

PACIFIC MACKEREL HARVEST GUIDELINE AND OTHER SPECIFICATIONS FOR 2001-2002

The Coastal Pelagic Species Management Team (CPSMT) met with the Coastal Pelagic Species Advisory Subpanel (CPSAS) to review results from the latest Pacific mackerel stock assessment, which will be used to set a harvest guideline (HG) for the 2001-2002 season. The CPSMT concurs with the stock assessment team's analyses and recommends the Council adopt a harvest guideline of 13,837 mt for the upcoming season.

The CPSMT and CPSAS discussed problems in the current mackerel fishery and possible scenarios for conducting the upcoming season. The southern California fishery experienced high mackerel availability at the opening of the 2000-2001 season. Cumulative catch by the end of October was anomalously high compared to recent years, and 95% of the total harvest guideline was taken by the end of October, only three months into the season. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) closed the directed fishery on October 27, 2001, after which a 20% incidental catch allowance was implemented. The harvest guideline was met at the end of March, and the CPS fishery has been under a 1 mt per trip allowance since the beginning of April. Incidental mackerel catch in the sardine fishery has been a common occurrence for the past several months, and this has created an apparent problem for the fishery. The CPSMT and CPSAS heard testimony from several sardine fishermen at the meeting, who claimed having difficulty in accurately assessing percentage of mixed loads at sea. They also expressed concern over high discard mortality from loads released at sea. Biologists from CDFG's coastal pelagic species unit in Los Alamitos, California were also present at the joint meeting. They presented dockside observer data on the frequency and percentage of Pacific mackerel mixed in sardine loads. The CPSMT used these data to estimate total incidental take of mackerel, and estimated approximately 2,000 mt per year taken by the sardine fishery in 1999 and 2000.

The CPSMT outlined three possible scenarios for the upcoming season:

- 1) Close the directed fishery after a substantial fraction of the HG has been landed and switch to restrictive incidental allowance levels for the remainder of the season.
- 2) Close the directed fishery after a smaller portion of the HG is landed and switch to a less restrictive incidental tolerance for the remainder of the season.
- 3) Close the directed fishery after a smaller portion of the HG is landed, switch to a less restrictive incidental tolerance through the mid-season period, and reopen a directed "mop-up" fishery during the last two months of the season (e.g. May-June 2002).

Option 1 would result in status quo for the fishery, resulting in the same restrictive measures realized during the current season. The CPSMT prefers not to repeat the current situation.

The CPSAS proposed, and the CPSMT endorses, the following guidelines for prosecuting the mackerel fishery in 2001-2002: 1) open the season with a HG 13,837 mt; 2) close the directed fishery when 6,000 mt of the HG has been landed; 3) switch to incidental tolerance of up to 45% mackerel in other CPS fisheries, or up to 1 mt of mackerel at any percentage (i.e. pure loads); 4) CPSMT will closely monitor directed and incidental HG landed as the season progresses, reporting to Council at the March and April meetings; 5) reopen the directed fishery for a "mop-up" fishery in May and/or June if a significant portion of the HG still remains.