

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL STATEMENT ON
PACIFIC WHITING MANAGEMENT

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) met with the Groundfish Management Team to discuss the 2004 stock assessment on Pacific whiting and 2004 management measures for the whiting fishery. The GAP was also made aware of the draft recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) although it has not seen the final SSC report.

Management decisions for the 2004 whiting fishery are especially complex due to a number of factors:

- The whiting Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel forwarded two stock assessment models with equal likelihood, which result in significantly different biomass estimates and future projections.
- The U.S. and Canada are signatories to a treaty governing Pacific whiting, but that treaty has not yet been subject to the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate nor implemented in the U.S. through domestic legislation.
- The U.S. has pledged to follow the “spirit” of the treaty and agreed to the allocation split of the coastwide harvestable biomass between the U.S. and Canada, but is also required to meet the mandates of existing U.S. law and the regulations implementing the groundfish fishery management plan.
- Whiting was designated as “overfished” as a result of the 2001 stock assessment, but has been shown under the 2003 stock assessment to not only be rebuilt, but also never to have reached the overfished level to begin with.
- The U.S. optimum yield (OY) is further constrained by the range analyzed in the environmental impact statement for the 2004 groundfish fishery and the need to minimize bycatch of widow rockfish in the whiting fishery.
- The U.S. fishery has several different components that start at different times and that have allocations established by law and regulation.

The first step that must be taken is to determine the coastwide acceptable biological catch (ABC) or total allowable catch as the number is referred to in the treaty. This number forms the basis of the allocation split between the U.S. and Canada, is supposed to be mutually agreed to by the U.S. and Canada, and is derived from the stock assessment.

The difference in the two stock assessment models forwarded by the STAR Panel involves the value assigned to acoustic q . One model continues the past practice of setting $q = 1$, thereby assuming all whiting within the acoustic “footprint” are accounted for. The GAP believes this value is so highly improbable that it should be rejected. Target returns from acoustic sampling of whiting routinely miscount fish which are traveling vertically within the water column, fish which have just changed depth, and thus, deflated their swim bladders, fish which are at the wrong angle relative to the acoustic beam, and fish which are located close to the ocean bottom. All of these factors are acknowledged by survey scientists at the Northwest Fisheries Science Center.

The second stock assessment model is structurally similar to the first, but the model was allowed to estimate the value of q within certain constraints. This model produced a value of $q = .6$. This model also fit the data more closely than the previous model. It takes into account the lack of accuracy in acoustic sampling noted above and was preferred by the acoustic scientist who served as the independent reviewer on the STAR Panel.

Because no single model has been endorsed by either the STAR Panel or the SSC, the GAP recommends that an ABC value equivalent to $q = .8$ under an $F_{40\%}$ harvest policy be adopted as an interim measure. This value would recognize the uncertainty surrounding the value of q while being more precautionary than the second model.

The GAP also notes that an informal discussion with our colleagues in the Canadian government revealed their support for the $q = 1$ model on an interim basis as a precautionary move, with the understanding that extensive study be made quickly of the true value of q . While the GAP cannot endorse the Canadian recommendation on which model to use, it strongly concurs with the need to quickly resolve the question of the value of q .

Once the ABC is established, the Council must determine the OY value for the U.S. share of the allocation. In no case should the OY exceed 250,000 mt this year, in order to avoid delays in getting the fishery started on April 1st in California and off-shore of Oregon on May 15th. After discussion with the GMT on various options for accounting for widow rockfish bycatch, the GAP believes an OY of 250,000 mt can be set without exceeding allowable widow catch. The GAP notes that substantial efforts have been made by all fishing sectors to avoid widow bycatch, including use of reporting, fleet-wide broadcasts of areas to be avoided due to widow concentration, and restricting deliveries of vessels to shore plants when those vessels have operated in higher bycatch areas. These efforts have resulted in minimal widow rockfish bycatch in 2003.

The GAP also notes that a U.S. OY of 250,000 mt will dampen the projected decline of the whiting biomass, which at the moment is largely being driven by a strong 1999 year class. If our Canadian colleagues decide to not fully harvest their share of the resource, the dampening effect will be improved, although this is a domestic decision for Canada.

The GAP believes the recommendations it is making are suitably precautionary, promote conservation while allowing an economic benefit to coastal communities, meet the spirit of the treaty, are scientifically defensible, avoid bycatch to the extent practicable, and should be adopted.

PFMC
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