



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

File #: GF 13-029, Version: 1

Eric Olson, Chairman
Chris Oliver, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

Adopt final harvest specifications for GOA groundfish

ESTIMATED TIME:

10 hours (all Groundfish Specifications items)

ACTION REQUIRED:

Review and approve GOA SAFE report (including Ecosystem and Economic SAFEs) and approve final GOA Harvest Specifications for 2014-2015 including:

1. Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC), and annual Total Allowable Catch (TAC)
2. TAC considerations for the State Pacific cod fishery
3. Prohibited Species Catch Limits

BACKGROUND:

At this meeting, the Council makes final recommendations on groundfish and bycatch specifications as listed above to manage the 2014 and 2015 Gulf of Alaska (GOA) groundfish fisheries.

GOA SAFE Document

The groundfish Plan Teams met in Seattle November 18-22, 2013 to prepare the final SAFE reports and to review the status of groundfish stocks. The GOA SAFE report forms the basis for the recommended GOA groundfish specifications for the 2014 and 2015 fishing years. Note that there are three volumes to the SAFE report: a stock assessment volume, a fishery evaluation volume ("Economic SAFE"), and an ecosystems considerations volume. The introduction to the GOA SAFE report was mailed to the Council and Advisory Panel November 20th. The full GOA SAFE report, the economic SAFE report and the ecosystem considerations volume were mailed to the SSC. The GOA Plan Team recommended OFLs and ABCs for 2014-2015 are attached as **Item C-6(a)**. The GOA Plan Team minutes are attached as **Item C-6(b)**. The Joint Plan Team minutes are included with the BSAI Plan Team minutes under **Item C-7**. An overview of the GOA SAFE report and ecosystem considerations volume will be provided to you at the meeting.

Two year OFL and ABC Determinations

Amendment 48/48 to the GOA and BSAI Groundfish FMPs, implemented in 2005, removed the requirement for annual assessments of rockfishes, flatfish, and Atka mackerel since new survey data were unavailable in alternating years. Although 2013 is an on-year for the NMFS GOA groundfish trawl survey, only modified assessments for selected species and summaries for the other species were produced as a result of the government shutdown in October 2013. Stock assessments for an abbreviated suite of model runs were required only for Steller sea lion prey species (pollock, Pacific cod, Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Atka mackerel), and species where a conservation concern has been noted. In such "abbreviated" assessments, authors were not required to include alternative models and were not required to respond to SSC or Team comments, among other things. For all other Tier 1-3 stocks, updated projections from last year using 2013 catch data were required at a minimum, with results presented in executive summaries using the "off-year" format for stocks on biennial assessment cycles. For stocks managed in Tiers 4-6, executive summaries using the "off-year" format for biennial assessment cycles were required. Tier 4-5 Gulf of Alaska assessments included the 2013 GOA trawl survey datum in their estimates of biomass and harvest recommendations.

This amendment also requires proposed and final specifications for a minimum of two years thus ABC and

OFL levels are provided for 2014 and 2015. In the case of stocks managed under Tier 3, 2014 and 2015 ABC and OFL projections are typically based on the output for Scenarios 1 or 2 from the standard projection model using assumed (best estimates) of actual catch levels. For stocks managed under Tiers 4 and 5 the latest survey data (2013) was used. Tier 6 stocks may have alternatives based on updated catch information.

The 2015 ABC and OFL values recommended in next year's SAFE report are likely to differ from this year's projections for 2015 because data from 2013 surveys are anticipated and a re-evaluation on the status of stocks will improve on the current available information for recommendations.

ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

At this meeting, the Council will establish final catch specifications for the 2014 and 2015 fisheries. The SSC and AP recommendations will be provided to the Council during the meeting. The sum of the preliminary 2014 and 2015 ABCs for target species are 640,675 t (2014), 644,165 t (2015) which are within the FMP-approved optimum yield (OY) of 116,000 - 800,000 t for the Gulf of Alaska. The sum of 2014 and 2015 OFLs are 790,468 t and 808,215 t, respectively. The Team notes that because of halibut bycatch mortality considerations in the high-biomass flatfish fisheries, an overall OY for 2014 will be considerably under this upper limit. For perspective, the sum of the 2013 TACs was 436,255 t, and the sum of the ABCs was 595,920 t.

The sum of the ABCs increased by 8% (+44,755 t) compared with last year. This is primarily driven by projected increases in pollock 53,930 t (+45%), Pacific cod 7,700 t (+10 %), and deep water flatfish 8,346 (+163%). Notable declines were projected in sablefish 450 t (-15%), shallow water flatfish -4,679 t (-10%), arrowtooth flounder -15,093 (-7%), and flathead sole -7,507 t (-15%). Nearly all rockfish stocks or stock complexes increased (total 12%) with the largest increase from Pacific ocean perch at 2,897 t (+18%) compared to the 2013 ABC.

The abundances of pollock, Pacific cod, Dover sole, flathead sole, northern and southern rock sole, arrowtooth flounder, Pacific ocean perch, rougheye and blackspotted rockfish, northern rockfish, and dusky rockfish are above target stock size. The abundances of sablefish are below target stock size. The target biomass levels for deep-water flatfish (excluding Dover sole), shallow-water flatfish (excluding northern and southern rock sole), rex sole, shortraker rockfish, other rockfish (formerly other slope rockfish), demersal shelf rockfish, thornyhead rockfish, Atka mackerel, skates, sculpins, squid, octopus, and sharks are unknown.

TAC Considerations for State Pacific Cod Fishery

Since 1997, the Council has reduced the GOA Pacific cod TAC to account for removals of not more than 25% of the Federal P. cod TAC from the state parallel fisheries. The relative percentage in the Central GOA was increased by the Board of Fisheries in March 2005 from 24.25 in 2004 to 25% while the relative percentage in the Eastern GOA was increased to 25% in 2010. In 2013 the relative percentage in the Western GOA was increased to 30%. Using the area apportionments of the 2014 and 2015 Pacific cod ABC recommended by the Plan Team, the Federal TAC for P. cod would be adjusted as shown in the attached table.

Prohibited Species Catch Limits

In the GOA, Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits are established for halibut by fishery and gear, and Chinook salmon (for the Pollock fishery only). Chinook salmon PSC limits are fixed at 25,000 fish and allocated by area and season. Since 1995, total halibut PSC limits for all fisheries and gear types have totaled 2,300 t. This cap was reduced from 2,750 t after the sablefish IFQ fishery was exempted from the halibut PSC requirements in 1995.

The FMP authorizes the Council to exempt specific gear from the halibut PSC limits. NMFS, after consultation with the Council, has exempted pot gear, jig gear, and the sablefish IFQ hook-and-line gear fishery categories from the non-trawl halibut limit since 1995. The Council recommended, and NMFS approved, these exemptions because (1) the pot gear fisheries have low annual halibut bycatch mortality; (2) IFQ program regulations prohibit discard of halibut if any halibut IFQ permit holder on board a catcher vessel holds unused

halibut IFQ (§ 679.7(f)(11)); (3) sablefish IFQ fishermen typically hold halibut IFQ permits and are therefore required to retain the halibut they catch while fishing sablefish IFQ; and (4) NMFS estimates negligible halibut mortality for the jig gear fisheries. NMFS estimates that halibut mortality is negligible in the jig gear fisheries given the small amount of groundfish harvested by jig gear, the selective nature of jig gear, and the high survival rates of halibut caught and released with jig gear.

The Secretary of Commerce approved Amendment 95 on November 29, 2013. The FMP amendment provides the Council with the authority during the annual harvest specification process to reduce the GOA halibut PSC limits for the 1) groundfish trawl gear sector and 2) groundfish catcher vessel (CV) hook-and-line gear sector by 15%. These proposed reductions are expected to be in effect in time for the final 2014/2015 harvest specifications. The proposed reductions would be phased in over three years: 7% in year 1, 5% in year 2 (12%), and 3% in year 3 (15%).

The proposed reduction for the catcher processor (CP) hook-and-line gear would be 7% which would be implemented in one step in year 1. This action would result in a new cap of 1,848 mt (in 2014), 1,759 mt (in 2015), and 1,705 mt (in 2016 and later years) for the trawl sector. The new hook-and-line halibut PSC limit may change annually, based on the GOA Pacific cod split formula. Based on 2013 Pacific cod TACs in the Western and Central GOA the hook-and-line CP sector would fish under a 115 mt halibut PSC limit. The hook-and-line CV sector PSC limit would be 154 mt (in 2014), 146 mt (in 2015), and 141 mt (in 2016 and beyond). Note that these limits do not account for the BOF action recently to increase the state waters Pacific cod TAC proportion in the western GOA from 25% to 30% beginning in 2014. Revised halibut PSC limits for the Hook and Line sector which account for this increase will be available at the Council meeting. Amendment 95 would reduce the demersal shelf rockfish fishery halibut bycatch limit from 10 mt to 9 mt. The Council intends that year 1 would occur in 2014 and that all reductions would occur by 2016. To meet that target implementation date, NMFS published the proposed rule (78 FR 57106) on September 17, 2013. The comment period ended on October 17, 2013.