

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON
OBSERVER DATA FLOW FOR FISHERY YEARS 2004-2006

Dr. Jim Hastie presented a report describing the proposed flow of observer data in fishery years 2004-2006 (Exhibit D.4.b, NMFS Report). Observer data are used both to develop management measures for Council deliberation and for inseason management. Although not covered in the report, observer-based discard estimates will also be important inputs to upcoming stock assessments. Under the proposed schedule, release of observer data will occur once a year. Data from the second year of the program, from September 2002 to August 2003, are currently being processed and will be made available in January 2004. Future releases of observer data will follow approximately the same annual schedule.

Under this schedule, observer data ending in August 2003 will be used to formulate management options for 2005-2006. Accordingly, there will be a lag of at least a year and a half between when the data are collected and when the management measures based on those data are implemented. While this lack of timeliness of observer data is of concern, the schedule adopted by the Council for multi-year management makes such lags unavoidable.

A clear distinction should be made between the use of observer data and the bycatch model to develop management measures for Council consideration and their use for inseason management. Inseason fisheries management is by its nature an adaptive process. Revision of management measures may be required when available data indicate that acceptable biological catches (ABCs) for target and bycatch species are likely to be exceeded by end of the year under existing measures. For inseason management in 2004, two options exist. The first is to reconcile model predictions with inseason landings data only. The second option is to use both inseason landings data and the second year of observer data that will be available in January 2004. The second option uses best available data, is likely to be more successful in preventing ABCs from being exceeded, but could result in more substantial revision of management measures during the year.

There are several other issues concerning the use of observer data that have not been resolved. The availability of several years of observer data raises the question of how much weight should be given to the more recent data, in comparison to the older data. A weighting scheme that gives less emphasis to older data, while likely to be somewhat *ad hoc*, may be warranted, due to the many recent changes in how West Coast groundfish are managed.

Another unresolved issue is how observer data will be used in future stock assessments. Stock assessments require estimates of total removals, which include both retained and discarded fish. Although observer data is appropriate to estimate current discard rates, estimation of historical discard rates will require use of other data sources. Rather than expecting each stock assessment author to develop their own method of combining data sources to estimate discard rates, consideration should be given to developing an approach that can be applied uniformly across species and makes best use of current and historical data sets. This could be accomplished in a number of ways, either by a workshop process, or by preparation of a report with summary tables of historical and current discard estimates. Fuller discussion of off-year workshops is found under SSC comments on Agenda Item D.9.