

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON
OBSERVER DATA IMPLEMENTATION STATUS

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) received an update from Dr. Jim Hastie on the status of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) observer program data and the effect of incorporating discard rates for targeted species from the observer program inseason. The new discard rates are used as a function of landed catch, rather than target strategy (unlike the treatment of overfished species in the bycatch model). The actual landed catches in Periods 1-4 for the Dover sole, thornyhead, and sablefish (DTS) complex were higher by varying degrees than the projected landed catches as modeled earlier this year. Adjusting the total catch to account for the higher landings results in attainment of a greater portion of the optimum yield (OY) at the beginning of Period 5.

While all species in the DTS complex would be affected by inclusion of the new discard rates, by far the most constraining is shortspine thornyhead. If the projections in the model are accurate for Period 5, then applying the new discard rates inseason would result in a total catch that overruns the shortspine acceptable biological catch (ABC) for 2003 by 24 mt. If the projections in the model are off in Period 5 by 15% (the same amount as in Period 4), then the shortspine total catch would exceed the ABC by 53 mt. As Period 5 has already begun, it is unlikely that action could be taken quick enough to significantly affect this outcome.

The GMT struggles in its attempt to develop a recommendation to the Council on this issue. On one hand, the new discard rates could arguably represent the "best available science" and are applied in the analyses of the 2004 management measure alternatives. Those rates, if applied inseason this year, would result in an overfishing situation. On the other hand, the timing of applying those rates to the fishery is such that drastic measures (e.g., closing the trawl fishery for the remainder of the year) may have to be taken to avoid overfishing. In April, the GMT stated that the NMFS observer data for overfished stocks should be implemented as soon as possible; however, those bycatch rates were applied early enough in the season to provide adequate time to implement mitigative measures. The GMT recognizes that revising discard rates for species in a healthier condition may not be as urgent; therefore, the Council may wish to weigh the socioeconomic impacts against the biological benefits of inseason implementation of observer discard rates for non-overfished species.