

REVIEW OF THE PROCESS FOR SETTING 2004 GROUND FISH SPECIFICATIONS

Situation: The Council began discussion of this year's process for setting 2004 groundfish annual specifications and management measures last year while deliberating how to transition into a multi-year management process. It was generally agreed that a three-meeting process where initial harvest specifications and management measure alternatives would be decided in June, final harvest specifications and a refinement of management measure alternatives would be decided in September, and final management measures adopted in November would be preferred over a two-meeting process that culminates in final decisions in September. However, in order to accommodate proper notice and comment rulemaking under a three-meeting process, 2003 specifications and management measures would need to be unchanged (rolled over) for the first four months of 2004; continuing status quo regulations for January through April 2004 would require no additional notice and comment beyond that achieved in 2003. In this case, new specifications and management measures would be implemented on May 1, 2004 under a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) decision-making process that includes a proper notice and comment period. The advantage to this strategy is a more thoughtful process for deciding 2004 management measures and the ability for Council and NMFS staff to focus on other initiatives this summer such as development of rebuilding plans.

The ability to roll over all existing 2003 specifications for the first four months of 2004 depends on the Council's comfort in the ability of those management measures to prevent early optimum yield (OY) attainment next year. Considerations for a Council decision on adopting a three- or two-meeting process include, (1) the implications of applying results from the NMFS West Coast Groundfish Observer Program, (2) the first assessment of the adequacy of 2003 management measures to prevent early OY attainment, and (3) the implications of new stock assessments in 2003. While the Council will not know the results of new stock assessments until June, there may be some indications from initial observer program results and fishery landings to date in 2003 that could be considered for this decision. In the event of a two-meeting process with significantly changed specifications for 2004, a separate environmental assessment will be required for another emergency rule for the period January through February 2004.

A final option for Council consideration is a three-meeting process with somewhat changed specifications that would require an emergency rule for the four-month period January through April 2004.

Related agendas that are relevant to a Council decision on the process for setting 2004 groundfish specifications are E.2, Report on the Bycatch Workshop and Observer Data Update, E.3, Status of Groundfish Fisheries and Consideration of Inseason Adjustments, and E.5, Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendment 16 - Rebuilding Plans.

Council Action:

- 1. Adopt a three-meeting process or a two-meeting process for development of 2004 groundfish specifications.**

Reference Materials: None.

Agenda Order:

- Agendum Overview
- Reports and Comments of Advisory Bodies
- Public Comment
- Council Action:** Adopt a Three-Meeting Process or a Two-Meeting Process

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