

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON  
STOCK ASSESSMENT PLANNING FOR THE 2009-2010 FISHING SEASON

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) met with Dr. Elizabeth Clarke of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), who briefed members on efforts to plan for a new set of groundfish stock assessments that are scheduled for completion and review next year (2007), which will form the basis of new groundfish management measures beginning January 1, 2009. Initial discussion focused on material presented in Agenda Item F.3.b, Attachment 1, "Possible schedule for West Coast groundfish assessments in 2007 and beyond." Early planning for this work is essential in order to insure that adequate reviews can be scheduled and completed next year, because it is generally acknowledged that conducting the reviews was the primary limiting factor in the Council's groundfish stock assessment process last year.

Dr. Clarke noted that at the March meeting, the Council decided to change sablefish from an update to a full assessment, requiring a STAR Panel review. To accommodate the decision on sablefish, and given the limited number of slots available at STAR Panels, petrale sole was "demoted" to an update. However, the SSC recommends that, given the problems encountered with petrale sole age data in 2005 and other issues, it is not worth doing a new assessment of the stock unless it is a full assessment. To allow for that possibility, within the context of the schedule laid out in Agenda Item F.3.b, Attachment 1, the SSC suggested moving English sole to the 2007 "update" slot currently occupied by petrale sole and moving petrale sole to the 2009 English sole "full" assessment slot.

The question of how and why stocks are selected to be assessed has been previously considered by the SSC and was again the subject of some discussion. To facilitate this process, the SSC recommends that a set of criteria be established, that may include such factors as: (1) economic importance, (2) overfished status, (3) demographic sensitivity, (4) time elapsed since the last assessment, etc. To initiate the development of such criteria, the SSC recommends that the groundfish subcommittee engage in preliminary discussions with the NMFS stock assessment coordinator, Council staff, the Groundfish Management Team (GMT), and the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) to begin scoping the issue. As an example, the SSC questions the relative importance of requiring assessments to be no older than five years, if the requirement precludes working on stocks that have never been assessed.

The SSC discussed the increasing difficulty of meeting the competing demands facing the Council with respect to completing more and better assessments. The STAR process that is reserved for full assessments is a thorough independent peer review, but it is expensive in terms of people's time and money. Shifting fully developed, stable models to an update mode will relieve some of the strain on the system. There are, however, many stocks that are quite data poor, and which are unlikely to be suitable candidates for assessment using the sophisticated methods practiced by analysts supporting the Council. Given this conundrum, the SSC recommends that lower tier trend analyses be developed for use by the Council in managing data-poor West Coast groundfish stocks. To function effectively, harvest control rules for these stocks will need to be developed and adopted by the Council, as results from a trend analysis do

not fit conveniently into the 40:10 harvest policy. Still, to solve what the SSC perceives as a growing problem in scheduling groundfish stock assessments and obtaining adequate review, developing some simpler approaches seems highly desirable.

The SSC also reviewed and made its final edits to the terms of reference for groundfish stock assessments and review process (Agenda Item F.3.c, Supplemental Attachment 2), all of which were relatively minor with the following exceptions. The SSC notes that an attempt has been made to strengthen the role of the GAP and GMT representatives on STAR Panels, but to maintain the separation between science and management with respect to panel membership. That has been accomplished by adding language to the Terms of Reference requiring that STAR Panel reports include a discussion of disagreements between the STAR Panel and the GAP and/or GMT representatives. Likewise, the Stock Assessment Team will be required to report in the assessment document the outcome of consultations with the GAP member regarding the use of various data sources in the stock assessment. In addition, the document was edited to explicitly state that only two full stock assessments should be reviewed at a STAR Panel.

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