

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL STATEMENT ON STATUS OF VESSEL MONITORING SYSTEM PLANS

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) spent a considerable amount of time reviewing proposals for a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and several other enforcement issues related to the use of depth-based management. The GAP greatly appreciates the time spent by the Enforcement Consultants in meeting with the GAP to discuss and resolve issues and encourages future joint meetings of this nature to ensure a workable and enforceable management system.

In regard to VMS, the GAP used Table 2.0.1 as displayed in Exhibit G.3.b, Supplemental NMFS Report as the basis for its recommendations. The GAP examined the issues primarily in the context of management options for 2003, recognizing that additional refinements would have to be made after a VMS program gets up and running.

In regard to issue #1 - Monitoring System, the GAP endorses Alternative 3, which would provide for a declaration and basic VMS system for certain vessels fishing in conservation areas. Alternative 3 is a good first step that could be expanded later. In the context of Alternative 3, the GAP believes, (1) that provision should be made for declarations covering a broad period of time for those vessels which frequently legally fish in conservation areas; (2) the recipient of declarations (whether federal, state, or a private contractor) be available to receive declarations 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, in order to accommodate the uncertainties of fishing activity; (3) a variety of ways be available to make a declaration, including but not limited to Internet based, telephone, and facsimile; and (4) that every declaration generate a confirmation so vessels can have proof they complied with the regulations.

In regard to Issue #2 - Coverage, the majority of the GAP endorsed Alternative 2B, which would require use of VMS on all limited entry vessels actively fishing. The GAP interpreted "actively fishing" as being away from port and would not include vessels that are not operating. This alternative would allow time to de-bug the VMS system while concentrating coverage on those vessels most likely to be present and fishing for groundfish in or adjacent to conservation areas.

A minority of the GAP endorsed Alternative 3, which would expand VMS coverage to recreational charter and open access vessels actively fishing in conservation areas. They suggested these vessels must eventually be covered anyway, so it would be more equitable to have them covered immediately along with limited entry vessels.

In regard to Issue #3 - Expenditures, the GAP unanimously endorsed Alternative 4, which would require NMFS funding for the entire system. The GAP noted that most other operable VMS systems in the U.S. fisheries were funded by the federal government either from the beginning or through reimbursement to vessel owners, and it would be inequitable to require West Coast groundfish vessels to have to pay their own way when others don't. Several members noted the statement in the table stating federal funding is not available and pointed out that funding by harvesters is, in many cases, not available either.

In regard to confidentiality of data such as vessel track lines, the GAP recommends such data not be released to anyone other than federal enforcement officers and state enforcement officers under a cooperative enforcement agreement. Individual vessel owners would be allowed to grant specific permission to release their vessel's data to other parties, including, but not limited to, fisheries managers, researchers, and private parties.

The GAP also discussed the issue of gear storage on trawl vessels transiting conservation areas. Current regulations require trawl gear to either be covered or stowed below deck. GAP members noted that covering is often impossible in heavy weather, that storage below deck is often equally impossible given the size and configuration of typical West Coast trawl vessels, and the regulations made it impossible for crews to work on gear while the vessel is traveling to a legal fishing area. The GAP recommends a third option be allowed: trawl gear can remain on deck while a vessel is in a conservation zone if the trawl doors are hung from their stanchions, and the net is disconnected from the doors.

Finally, the GAP discussed a discrepancy in existing sablefish regulations whereby a vessel must completely fill its tier limit before participating in the daily-trip-limit (DTL) sablefish fishery. Often, a vessel will have such a small amount left on its tier limit that filling it is impossible without encountering an overage. However, until the tier limit is filled, the vessel cannot legally participate in the DTL fishery, since all fish will accrue to the tier limit. The GAP recommends the following regulatory change: if a vessel has less than the DTL daily amount left in its tier limit, any sablefish caught will count towards the DTL fishery and not towards the tier limit. The vessel would be considered to have completed its tier limit fishery and entered the DTL fishery under these circumstances.

PFMC
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