided to the Council during the meeting.

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OFLs, ABCs, TACs and Apportionments. The sum of the recommended ABCs for 2018 and 2019 are 3,766,809 t and 3,578,956 t, respectively. For comparison, the sum of ABCs was 4,013,993 t in 2017 and 3,236,662 t in 2016. The recommended lower sums reflect a decline in Pacific cod. The Team recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks, except for EBS pollock, Bogoslof pollock, EBS Pacific cod, and sablefish.

Overall, the status of the stocks continues to appear favorable. Nearly all stocks are above B_{MSY} , or the B_{MSY} proxy of $B_{35\%}$. The abundances of EBS pollock, EBS Pacific cod, sablefish, all rockfishes managed under Tier 3, and all flatfishes managed under Tiers 1 or 3 are projected to be above B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy of $B_{35\%}$ in 2018.

The sum of the biomasses for 2018 listed in Table 3 represents a 16% decrease from 2017. This is primarily due to declines in EBS pollock and Pacific cod. The 2017 value, in turn, represented an increase of 9% from 2016 after stable biomasses since 2013.

TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery. In setting TACs for 2018 and 2019 the Council accounts for guideline harvest levels (GHLs) for groundfish fisheries in state waters. The Alaska Board of Fisheries took action in 2015 that modified how GHLs in the Bering Sea (BS) and Aleutian Islands (AI) are set for Pacific cod. This year, the GHL in the AI will be set at 27% of the AI ABC. The BS GHL will be set at 6.4% of the EBS Pacific cod ABC. A table listing the ABCs, GHLs, and resulting federal TACs for 2018-2019 Pacific cod is **attached as C4c** (Pacific cod GHL-maxTAC).

Flatfish flexibility ABC reserve. An ABC reserve is annually specified for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole, which will be allocated to CDQ groups and the Amendment 80 cooperative using the same formulas that are used in the annual harvest specifications process. The ABC reserve for each species will be specified by the Council, by evaluating the ABC surplus for the species (i.e., the difference between the ABC and TAC), and considering whether that amount needs to be reduced by a discretionary buffer amount based on social, economic, or ecological considerations. The Council will then designate some, all, or none of the ABC surplus as the ABC reserve. The Council should provide its rationale each year for setting the ABC reserve at a particular level for these three flatfish species.

During the Inseason Management Report (Agenda item B3), NMFS will have provided a report on flatfish exchanges by the Amendment 80 cooperative during the course of this year. This is to inform the Council's decision as to whether to establish a buffer reducing the amount of the ABC reserve available to be exchanged by eligible entities. The report will include information on the number of vessels used to harvest cooperative quota, the number of flatfish exchanges and the dates those exchanges were approved, the types of and amounts of cooperative quota and Amendment 80 ABC reserve utilized, and the dates, types, and amounts of inter-cooperative quota transfers.

Prohibited Species Catch limits. Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits are established for halibut, crab, and herring during the specifications process and are allocated amongst sectors and seasons as described below. See **attached as C4d** (Tables 14-17 PSCs & Apportionments) for summary tables of all allocations and PSC limits by species.

Crab PSC in Trawl Fisheries: Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limits for red king crab, Tanner crab, and *C. opilio* crab, as well as gear type and target fishery apportionments, which are set in federal regulations. The 2018 and 2019 crab PSC limits have been revised using current crab biomass amounts.

Herring: An overall herring PSC limit is established as 1% of the EBS biomass of herring. This limit is further apportioned to seven PSC fishery categories. Herring PSC limits from 2017 are listed in **attachment C4d** (Table 15); revisions based on the most current biomass amounts may be provided during the meeting.

Halibut PSC in Trawl Fisheries: The overall PSC limit is fixed under Amendment 111 at 2,805 t, which is apportioned as 1,745 t to Amendment 80, 745 t to Trawl Limited Access, and 315 t to CDQ. Within the Trawl Limited Access sector, the halibut PSC limits are further apportioned to the trawl fishery categories. Additional reductions of 5% would occur if PSC limit amounts are transferred from the BSAI trawl limited access sector to the Amendment 80 trawl sector during a fishing year.

Halibut PSC in Fixed Gear Fisheries: A 710 t non-trawl gear halibut mortality limit can be apportioned by fishery categories. The halibut PSC limit for the hook-and-line Pacific cod fishery is divided between the hook-and-line CP and CV sectors. The Council can provide varying amounts of halibut PSC by season to each sector, tailoring PSC limits to suit the needs and timing of each sector.

Seasonal apportionment of PSC limits. The Council may also seasonally apportion the above listed PSC limits (for the fixed gear and BSAI trawl limited access sector). Regulations require that seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances be based on information listed below.

Factors to be considered for seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances

1. Seasonal distribution of prohibited species;
2. Seasonal distribution of target groundfish species relative to prohibited species distribution;
3. Expected prohibited species bycatch needs on a seasonal basis relevant to change in prohibited species biomass and expected catches of target groundfish species;
4. Expected variations in bycatch rates throughout the fishing year;
5. Expected changes in directed groundfish fishing seasons;
6. Expected start of fishing efforts; and
7. Economic effects of establishing seasonal prohibited species apportionments on segments of the target groundfish industry.

Halibut Discard Mortality Rates: The recommended discard mortality rates for use in the BSAI for 2018-2019 are **attached as C4e** (Table 12 Halibut DMRs).