

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON
PRELIMINARY APPROVAL OF EXEMPTED FISHING PERMITS FOR 2015 FISHERIES

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed a preliminary exempted fishing permit (EFP) application for testing alternative gears to drift gillnets (DGN) for catching swordfish or for testing alternative approaches to current DGN fishery management practices (Agenda Item G.3.a, Attachment 4). The primary research question identified in the application was whether alternative fishing gears would reduce the bycatch of protected species (i.e., leatherback turtles) and other species. A secondary question is whether these alternative gears are commercially viable fishing techniques. A general approach was identified for addressing these questions, but there are too few details in the preliminary proposal for the SSC to evaluate the scientific validity of the approach.

There are a number of obstacles to using a controlled experimental design to evaluate bycatch rates for different gears. First, the bycatch of leatherback turtles is a very rare event, so sample sizes of gear deployments will need to be very large in order to detect differences between gears. A second obstacle is that fisheries using different gears will be conducted in a way that gives the best catch rates for the gear, which may be at different times and areas for each gear. Therefore even side-by-side comparison of gears would not necessarily provide information on differences for fleets using different gears.

The SSC recommends that the Council consider carefully whether a controlled experimental design is the best way to proceed in evaluating the performance of very different gear types to replace drift gillnets. An EFP could simply allow alternative gears to be deployed subject to appropriate monitoring under existing bycatch restrictions. These bycatch restrictions would provide an incentive for EFP holders to devise effective bycatch avoidance strategies suited to their gear type. Such a program would allow alternative gears to be evaluated and would eventually generate the necessary information on bycatch for any gear that proves to be viable from an economic perspective.

Finally, the SSC recommends that EFP applicants consult with a scientific advisor for experimental design if the Council wishes EFPs to be designed to answer specific questions in a scientific manner. The SSC would also like to note an excerpt from COP 20 regarding SSC review of EFPs: “All EFP applications should first be evaluated by the HMSMT for consistency with the goals and objectives of the HMS FMP. When a proposal is submitted to the HMSMT that includes a significant scientific component that would benefit from SSC review, the HMSMT can refer the application to the SSC for comment.” The process would be much more efficient if these operating procedures were followed.