

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON SEABIRD AVOIDANCE REGULATIONS

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) reviewed the Preliminary Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) Measures to Minimize Take of Short-tailed Albatross in the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery (Agenda Item F.4.b, Preliminary Draft EA), including draft regulations, and offers the following comments.

The GMT identified a few potential items that may warrant further considerations be incorporated into the Preliminary Draft EA and/or may also warrant revisions to the draft regulations.

Longline Gear Descriptions

The Preliminary Draft EA contains a comprehensive description of the longline fisheries that would be affected by the new streamer line regulations; however, additional information about the specific types of gear configurations and deployment methods that are used in the Pacific coast groundfish fishery would be very helpful to fully explore the feasibility of the draft regulations, to be most effective at avoiding seabird interactions. For example, some longline vessels deploy weighted skates, but some vessels use lines with floats to avoid hagfish. The GMT noted that, under the proposed regulations, both of these types of longline gear would be legal but would have quite different levels of compliance with the proposed requirement to “ensure that baited hooks sink as soon as they are put in the water.” This example illustrates how incorporating additional information about the specific types of gear configurations and deployment methods that are used in the Pacific coast groundfish fishery may uncover other issues that could change the relative effectiveness of the proposed regulations. In this specific example, the EA could explore whether or not lines with floats should be prohibited to allow baited hooks to sink more quickly or if some other specific gear requirements should be considered to meet the reasonable and prudent measures, terms and conditions, and conservation recommendations described in the Biological Opinion.

In addition to industry representatives, Sea Grant may be a good source to get more specific information about the types of gear configurations and deployment methods that are used in the Pacific coast groundfish fishery, since they have been investigating regional gear type issues.

The GMT recommends that NMFS work with industry, Sea Grant and others to incorporate additional information regarding the specific types of gear configurations and deployment methods that are used in the Pacific coast groundfish fishery into the Draft EA.

Weather Safety Exemption

The GMT reviewed the regulations that would exempt fishing vessels from requirements to use streamer lines under certain foul weather conditions, specifically if winds are greater than 45 knots (Beaufort 9 conditions). The GMT hypothesized that it is unlikely that there is much fishing effort that occurs in these storm conditions off the West Coast because of the highly exposed outer coast fishing grounds (compared to some fishing grounds in the lee of some of Alaska's Islands). Information in the observer database could provide information on the magnitude of fishing effort that has occurred under these types of storm conditions. The GMT recommends considering an additional alternative that does not have a weather safety exemption, and would instead prohibit longline gear from being deployed under any circumstances without meeting the applicable streamer line requirements. The weather safety exemption may not be necessary, as written, because it is unlikely any fishing would occur at all in those types of foul weather conditions off Washington, Oregon, or California.

The GMT recommends a new alternative (Alternative 3) that is the same as Alternative 2, but removes the weather safety exemption.

The draft regulations, as written, may require more specificity regarding how, where, and when weather conditions would be measured and applied to allow the weather safety exemption. The GMT was also curious how and when the Alaska Region measures the Beaufort conditions to know when to apply a weather safety exception that is in their streamer line regulations. It is possible that their method would be applicable to the west coast fishery, but without seeing more detail, a determination cannot be made. **The GMT recommends additional information regarding how and when to apply the weather safety exemption be added to the Draft EA under Alternative 2.**

Voluntary Use of Streamer Lines

The GMT noted that 221 streamer lines have been distributed to the longline fleet for voluntary use, and suggests exploring available information to see how many longline vessels have been using streamer lines. Information on the number of vessels that voluntarily use streamer lines may be available from Sea Grant, and some information may also be available from observations made in the West Coast Groundfish Observer Program. **The GMT recommends a review of available information to see how many vessels in the groundfish fishery voluntarily use streamer lines, and for that information to be presented in the EA.**

Research and Vessels Smaller than 55 Feet

The GMT expressed support of research efforts to inform measures for seabird avoidance that are designed for vessels less than 55 ft long, with voluntary use of streamer lines being encouraged in the interim. The new ESA Workgroup, being considered under Agenda Item C.6 could be a possible avenue for the results of ongoing research to come forward to modify or implement new regulations to protect seabirds.

GMT Recommendations:

1. **NMFS work with industry, Sea Grant and others to incorporate additional information regarding the specific types of gear configurations and deployment methods that are used in the Pacific coast groundfish fishery into the Draft EA.**
2. **Add a new alternative (Alternative 3) that is the same as Alternative 2, but removes the weather safety exemption.**
3. **Additional information regarding how and when to apply the weather safety exemption be added to the Draft EA under Alternative 2.**
4. **A review of available information to see how many vessels in the groundfish fishery voluntarily use streamer lines, and for that information to be presented in the EA.**

PFMC
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