

PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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October 4, 2002

Dr. Usha Varanasi
National Marine Fisheries Service
Northwest Fisheries Science Center
2725 Montlake Blvd. E.
Seattle, WA 98112

RE: Stock Assessment Priorities for 2003

Dear Usha:

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) recommended groundfish stock assessment priorities for 2003 at its September 9-13, 2003 meeting in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Elizabeth Clarke presented a list of stocks to consider for assessment in 2003, including recommendations for stocks that should be considered for full assessment and those that should be considered for expedited assessment updates.

The Council considered the list of candidate stocks, comments from the public, and statements from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP). Criteria used to prioritize assessments that should go forward include the importance of new information for management purposes, the relative risk to stocks under the new depth-based management regime, the elapsed period since the last assessment, and the available resources to do the assessment. The Council understands the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) would be the lead agency on these assessments with state agency support where appropriate and as available.

The Council prioritized stock assessments for 2003 as follows:

Highest Priority Stock Assessments

Full Assessments

Pacific whiting was given high priority for a full assessment due to gaps and uncertainties in the data used in the 2002 assessment.

Bocaccio was given high priority for a full assessment due to the high risk of overfishing this species and the fact that bocaccio bycatch restrictions constrain many other fisheries.

Widow rockfish was given a high priority for a full assessment because the 2000 assessment may be significantly outdated. The Council recommended a full assessment rather than an update after statements by the GAP and SSC indicated that a full assessment is warranted and that personnel will be available to complete a full assessment in 2003.

Black rockfish was given high priority for a full assessment as they and other nearshore species are facing increased pressure as depth-based restrictions under the new management regime force fishers closer to shore. Additionally, this stock has not been assessed since 1999 and considerable data uncertainties remain. The Council discussed the geographic extent of the assessment and anticipates that a black rockfish assessment in 2003 would be limited to populations off Oregon and California.

Assessment Updates

Darkblotched rockfish was given a high priority for an assessment update because the species is at high risk of overfishing, the 2000 stock assessment is outdated, and darkblotched bycatch restrictions constrain many other fisheries.

Cowcod was assigned a high priority for an updated assessment because the last assessment in 1999 is outdated.

Lower Priority Stock Assessments

Assessment Updates

Pacific ocean perch and *yellowtail rockfish* were given lower priority status because fisheries are not expected to attain the optimum yields (OYs) for either species in the next few years under the new management regime.

Lingcod was given a lower priority because fisheries are not expected to attain lingcod OYs in the next few years under the new management regime. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife indicated a willingness to devote staff resources to this assessment should it proceed as an assessment update.

Delayed Assessments

Cabazon stock assessment was recommended to be delayed. A cabazon assessment would be new, requiring extensive staff time for data collection and model development. California Department of Fish and Game staff time to contribute to the assessment is problematic at this time, despite the desire and intent to do so; Council staff impacts in handling a large number of assessments is also a concern.

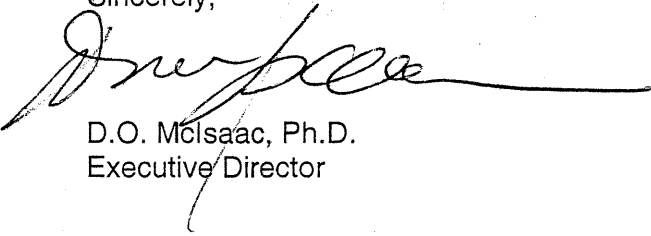
In summary, the Council recommends high priority be given to Pacific whiting, bocaccio, widow rockfish, darkblotched rockfish, black rockfish, and cowcod as NMFS considers stock assessment planning for 2003. If resources exist, the Council recommends additional stock assessments for Pacific ocean perch, yellowtail rockfish, and lingcod.

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Regarding assessment reviews preliminary to Council considerations, we would like to work with you in arranging for reasonable scheduling during the upcoming months. We have set whiting OYs for 2003 and do not see urgency in convening an early Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel for this species, absent needs that are determined in the upcoming U.S.-Canada negotiations on transboundary fishery management mechanisms. The Council expressed a desire for a spread in the scheduling of the other STAR Panels and update reviews that is responsive to the existing logistical constraints in the spring prior to the May deadline for the June Council meeting briefing book. We also note that a two-day meeting in late April to review four assessment updates may not be sufficient.

The Council appreciates the time you and your staff devote to this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



D.O. McIsaac, Ph.D.
Executive Director

MDB:rdh

c: Dr. Elizabeth Clarke
Dr. Rick Methot
Council Members
Scientific and Statistical Committee
Groundfish Management Team
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