



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

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Dan Hull, Chairman
Chris Oliver, Executive Director

SUBJECT:
GOA Gear Specific Skate MRAs - Discussion Paper

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ACTION REQUIRED:
Review discussion paper - Action as necessary

BACKGROUND:

On December 28 2015, NMRFS published a final rule issuing regulations to reduce the maximum retainable amount (MRA) of skates using groundfish and halibut as basis species in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) from 20 percent to 5 percent to prevent the catch of skates from exceeding the Allowable Biological Catch (ABC). These regulations were implemented on January 26, 2016. In April 2016, public comment at the NPFMC meeting claimed that the 5% MRA does not reflect the intrinsic rate for skate catch in the longline fishery and, therefore, resulted in unnecessary regulatory discards. Council directed staff to prepare a discussion paper to examine gear specific MRAs for gear types and sectors for GOA skates.

The amounts of skates available to the commercial fisheries in the GOA are limited by small ABC and TAC that are fully needed to support incidental catch needs in other fisheries. The directed fishery for skates is typically closed at the beginning of the fishing year and skate incidental catch is limited by an aggregate skate MRA. The previous, 20%, MRA allowed industry to top off on skates while fishing for groundfish, and the estimated catch of big skates exceeded the ABC in the Central GOA in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. The estimated catch of longnose skates exceeded the ABC in the Western GOA in 2009, 2010, and 2013.

To prevent the catch of skates from exceeding the ABC, the MRA was reduced to a level that approximates the intrinsic rate of incidental catch for skates. The intrinsic rate is the rate that would occur if there were no market for skates, or if skate retention were prohibited by regulation. This is not the same as an encounter rate that occurs when there is a market for skates, regardless of MRA. Analysis in 2014 indicated that the intrinsic rate of skate catch was approximately 5%, but the analysis also considered alternatives to reduce the MRA in GOA fisheries to 10%, 15%, and 20%. Analysis indicated that only a 5% MRA would affect catch rates sufficiently to bring estimated catches below the ABC.

Big skate catch again exceeded the ABC in the Central GOA in 2016, despite the lower MRA in place after January 27. As in previous years, after skates were placed on prohibited retention status, the catch rates dropped to below the 20% MRA in 2014 and 2015, and below the 5% MRA in 2016, suggesting that the intrinsic rate calculated for big skates in 2014 may be applicable to all skates, although additional years of data will be necessary to form conclusions. It is in-season management's belief that increasing the skate MRA in the GOA above 5% will increase the total amount of skate harvest, resulting in skate species being placed on prohibited species catch status earlier in the year. Increasing the MRA will increase retention by those vessels that retain skates, by incentivizing top-off behavior that appears to occur on some vessels.