

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL STATEMENT ON
STOCK ASSESSMENT REVIEW PANEL PROCESS - REVIEW OF 2002 AND PLANNING FOR 2003

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) met jointly with the Scientific and Statistical Committee and the Groundfish Management Team to review the stock assessment review (STAR) panel process and the list of assessments scheduled for 2003. Drs. Elizabeth Clarke and Richard Methot of the Northwest Fisheries Science Center gave a presentation on these topics, which was followed by discussion among the three advisory bodies.

The GAP supports strict adherence to the STAR terms of reference that require a complete assessment document be available two weeks prior to STAR review. Failure to provide a complete stock assessment has caused unnecessary delays in past reviews. The GAP also agrees that a committee of independent experts (CIE) reviewer is not needed for assessment updates. Such updates involve assessments where modeling approaches have been generally agreed upon and having an independent reviewer would be an unnecessary expense.

In general, the GAP endorsed the list of stocks proposed for assessment, with two concerns. First, the GAP believes Pacific ocean perch (POP) should undergo a full assessment and be reviewed in the same panel with widow rockfish. Trying to review three stock assessments on three different species during one STAR panel is beyond the capability of reviewers and will undermine the quality of the review that will occur. Further, there are indications the POP assessment will involve a significant change in the assessment model, which would make it ineligible for a simple update.

While one logical way to resolve these concerns would be to review POP and widow rockfish during the same STAR panel, there is one issue that needs to be addressed in regard to POP and darkblotched rockfish, a species that is scheduled for an update review. Historical catch history for both POP and darkblotched rockfish depend on records of foreign catches. Unfortunately, there appears to be no clear accounting of which of these species were caught in what amounts. In order to avoid double-counting of foreign catch records in regard to these two species, it would be preferable they be reviewed by the same STAR panel. The GAP has no firm suggestions on how to resolve this dilemma other than by making clear to the relevant STAR and update panels that this possible problem exists and needs to be specifically addressed.

Second, the GAP strongly objects to reviewing Pacific whiting in the early spring, prior to the acoustic survey that will be conducted in the summer. It is the GAP's understanding that the spring review was scheduled, among other reasons, to accommodate Canadian reviewers who will participate in a binational review. While we appreciate the fact Canadian scientists have their own deadlines to meet, scheduling an assessment review without taking into account the most up-to-date data that will be available through the acoustic survey completely undercuts the science and management process and violates the legal precept that assessments be based on the best scientific information available. Further, as now scheduled, Pacific whiting would not undergo an assessment again until 2005 - a full two years after the acoustic survey. Pacific whiting is a fast-growing species that has shown significant population fluctuations. It has been designated overfished, and catches have been reduced significantly, resulting in substantial adverse economic effects for coastal communities. We should not be dismissing the availability of up-to-date data that will be useful in properly assessing this species. The GAP recommends that either the assessment and review take place after the 2003 acoustic survey, so the results can be available for the 2004 fishery.

Finally, the GAP notes that while money seems to be available for a variety of purposes, funds for groundfish data collection and assessments still falls far short of what is needed. The GAP urges the Council family continue its efforts to procure adequate funding for groundfish research.