

PACIFIC WHITING MANAGEMENT

Situation: The Pacific whiting fishery management process is unlike other federally-managed West Coast groundfish for 2004 fisheries, for which catch specifications and management measures were adopted by the Council at the September 2003 Council meeting. The Council deferred a decision on setting harvest specifications and management measures for the 2004 Pacific whiting fisheries pending the development and review of a new stock assessment to occur during February 2004. This transboundary stock has been assessed and managed jointly with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada, and a new process is described in a treaty that has been signed by both countries and is currently awaiting ratification by the U.S. Senate and passage of implementing legislation by the U.S. Congress (Exhibit E.5.a, Attachment 1). The primary tenets of the treaty include an annual assessment and management process, a research commitment, and a harvest sharing agreement providing 73.88% for U.S. fisheries and 26.12% for Canadian fisheries. At the treaty signing ceremony, both Assistant Secretary of State, John Turner, and Canadian Fisheries Senior Minister, Pat Chamut, stressed the intent of both countries to manage 2004 fisheries in the spirit of the agreement, to the extent possible.

A new Pacific whiting assessment was prepared this winter (Exhibit E.5.a, Attachment 2) and reviewed by a Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel (Exhibit E.5.a, Attachment 3). The stock assessment concluded the stock size to range between 47% and 49% of the unfished level, and the STAR Panel concluded these two estimates were equally probable. The Council should consider the advice of the STAR Panel, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), and other advisors before adopting the assessment for use in management decision-making.

The assessment, once approved, will be used to set 2004 harvest specifications. The Council is tasked with setting an acceptable biological catch (ABC) and optimum yield (OY) for Pacific whiting that will be used to manage 2004 fisheries. Considerations for this decision include the stock's current and projected status with respect to the overfishing threshold, the international agreement with Canada, and widow rockfish bycatch concerns.

Another important implication of the adoption of a new stock assessment for Pacific whiting is the status of this species relative to its designation as an overfished species. In 2002, the best scientific information at the time indicated abundance in 2001 was less than the $B_{25\%}$ (biomass at 25% of the unfished level) threshold that determines the overfished status designation. Consequently, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) declared Pacific whiting overfished, and the Council began planning for development of a rebuilding plan as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. This rebuilding plan, known as Groundfish FMP Amendment 16-4, has been scheduled for adoption in a two-meeting process for the April 2004 and June 2004 Council meetings. The rebuilding plan was to prescribe measures to rebuild the stock to the $B_{40\%}$ level, at which time it would be de-listed as overfished. In the event the Council adopts a stock assessment indicating the stock is at or greater than the $B_{40\%}$ level during 2004, transmittal of this decision to NMFS should lead to de-listing of Pacific whiting as an overfished species and removal of Amendment 16-4 from future Council workload planning. While only valuable in hindsight, the

new stock assessment and STAR Panel reports note that the best scientific information available now indicates the Pacific whiting stock was not under the $B_{25\%}$ level in 2001.

Additionally, under this agendum, Mr. Bill Robinson, Assistant Northwest Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, NMFS, will inform the Council of a new management measure to be implemented in 2004 for the shoreside whiting sector under the Shoreside Whiting Exempted Fishing Permit.

Council Task:

- 1. Adopt the new Pacific whiting stock assessment.**
- 2. Adopt 2004 Pacific whiting ABC and OY.**

Reference Materials:

1. Exhibit E.5.a, Attachment 1: Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on Pacific Hake/Whiting.
2. Exhibit E.5.a., Attachment 2: Stock Assessment of Pacific Hake (Whiting) in U.S. and Canadian Waters in 2003.
2. Exhibit E.5.a, Attachment 3: STAR Panel Report on the Stock Assessment of Pacific Hake (Whiting) in U.S. and Canadian Waters in 2003.

Agenda Order:

- a. Agendum Overview
- b. Perspectives of the Canadian Government
- c. Reports and Comments of Advisory Bodies
- d. Public Comment
- e. **Council Action:** Adopt Stock Assessment, Final 2004 Acceptable Biological Catch and Optimum Yield, Exempted Fishing Permit, and Management Measures

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