

BYCATCH FULL RETENTION OPTIONS

Situation: At its February 2001 meeting, the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) discussed the ongoing dilemma about unmeasured bycatch and discard rates of groundfish, in particular overfished stocks. The GMT is growing more and more concerned about the inability to know whether we are achieving the harvest levels required by the rebuilding plans. With respect to canary rockfish in particular, the GMT believes there is a great incentive for fishers not to retain canary rockfish out of fear the optimum yield will be reached early and the fishery closed. This situation will worsen as the stock rebuilds, because it is likely canary rockfish will become harder to avoid. As a step towards resolving this dilemma, the GMT would like the Council to consider requiring full retention of rockfish, or at least slope and shelf rockfish species, by commercial fishers.

The Council has discussed methods to reduce discard several times in the past, and recommended implementation of a program that would allow fishers to voluntarily retain trip limit overages and forfeit the value to a research fund. Implementation of that program has been forestalled by workload issues, reduced harvest levels, and unresolved problems with the proposal. The GMT has prepared a discussion paper and requests guidance from the Council on whether to proceed with development of a mandatory program to increase retention and reduce discard. Although there would likely be enforcement concerns that some vessel operators would continue to discard, the GMT believes it is fundamentally better to require fishers to retain accidental catch of rockfish rather than requiring them to throw it away. This move towards individual accountability may be part of a larger program to provide incentives for cleaner fishing operations. The pending observer program can provide a level of verification regarding compliance with the retention program.

Council Action: Council discussion and guidance to GMT and/or others.

Reference Materials:

1. GMT Discussion Paper on Increased Retention of Rockfish by Commercial Fishers (Exhibit F.9, GMT Report)

Groundfish Fishery Strategic Plan Consistency Analysis

The Strategic Plan addresses bycatch reduction and enumeration, individual and sector accountability for bycatch and other impacts, and establishment of incentives for fishers to operate in ways that are consistent with management goals and objectives. The Plan envisions adoption of regulations that are more easily enforced and data collection for accurate assessment of the effects of management on groundfish stocks and fishery participants. The Plan anticipates a full retention strategy may be considered when an effective observer program has been established.