



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

File #: Catch 18-008, **Version:** 1

William Tweit, Interim Chair
David Witherell, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

Sablefish discard allowance - Discussion paper

STAFF CONTACT: Jim Armstrong and Sam Cunningham (NPFMC)

ACTION REQUIRED:

- Review discussion paper
- Decide whether further action is warranted

BACKGROUND:

In April 2018 the Council tasked staff to develop a discussion paper that considers modifying the requirement to retain small sized sablefish in the Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) longline and pot fisheries. Current regulations require all sablefish to be retained when a vessel has sufficient IFQ onboard. The Council could analyze setting a minimum size limit (fish length) or could allow the careful release of any sablefish brought onboard. The Council's request for information is responsive to public testimony noting that the IFQ fishery began experiencing an increase in catch of small sablefish in 2017. The small fish recruiting into the fishery are linked to an unprecedentedly large 2014 year class. Small size fish are of lesser value to harvesters and processors; stakeholders expressed an interest in returning those fish to the sea for both economic and conservation purposes. Encounters with small sablefish have increased in all management areas, but the most dramatic shift has occurred in the Western GOA and the BSAI.

This paper describes sablefish abundance and growth, and the factors that might determine whether discarding small fish could adversely affect the resource. The paper identifies what information would need to be gathered to develop a discard mortality rate (DMR) for IFQ-caught sablefish in order to account for total mortality in a fishery that requires or allows discards. The discussion of DMR data is paired with a discussion of changes to observer sampling protocols that would be required. Finally, the paper documents how the value-per-pound of sablefish varies by the size of the fish, noting that annual trends in sablefish value vary by year but are similar across FMP subareas within each year.

At this meeting, the Council will determine whether to move forward with an analysis of allowing sablefish IFQ discards. If an analysis is initiated, the Council should develop a purpose and need statement that addresses the need for this action under the assumption that the 2014 year class will have aged into more preferable market categories by the time a rule can be implemented. If the Council analyzes establishing a minimum size limit for retention, it should specify whether staff should consider different minimum size limits for each FMP subarea or one limit for all areas throughout Alaska. The Council should also clarify whether any action would apply to both shoreside-delivering vessels and at-sea processors.