



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northwest Region
7600 Sand Point Way N.E., Bldg. 1
Seattle, WA 98115

APR 10 2002

Dr. Hans Radtke
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 200
Portland, OR

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PFMC

Dear Hans:

I am writing to inform you that NMFS has disapproved the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) recommended Pacific whiting (whiting) specifications for 2002. At its March 2002 meeting, the Council recommended that NMFS adopt a U.S.-Canada Coastwide OY of 190,500 mt with a U.S. OY of 152,400 mt (80 percent of the coastwide OY) based on a harvest rate of F40% and assuming a medium-high recruitment scenario. NMFS is implementing a U.S.-Canada Coastwide OY of 162,000 mt, with a U.S. OY of 129,600 mt, based on a harvest rate of F40% and assuming a medium recruitment scenario.

As you know, the range of alternative allowable biological catches (ABCs) and optimum yields (OYs) presented to the Council was based on three different recruitment assumptions and on three alternative harvest rates. The three whiting recruitment level assumptions represented different degrees of risk in characterizing the amount of juvenile fish entering the fishery. A low recruitment assumption was the most precautionary and represented a risk averse approach, the medium recruitment was risk neutral, and the high recruitment assumption carried more risk for a timely stock recovery.

Although the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) chose to forward all three recruitment assumptions to the Council, they noted that the medium recruitment assumption was the risk neutral characterization of the incoming recruits. A large amount of juvenile fish, spawned in 1999, are expected to mature and enter the fishery in the near future, however the spawning biomass is not expected to increase above 40 percent (MSY biomass level) of the unfished biomass level for several years. Any increases in the stock will depend on the biomass of juvenile fish that mature and enter the fishery as well as the harvest rates.

The Council's groundfish assessment review (STAR) panel for whiting recommended moving to a more conservative harvest rate proxy of F45%. However, the SSC did not make the same recommendation, but noted that the STAR panel recommendation was a risk-averse policy, not risk-neutral. The SSC identified the F40% rate as a risk neutral policy. While the F45% is by definition more conservative

than the F40%, neither the STAR or SSC were presented with an analysis to evaluate the suitability of the F45% harvest rate proxy.

After consulting with the Northwest fisheries Science Center, I believe that the medium recruitment assumption for the 1999 year class is the best available science. The scientists advise there is an 80% probability that the medium recruitment assumption is correct, and only a 10% probability that the high recruitment assumption is correct. The Council recommendation was based on an average of the medium recruitment assumption and the high recruitment assumption. NMFS is using the medium recruitment assumption. In the absence of a revised harvest rate analysis, I believe the F40% harvest rate proxy should remain in place. Therefore, NMFS has implemented by emergency rule, a whiting ABC based on the risk neutral medium recruitment scenario and an F40% harvest rate, which results in a U.S. ABC of 166,000 mt. The OY, the ABC with the application of the 40/10 harvest policy, is 129,600 mt. The non-tribal commercial OY for whiting is 106,920 mt (the 129,600 mt OY minus the 22,680 mt tribal allocation). As in 2001, each sector will receive a portion of the commercial OY, with the catcher/processors getting 34 percent (36,353 mt), motherships getting 24 percent (25,661 mt), and the shore-based sector getting 42 percent (44,906 mt).

Given the current biomass estimate and the uncertainty associated with the estimates of recent year class strength, a risk neutral approach, instead of one that accepts greater risk, is supported by the best available science. The 2002 retrospective analysis of recruitment estimates from the 1998 assessment resulted in recruitment strengths and biomass estimates being revised downward. This suggests that future stock assessments also have a reasonable expectation of revising the estimated strength of the 1999 year class to a lower value. The STAR Panel recognized the high variance associated with forecasting recruitment and suggested caution in using the projections for forecasting future biomass levels.

The U.S. OY recommended by the Council (152,400 mt) represents a 20 percent reduction from the 2001 whiting OY, while the OY that NMFS has adopted (129,600 mt) represents a 32 percent reduction from the 2001 whiting OY. I recognize that in the short term, the reduced OY is expected to have a substantial adverse economic impact on harvesters and processors, however I believe it is necessary for the long-term health of the stock and the fishery.

OVERFISHED STATUS

This letter also serves to inform you that the whiting stock will be declared overfished with the publication of the emergency rule to implement the 2002 whiting specifications. Annually, the status

of the groundfish resources are evaluated against the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), the National Standard Guidelines, and the FMP. If a particular species' biomass is less than 25 percent of the unfished biomass then the species is considered overfished.

As a result of the new whiting stock assessment, NMFS has determined that the stock biomass in 2001 was 0.7 million mt, and that the female spawning biomass was less than 20 percent of the unfished biomass. Because the overfished threshold under the FMP is 25 percent of the unfished biomass, the whiting stock was determined to be overfished in 2001 and will be again in 2002. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that a rebuilding plan be prepared within 1 year after the Council is notified by NMFS that a particular species is overfished.

Sincerely,



D. Robert Lohn
Administrator, Northwest Region

cc: F/SWR2 (Fougner,) GCNW (Cooney,)

