

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL STATEMENT ON
FINAL HARVEST LEVELS FOR 2002

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) met jointly with the Groundfish Management Team to discuss 2002 harvest levels. The GAP makes the following recommendations to the Council.

Given the drastic reductions in optimum yields (OYs) for several important species, the GAP spent some time discussing survey methodology and the need for innovative approaches to stock assessment. For example, additional attention needs to be given to examining environmental factors affecting both abundance and availability of fish to survey gear. In addition, NMFS should expand survey work on sablefish by utilizing fixed gear (especially on the continental shelf) and by examining all depths. Further, as the GAP has recommended in the past, surveys need to extend below Point Conception.

Several of the OY figures proposed by the Council in September were expressed as ranges. The GAP first addressed the question of a final number within these ranges, although the GAP notes that - based on discussions with NOAA General Counsel - nothing prevents the Council from adopting a final OY above or below a proposed range if the data support that action.

For sablefish, the GAP recommends the Council adopt an acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 4,786 mt and an OY of 4,500 mt for 2002, and recommend to NMFS the preferred stock assessment model used in 2001 be re-calculated using updated data from the 2001 triennial survey and any other new data available. The 2001 stock assessment reduced the sablefish biomass primarily on the basis of missing recruitment in the mid 1990's and projections that - unless recruitment improved - sablefish stocks would continue to decline below the overfished level. The preliminary data from the triennial survey not only shows a significant increase in biomass, but also verifies the anecdotal data that had been presented to the Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel, the GAP, and the Council regarding the presence of significant numbers of small sablefish. Since these fish will not be immediately available to the fishery, a reduction in OY from 2000 levels is justified. At the same time, the presence of large numbers of small sablefish gives initial indications the necessary upswing in recruitment is occurring, and the spawning biomass is larger. An OY of 4,500 mt is slightly below the amount which would be available under the Council's harvest policy of $F_{45\%}$ using an assumption that missing recruitment was due to a regime shift and takes into account the Council's precautionary control rule (the 40-10 policy). In terms of the social and economic environment, the Council's draft Environmental Assessment (EA) shows that in 2000, sablefish represented 30% of groundfish landings by value, the highest of all groundfish species (Table 3.3.1.1-2, page T-32). For both conservation and management reasons, the suggested OY is justified for 2002, and future OY will depend on the revised stock assessment.

For Dover sole, the GAP recommends an ABC of 8,510 mt and an OY of 7,440 mt for 2002, and the Council recommend to NMFS the preferred 2000 stock assessment model be updated using the 2001 trawl survey data and any other readily available information. As the GAP noted in September, these ABC and OY levels are based on the preferred model of the 2001 Dover sole stock assessment; utilize the Council's approved harvest policy of $F_{40\%}$; have been adjusted in accordance with the Council's precautionary control rule (40-10 policy) and will allow the stocks to increase in size over the next 10 years. Further, the GAP references the preliminary trawl survey data which shows a significant increase in Dover sole biomass, again - as in the case of sablefish - supporting anecdotal data regarding the abundance of Dover sole. Length data from the trawl survey does not indicate predominance of any age class, but rather a reasonable distribution across all ages and both sexes. The GAP also points out that if Dover sole abundance is as high as is indicated by the trawl survey and anecdotal data, significantly reducing Dover harvest will merely result in increased discards, which contravenes the conservation standards of the law. Finally, from the socioeconomic standpoint, the Council's draft EA shows that flatfish (including Dover sole) represented 24% of groundfish landings (by value) in 2000. The GAP believes the ABC and OY values recommended are fully justified.

For shortspine thornyheads, the GAP recommends a 2002 ABC of 1,004 mt and an OY of 955 mt. Again,

both anecdotal data and trawl survey data show shortspines to be stable to increasing; in fact, the 2001 survey results for shortspine are the highest on record. Since 1992, the mean weight (coast wide) of shortspine taken in the trawl survey has stayed in the range of .13 - .14 kg, an indication of stability. The 2001 stock assessment clearly indicates this species is not overfished, although the assessment is unclear - due to inherent data problems associated with this species - as to relative abundance trends. Finally, the ABC and OY levels recommended by the GAP are identical to those recommended to the Council by the Groundfish Management Team in September. Artificially constraining shortspine catches will also constrain Dover sole and sablefish catches, leading to both increased discards and substantial reduction in economic value of the fishery.

For Pacific ocean perch (POP), the majority of the GAP recommends an ABC of 640 mt and an OY of 410 mt for 2002. The 2001 trawl survey shows POP increasing, reflecting the results of the most recent stock assessment. Although the 2001 survey point is the highest since 1989, averaging survey population estimates across the years shows the population to be relatively stable in spite of higher harvest levels allowed in the past. The recommended OY level is equivalent to a 60% probability of rebuilding within the time frame estimated in the rebuilding analysis adopted by the Council. The recommended OY would provide adequate precaution for this species.

For darkblotched rockfish, a majority of the GAP recommends an ABC of 187 mt and an OY of 181 mt for 2002. This corresponds to a 60% probability of achieving the rebuilding target. Again looking at the 2001 trawl survey data, darkblotched shows an increase in population.

For widow rockfish, a majority of the GAP recommends an ABC of 3,727 mt and an OY of 856 mt for 2002, again equivalent to a 60% probability of meeting rebuilding targets. The most recent stock assessment indicated that widow rockfish are just below the "overfished" level, so a conservative harvest level as recommended here should be sufficient to achieve rebuilding.

A minority of the GAP recommends ABCs and OYs for widow rockfish, darkblotched rockfish, and Pacific ocean perch be set at levels equal to an 80% probability of achieving rebuilding targets. The corresponding tonnages are shown as Alternative 1 in Exhibit C.3 Attachment 1.

For the remaining ABCs and OYs, the GAP recommends the preferred levels identified in Exhibit C.3 Attachment 1.

In the case of yelloweye rockfish, the GAP is concerned that stock assessment relies primarily on recreational catch data, especially considering the problems that have previously been recognized with recreational data. Recreational data tends to show local depletion rather than coast wide effects. Recent efforts by the recreational fleet to avoid canary rockfish have also reduced yelloweye catch. The GAP believes a better data source needs to be found, as the overfished status of yelloweye will profoundly affect harvest in a variety of fisheries.

The GAP also recognizes that the 2001 trawl survey data for yellowtail rockfish shows a large decrease in population. Based on information provided by Dr. Mark Wilkins of NMFS, yellowtail demonstrate a wide range in catchability in the triennial survey and the reduced numbers from this year are not necessarily indicative of a population trend. Similar phenomena occurred in the surveys between 1992 and 1998, where a relatively "normal" number was followed by an apparent crash and then by an apparent massive increase. Since yellowtail are a long-lived species which will not go through such tremendous population fluctuations in such a short period of time, combined with the fact that mid-water fishing opportunities will be reduced due to protection of widow rockfish, the GAP believes the OY identified as preferred is a reasonable one.

From the socioeconomic aspect, the Council's draft EA does not break out species of rockfish. However, rockfish as a group represented 28% of the groundfish landings by value in 2000.