

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
SCOPING OF MULTI-YEAR AVERAGE CATCH POLICY

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) received a briefing from Mr. John DeVore about this topic and matters for Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) consideration. The GAP also received information from Ms. Maggie Smith (NOAA-General Counsel) about the consistency of a multi-year average catch policy with the National Standard 1 (NS1) Guidelines.

In April 2017, as part of future workload planning, the GAP recommended that use of a multi-year average catch policy be considered in combination with other topics aimed at adding flexibility relative to annual catch limits (ACLs) in the biennial groundfish management process. The other two flexibility items for consideration are (1) NS1 Guideline carryover provisions and (2) mid-biennium ACL adjustment and rebuilding harvest rate adjustment (“green light”). At that time, the GAP cautioned the Council that pursuing a multi-year average catch policy might not be worth the time and resources because current regulations prohibit exceeding an ACL in any given year.

Ms. Smith discussed with the GAP that a multi-year catch average policy that is prospective is not consistent with NS1 Guidelines. That is, the Council cannot design a system to exceed an ACL on purpose. An ACL is just that, an annual limit. However, Ms. Smith indicated that it might be possible to set up a process in the groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) that provides for flexibility in how management responds to exceeding (or approaching) an ACL. For example, in response to an unforeseen catch event that causes total annual harvest to approach or exceed an ACL, the FMP could include management measures that could be used in response to this event, such as posing the query – has the stock experienced overfishing in recent years? – if no, then fishing in the current year could continue, but management measures would be triggered for the next year to ensure the ACL is not exceeded in the following year.

The GAP recommends that the development of a multi-year catch policy be suspended at this time because the policy is not consistent with NS1 Guidelines. However, the GAP is keenly interested in pursuing management changes that promote flexibility in the application of ACLs. To that end, the GAP thinks that development of robust carryover provisions would provide more flexibility to fishery participants and, therefore, recommends that topic continue to move forward. The GAP thinks implementation of the “green-light policy” would also provide greater flexibility. The GAP will provide additional comments on these topics under Agenda Item F.7: Specifications and Management Measures Process for 2019-2020 Fisheries.