

Stock Assessment Prioritization

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NOAA Fisheries has developed a stock assessment prioritization system described in the report *"Prioritizing Fish Stock Assessments"* released in August 2015. This transparent and objective prioritization system is designed to guide regional planning decisions for upcoming stock assessment cycles. The system was developed in response to substantial increases in appropriated funds for stock assessments, which has necessitated a more in-depth look at the way we prioritize our stock assessment budgets to ensure sound investments that address national and regional needs. NOAA Fisheries' proposed stock assessment prioritization approach received a favorable GAO review in 2014 and we now see inclusion of mandates for prioritization in recently proposed MSA reauthorization language. The system took several years to develop, with a draft version that became available for Council and public comment during February-May 2014. Comments received and dialogue at two meetings of the Council Coordination Committee helped shape the system described in the report. We expect the system not to be rigid but to evolve as we collectively learn from first rounds of implementation in each Council.

The system is designed to be implemented regionally through joint efforts by NMFS and the Councils. It provides a quantitative approach to ranking each stock's current assessment need. This ranking is then advisory input to a NMFS-Council process to consider additional factors and exigencies and determine the actual list to be assessed. This system relies on regional expertise from scientists, managers and advisors as well as quantitative data on each stock, much of which is already available in national/regional databases. Several fishery importance factors will strongly benefit from a strong role by the Council family.

The system is built upon the designation of a target level (e.g. data-moderate or data-rich) and a target frequency (annual or slower frequency) for each stock's assessment. Then various stock status and fishery importance factors are used to rank stock assessment needs to best achieve target levels and frequencies. It recognizes that not all stocks need data-rich, frequent assessments, but that all harvested and managed stocks occasionally need some level of assessment for NMFS to determine the stock's status and for the Council to create Annual Catch Limits and other management measures.

This prioritization system will help guide planning decisions for upcoming stock assessment cycles. NOAA Leadership, as well as the Government Accountability Office, have reviewed and support the system as the appropriate approach to schedule regional stock assessments. We continue to look for ways to strengthen and streamline the fishery management process while using the best available science to manage fisheries in the United States. We look forward to working with you to build on our efforts to further strengthen the sustainability of Pacific Coast fisheries.

NOAA Fisheries believes that the 2017 Pacific Coast Groundfish stock assessment cycle is an ideal candidate for the first implementation of the system. The diversity of stocks in the

PFMC's Groundfish FMP provide a very good test of the system and NMFS personnel associated with this FMP are already highly familiar with the prioritization system. In order to have a fully developed set of prioritization information available by late spring 2016, we will need to begin soon. We believe it necessary to reach agreement at the Nov 2015 PFMC meeting to initiate the necessary data assembly and expert workshops to develop the stock by stock scores. We request a time slot on the Nov 2015 PFMC meeting agenda so that we can proceed with next steps in a timely manner.