

Groundfish Management Discussion Paper on "Full Retention" of Groundfish Species

The GMT is concerned there may be sufficient uncertainty in our current estimates of total fishing mortality to compromise rebuilding efforts. This is especially important, because the small harvest targets required by some of the current rockfish rebuilding plans may be creating incentives for fishers not to land even their legal catches. In order to better quantify total mortality, the GMT believes the Council should consider exploring mandatory retention of all shelf and slope rockfish caught by commercial fishers. Such a program provides more meaningful results than a program to voluntarily land trip limit overages.

The GMT discussed some of the pros and cons of such a measure. Among the benefits identified from such a management measure are:

- Mortality is nearly 100% for rockfish caught in trawl gear or with line gear from any significant depth. Therefore, if fishing practices remained consistent, overall mortality would not be increased by a mandatory full retention program. The value would be captured for dead fish which would otherwise be discarded. Since capture mortality is less than 100% for shallow-water rockfish taken with line or trap gear, nearshore species (or fisheries) could be excluded from the mandatory landing requirement.
- Rockfish mortality would be directly enumerated rather than estimated.
- Most rockfish are marketable. Focusing a full retention program on rockfish avoids the problem of requiring the landing of large amounts of unmarketable fish which could occur with other species. While some rockfish are discarded due to size (i.e., too small to be sold), rather than because the trip limit has been exceeded, the GMT has received informal information indicating this amount is likely small. Additionally, analysis conducted by Dr. Erik Williams points out the importance of identifying any difference between the size of retained and discarded rockfish.
- If our current estimate of discard mortality of 16% is reasonable, it would not appear markets would be greatly affected if landings were to be increased by an amount of this general magnitude.
- Revenues generated by the landing of overages could be channeled into the at-sea monitoring efforts necessary to ensure compliance with a mandatory landing requirement.
- Statistical comparison between the fleet as a whole and the pending observer program would provide an indirect measure of compliance with a mandatory retention program.

Among the negatives of a mandatory program are:

- Substantial at-sea monitoring may be required to ensure compliance.
- Overall rockfish harvest rates could accelerate since fishers could fish right up to trip limit allowances with no penalty.
- Fishers might be financially disadvantaged if they were required to use hold space to retain and deliver an overage without value which would otherwise have been used for marketable catch.

If the Council agrees that mandatory full retention for rockfish is a reasonable management option, the GMT will continue to explore the issue among itself and with industry and report back to the Council in June.