

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON  
BIENNIAL HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS FOR 2015-16 AND BEYOND

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) heard a presentation by Mr. John DeVore on biennial harvest specifications for the 2015-16 cycle and offers the following comments.

In this statement, the GAP addresses only numbers 1 through 7 of the checklist found at [Agenda Item C.4.a, Attachment 1, Action Item](#), for the following recommendations and refers to [Agenda Item C.4.a, Supplemental REVISED Attachment 2](#) as a basis for most of our recommendations.

**Preferred Harvest Specifications**

1. OFL: Adopt remaining OFLs, as recommended by the SSC

The GAP agrees with adopting the 2015-16 overfishing limits (OFLs), as recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), including those for California kelp greenling, leopard shark, and Washington cabezon.

2. ABC: Confirm or modify P\* and adopt ABCs

The GAP reviewed [Agenda Item C.4.a, Supplemental REVISED Attachment 2](#) and, as in the GAP's November 2013 statement, recommends adopting a P\* of 0.45 for all stocks and complexes to determine 2015 and 2016 acceptable biological catches (ABCs), recognizing that for some stocks, this is a departure from the default ABC harvest control rules (HCRs) adopted for the 2013-14 management cycle.

3. ACL - Confirm or modify PPA ACLs

As in our November 2013 report, the GAP is recommending the default HCRs be applied to most stocks and stock complexes for the next management cycle. Those stocks where the GAP is recommending a departure from the default Annual Catch Limit (ACL) HCRs are listed below.

- **Arrowtooth flounder:** The GAP recommends setting the ACL equal to the ABC. However, the GAP recommends the ABC be specified using a P\* of 0.45, which is a departure from the status quo P\* of 0.4. The West Coast arrowtooth stock is healthy and increasing in abundance. They are a top level predator on the shelf and compete with Pacific halibut. Further, this is a trawl-dominant stock and targeted by some members of the fleet, some of whom are close to attaining their vessel cap for arrowtooth.
- **Dover sole:** The Council chose for analysis two ACL alternatives for Dover sole: a 25,000 mt and 50,000 mt ACL; the GAP prefers the higher ACL of 50,000 mt to help

develop the Dover market. This is a healthy stock with an abundance much higher than the target  $B_{MSY}$  level; the stock is projected to remain above target at a level of removals higher than the 50,000 mt ACL (see Table 4-2 in [Agenda Item C.4.a, Attachment 3](#)). The potential of developing a more robust Dover market depends on the certainty of the potential of a higher volume of landings enabled with higher ACLs.

- **Lingcod south of 40°10' N lat.:** The GAP recommends setting the ACL equal to the ABC. However, the GAP recommends the ABC (and ACL) be specified using a  $P^*$  of 0.45, which is a departure from the status quo  $P^*$  of 0.4. This is a healthy and well managed stock targeted by every non-whiting sector of the West Coast groundfish fishery. The slight increase in yield afforded by a higher ACL will directly benefit the industry and affected fishing communities in California.
- **Longspine thornyhead:** The GAP recommends specifying the longspine ACLs by apportioning the coastwide ABCs determined using a  $P^*$  of 0.45. The recommended ACLs for north and south of 34°27' N lat. are 3,474 mt and 1,097 mt, respectively, in 2015 and 3,305 mt and 1,044 mt, respectively, in 2016.
- **Sablefish north of 36° N lat.:** The GAP recommends setting the ABC using a  $P^*$  of 0.45 rather than the status quo  $P^*$  of 0.4. We note the  $P^*$  of 0.4 was used only for the 2013-14 biennial specifications and a  $P^*$  of 0.45 was the expected default at the time. The GAP further recommends application of the default 40-10 ACL HCR to determine the ACL to manage this important stock. Sablefish is a critically important stock to west coast commercial fisheries. It is the main target in offshore limited entry (LE) and open access (OA) fixed gear fisheries, as well as the bottom trawl fishery. Ex-vessel prices for sablefish are increasing and a higher ACL directly benefits the industry and affected fishing communities. Further, the LE trawl fleet needs a higher quota of sablefish to optimize their Dover/thornyheads/sablefish (DTS) and shelf fishing strategies. A higher sablefish quota allows trawlers to better attain their Dover sole quota, a stock that is the subject of developing markets. A higher sablefish quota would also benefit fixed-gear fisheries that, in recent years, have also been significantly constrained by lower catch limits.
- **Sablefish south of 36° N lat.:** The GAP makes the same recommendation for this stock as made for sablefish north of 36° N lat.
- **Shortspine thornyhead:** The GAP has the same recommendation as that made for longspine thornyhead: to specify ACLs north and south of 34°27' N lat. by apportioning the coastwide ABCs determined using a  $P^*$  of 0.45. The GAP-recommended ACLs for north and south of 34°27' N lat. are 1,913 mt and 1,012 mt, respectively, in 2015 and 1,892 mt and 1,001 mt, respectively, in 2016.

- **Spiny dogfish:** The current state of our understanding leads the GAP to believe that a  $P^*$  higher than 0.35 is more than adequately supported by recent science: the SSC recommended a more conservative proxy rate for setting the OFL to address the conservation concerns in September 2013. Moreover, the greatest concern about uncertainty during the last cycle was the question of what is the most appropriate  $F_{MSY}$  harvest rate for setting the dogfish OFL. The  $F_{MSY}$  range at that time was between an SPR of 45% and 76%, which was the axis of uncertainty that led the Council down a precautionary path. The SSC's September action to use a proxy SPR harvest rate of 50% for spiny dogfish and other elasmobranchs dealt with that uncertainty. Therefore, the Council has the information it needs to move forward and consider a  $P^*$  of 0.45 for setting the ABC and ACL.
- **Starry flounder:** The GAP recommends setting the ACL equal to the ABC. However, the GAP recommends the ABC (and ACL) be specified using a  $P^*$  of 0.45, which is a departure from the status quo  $P^*$  of 0.4. This is a healthy stock far above its  $B_{MSY}$  target and is caught in nearshore commercial and recreational fisheries. There are no biological risks associated with a higher ACL.
- **Widow rockfish:** The GAP recommends an ACL of 3,000 mt, which is higher than the default 1,500 mt ACL specified for 2013 and 2014. The GAP notes the stock assessment is uncertain, but with a 3,000 mt ACL, the stock is still predicted to remain above the  $B_{MSY}$  level for the next 10 years. The non-whiting trawl fishery needs a higher widow ACL to gain greater access to the healthy yellowtail rockfish resource. Further, this is a constraining stock for the at-sea whiting sectors. A higher widow quota will allow greater flexibility to target whiting while avoiding other species of concern such as canary and rougheye rockfish. The GAP notes that annual average widow landings in the three years immediately prior to the 2002 widow shutdown (1999 to 2001) were below 3,900 mt. It is hoped the regulations for 2015-16 will allow midwater gear to be used outside of the whiting season; specifically, a 12-month non-whiting midwater fishery to target yellowtail.

4. ACT: Confirm or modify the 4 mt ACT for cowcod

The GAP recommends the 4 mt Annual Catch Target (ACT) for cowcod and understands most of the remaining 6 mt of the proposed ACL could be used for research. Moreover, a 25 percent increase in the harvestable amount of cowcod may allow more fishing opportunity, since this species limit constrains access to target species. For example, a higher harvest limit may allow a return to recreational fishing in the 50- to 60-fathom zone in the southern California Bight.

5. Rebuilding: Confirm PPA rebuilding plan parameters. Adopt new  $T_{TARGET}$  for cowcod

The GAP does not have a recommendation for a new target year for the cowcod rebuilding plan.

6. Confirm EC species' designations

Referencing Table 4 in [Agenda Item C.4.a, Supplemental REVISED Attachment 2](#), the GAP recommends the species in that table for ecosystem component designations.

7. Confirm PPA to manage CA kelp greenling, OR kelp greenling, WA kelp greenling, WA cabezon and leopard shark with stock-specific specifications or decide to manage these stocks in a Shallow Roundfish complex

The GAP agrees with the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) recommendation to manage leopard shark on its own. With regard to kelp greenling, the GAP recommends a coastwide management scheme that would manage these stocks, along with cabezon in Washington, and create a Shallow Roundfish complex. Waiting until June to make these decisions should be avoided because it would disrupt the development of management measures and delay completion of harvest specifications. Furthermore, and most importantly, any interruption here would risk the delay of regulation implementation past Jan. 1, 2015.

The remaining items on the checklist, such as issues regarding China rockfish and the Nearshore Complex, will be addressed under Agenda Items C.8 and C.9.

### **Rougheye/Blackspotted Rockfish Category Designation**

The GAP continues to be concerned by policy decisions that reduced the 2015/2016 rougheye rockfish ABC and OFL values. The GAP recommends the Council task the SSC with reviewing their rationale for changing the rougheye/blackspotted rockfish stock assessment from category 1 to category 2.

Our rationale is the apparent discontinuity between the reason provided by the SSC in their November 2013 report and information about slope rockfish productivity and vulnerability in the Council record.

In November 2013, the SSC reported: “Category Designation for the Rougheye / Blackspotted Rockfish Assessment – The SSC revisited the decision that was made at the September meeting to designate the new stock assessment for rougheye rockfish as a category 1 assessment. Given that the assessment is for a complex of two species (rougheye and blackspotted rockfish) and given that there is insufficient information available to confirm that these species have similar vulnerability to the fishery and rates of biological productivity, the SSC recommends that the assessment be classified as a category 2 assessment. Both the ABCs and decision table will be updated to reflect this change.” ([Agenda Item H.6.b, Supplemental SSC, Report, November 2013](#))

However, in direct contrast to the SSC statement that insufficient information is available, the Council record contains information provided by the GMT to the Council in April 2013 ([Agenda Item D.3.a, Attachment 1, April 2013](#)).

**Table 10. Slope rockfish stocks ranked by relative productivity. Productivity (P) and vulnerability (V) scores are from the GMT's PSA analysis.**

Stock	P	Relative P	V	Relative V
Yellowmouth rockfish	1.61	High	1.96	Med
Longspine Thornyhead	1.47	High	1.54	Low
Pacific ocean perch	1.44	High	1.69	Low
Aurora rockfish	1.33	Low	2.1	High
Shortspine thornyhead	1.33	Low	1.8	Low
Redbanded Rockfish	1.28	Low	2.02	High
Splitnose rockfish	1.28	Low	1.82	Med
Blackgill rockfish	1.22	Low	2.08	High
Shortraker rockfish	1.22	Low	2.25	Highest
Blackspotted rockfish	1.17	Low	1.97	Med
Rougheye rockfish	1.17	Low	2.27	Highest

It is clear from the April 2013 table that information about productivity and vulnerability is available for both rougheye rockfish and blackspotted rockfish. The Productivity and Susceptibility Assessment (PSA) analysis is apparently sufficient for making a variety of management and policy decisions. Why then is it inadequate to inform whether rougheye and blackspotted have comparable vulnerability to the fishery and rates of biological productivity? The GMT's PSA analysis indicates that rougheye and blackspotted have identical P-scores. Moreover, rougheye has the "highest" V-score, which means it is much more vulnerable to the fishery than blackspotted with a "medium" V-score. Therefore, the GAP strongly recommends the Council task the SSC with reviewing their November 2013 decision about this issue. It is critical that this question be addressed. There is a direct link between the OFL and ABC values for 2015/2016 and the stock assessment category designation. In general, adopting lower harvest levels without adequate rationale, especially when there is no compelling conservation risk to the stock, is inappropriate. Specifically, given the significant ramifications of the rougheye/blackspotted ABC to all commercial fisheries, it is critical we get it right.

### **Amendment 24**

To provide some background, in March 2013 the Council voted to pursue two alternatives: one suggested by the GAP and one that included recommendations from the GMT and the SSC. The GAP alternative was developed to maintain the  $P^*=0.45$  "cap" in the groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) while allowing the Council some flexibility to suggest a different  $P^*$  value if appropriate. (See [March 2013 Agenda Item H.4.b Supplemental GAP report](#) and [March 2013 minutes](#), pages 46 – 51).

In June 2013 the Council voted to pursue a slightly different alternative based on recommendations of the GMT (see [June 2013 Agenda Item F.7.b Supplemental GMT report](#) and [June 2013 minutes](#), pages 40- 42). The effect of the June decision was to remove the proposed Amendment 24 wording

recommended by the GAP and previously recommended by the Council but to leave in place some of the flexibility that the GAP believes is necessary.

Looking at the draft FMP amendments that are presented at this meeting under Agenda Item C.4.a Attachment 4, the GAP believes that the draft Alternative 3 language most closely follows the GAP recommendation for last year and therefore we support that language.

However, we are concerned that the 2013–14 Dover sole ACL of 25,000 mt *not* be characterized as a “constant catch” HCR, which would presumably be carried over into the future. The 25,000 mt ACL was established in the 2011–12 biennium in response to uncertainty over market conditions and how the newly implemented trawl rationalization program would operate. That ACL, along with most others for healthy species, was rolled over in 2013-14 in an effort to reduce workload associated with development of annual specifications in spite of testimony about the potential for new market development if a sufficient ACL was available. We do not believe that Dover sole should be characterized as being managed under a “constant catch” strategy and want to make clear that our support for Alternative 3 does not imply that Dover sole should be managed under anything other than a normal healthy stock strategy using a  $P^* = 0.45$  and an  $ACL = ABC$ .

PFMC

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