

## GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM STATEMENT ON BYCATCH AND INCIDENTAL CATCH OF ROCKFISH

During the Council's discussion of management measures for the year 2000 fisheries, the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) pointed out it had not adjusted some of the rockfish optimum yields to account for discard. The Council directed the GMT to provide an evaluation or estimation of discard rates that might be applied during 2000 in order to account for total fishing mortality of some rockfish categories. The GMT would like to provide such an analysis, but must again point out we lack the tools to estimate bycatch/discard. Therefore, the GMT cannot advise the Council whether the management measures implemented for 2000 will achieve the desired reduction in total mortality. This is especially true with respect to catches of rockfish, since harvest opportunities are now constrained by both new rockfish assemblages and by additional trawl gear restrictions. The rockfish discard information we are using today applies only to trawl gear and is based on information collected in the 1980s. Fishermen and others have already questioned the applicability of this information to current fisheries, and the substantial management changes for 2000 make its continued use even more suspect. For some of the new minor rockfish limits implemented this year, we have no discard estimate at all. The continued absence of a comprehensive, total catch monitoring program is a serious defect in the current management program.

The GMT believes even a qualitative estimate of current incidental catch and discard rates might be an improvement and discussed possible approaches to develop some insight into potential rockfish bycatch. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is currently doing a tow-by-tow logbook analysis to see if any species associations are apparent. If so, it may provide insight about incidental rockfish catch rates by vessels targeting other species. At best, this analysis may be useful for slope fisheries, where fewer changes were made for 2000. (Due to the new gear and species restrictions for year 2000 shelf fishing, comparison of historical logbook information to 2000 fisheries is questionable.) The new differential trip limits for slope and shelf rockfish may cause fishers to change from their previous rockfish fishing strategies that harvested fish from both subgroups. This would compromise our ability to compare historical and new information even on the slope where new gear requirements were not imposed. The WDFW analysis will be presented to the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel and the Council at the April Council meeting.

Since the hard data being collected in 2000 is for landed catch only, the GMT also discussed a means to capture qualitative data on discard currently available only from the at-sea operation of the fishing fleet. A serendipitous event occurred earlier this year, the result of confusion about the "all other flatfish" trip limit (i.e., all other than Dover, arrowtooth, petrale and rex sole). Some fishers interpreted the trawl trip limit table in the November 1999 newsletter to allow "other flatfish" to be harvested with large roller gear and delivered their incidental catch of English sole taken while fishing on the slope during the first part of the year. This provided an unexpected look at the incidence of English sole in slope fisheries. Had it not been for the confusion with the regulation, the English sole would have been discarded with no record of the mortality. The GMT plans to use this information to tailor regulations which more closely reflect reality. However, the point remains it is unlikely English sole is the only species for which the current landed catch opportunity doesn't match the actual catch occurring, or at least for landed catch where no discard is assumed. In fact, the GMT has also received "anecdotal" information from the fleet that redbanded rockfish, currently included in the minor shelf rockfish group, are regularly occurring in the slope trawl fishery. Since no allowance for shelf rockfish is provided for roller-gear fisheries on the slope, all redbanded rockfish caught in that fishery must be discarded, again without being accounted for.

The Council may wish to consider a selected group of industry and managers to provide further perspective on situations where regulations may not be consistent with the way catch is actually occurring. While the GMT believes this approach may be a poor substitute at best for empirical measurement of total mortality, it may be worth considering when weighed against having no information at all. In such a situation, the utility of anecdotal data may increase if fishers have complementary perceptions.

Lacking a comprehensive observer program, the team discussed other possible approaches to quantify total catch mortality. Such approaches could include:

1. Recording of discard in mandatory trawl logbooks (and implementation of logbooks in other fisheries).
2. Chartering vessels to conduct discard work similar to that done by Pikitch, et al. or the Oregon Enhanced Data Collection Program.
3. Collect information via "ride-alongs" by state sampling personnel.
4. Provide for full retention substantiated by observer or video camera validation.
5. Some combination of the above.

None of the above approaches would provide the statistically representative information that would result from a comprehensive observer program. However, they perhaps should not be contrasted with an observer program, but rather with no information at all. The GMT discussed the potential implementation of one or more of the above options under the authority of an exempted fishing permit (EFP), but did not fully explore the permit mechanism or what the EFP would specifically allow.

The GMT will also be monitoring the fishery inseason. The frequency with which fishers routinely achieve trip limits may also provide some insight into potential discard.