

## GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM (GMT) REPORT ON PACIFIC WHITING MANAGEMENT

The GMT's discussions primarily focused on developing alternatives and recommendations for setting the harvest level for the 2004 whiting fisheries while providing protection for overfished widow rockfish. The GMT reviewed the SSC's statement on the models used in the Pacific whiting assessment and the STAR panel's conclusions relative to the acoustic survey catchability (q). The GMT believes that the whiting ABC should be set based on the results in the assessment, and did not believe we could offer additional insight as to the true state of nature. Therefore, the GMT recommends the Council consider the two options at the F40% level of 514,441 mt (q=1.0) and 780,758 mt (q=0.6) in setting the 2004 ABC for whiting.

The GMT has developed the following recommendations and management alternatives for the Council's consideration regarding Pacific whiting fisheries:

### Recommended Management Approach

The GMT recommends that the Council set the whiting OY at the level projected to be accommodated with the available widow rockfish. The GMT recognizes that this approach may result in forgoing harvestable surplus of whiting, but believes that the assumptions regarding widow bycatch rates in the whiting fisheries warrant precautionary management. The GMT believes that this management strategy will require the monitoring of widow bycatch and stresses the need for real-time updates of widow catches in all whiting fishery sectors.

State GMT members committed to evaluate the inclusion of widow rockfish into the "penalty box" provisions that currently are in place for yellowtail rockfish in state shoreside whiting EFPs.

This provision assesses foregone fishing days on vessels that exceed a specified rate of yellowtail rockfish bycatch in their whiting operation. The evaluation of including widow will be done at the series of meetings held along the coast that are mandatory for fishers in order to participate in the shoreside whiting EFP fishery.

### Scorecard Update

The GMT reviewed the 2004 bycatch scorecard and reduced the widow catch estimate for the limited entry fixed gear fisheries from 30 mt to 5 mt. After tallying the amount of widow projected to be taken in the non-whiting fisheries, the GMT identified a remainder of 225 mt of widow available in the scorecard. Following the guidance of the Council from last fall to hold the non-whiting fisheries "harmless" relative to achieving widow rockfish rebuilding targets, the GMT recommends that an additional 5 mt be set aside as a "buffer" in the scorecard. The GMT feels that the buffer is needed to accommodate uncertainty in the catch estimate projections to avoid early attainment of the widow OY. This would provide 220 mt of widow rockfish to set the whiting OY.

### Widow Bycatch Projection Alternatives

In the bycatch scorecard for 2003, the GMT applied the average bycatch rates for 1998-2001 for each sector to project catch estimates. For the current 2004 scorecard, the GMT applied the 1998-2003 (2003 at-sea data through September 25, 2003) average bycatch rates for each sector

to project catch estimates for all overfished species, except widow rockfish. The GMT believes that the same methodology for determining the bycatch rate used to project 2004 catches should be applied across all whiting sectors and for all overfished species.

The GMT did not reach consensus on the approach to calculate the widow bycatch projections, and has two alternatives for Council consideration—one that applies a weighted average to more recent years and another that applies a straight average bycatch rate for the same time period. In both cases, the years 2000-2003 were used. Given the recent increase in the whiting biomass resulting from a very strong 1999 year class, as well as increasing rockfish avoidance behavior in the fishery, the GMT feels it is appropriate to consider a recent time series during which these factors have come more into play in assessing widow bycatch. Therefore, the team’s recommendation proposes using the recent four-year average rather than the five-year average that was previously used. (The attached graph depicts the widow bycatch rates in the whiting fishery for the past six years.) After the Council chooses a bycatch projection methodology, the resulting bycatch estimates will be presented in an updated scorecard.

Factors for consideration include whether widow bycatch is directly proportional to whiting abundance (Alt.1), or whether bycatch is a more random event (Alt. 2). Alternative 1 recognizes there may have been behavior changes to avoid widow rockfish in recent years; however, this option also assumes that the behavioral change will continue in 2004. Alternative 2 is more consistent with the current management approach and attempts to smooth out random bycatch events. Another factor is relative to precautionary management—the alternatives in Table 1. are arranged in order from highest to lowest risk.

Table 1. Options for setting the whiting OY using widow bycatch rates. (Note: Option 1 would set the whiting OY above the maximum OY adopted by the Council of 250,000 mt; option 1a constrains the OY at the maximum level and back calculates the estimated widow impacts.)

	Annual Calculation Weighting	All Sectors (mt)		Sector Allocations (mt)			
		Widow	Total	Shoreside	MS	C/P	Tribal
1	40 ('03) 30 ('02) 20 ('01) 10 ('00)	220	260,343	93,804	62,002	87,837	35,000
1a	Same as Option 1	211	250,000	90,510	59,520	84,320	32,500
2	Average 4-Year (2000-2003)	220	205,782	73,399	49,142	69,618	30,000

Other Management Alternatives

The GMT also considered the following alternatives, but has received guidance from NOAA General Counsel that these options would not be available for 2004. The GMT believes that these alternatives should be considered for 2005-06 management:

- Set a hard bycatch cap for widow rockfish in the whiting fishery, which may or may not include allocations among whiting sectors
- Close widow “hotspot” areas to the whiting fishery - ODFW has analyzed ways to avoid

areas of higher widow bycatch in the shoreside whiting fishery. The use of a widow rockfish conservation area for the whiting fishery, or a series of smaller “hotspot” areas were examined. As another example, the widow rockfish assessment identified that widow catch rates in the whiting fishery are highest near the 200 m isobath, largely tapering off within five nm. The GMT suggests that the industry use this information to voluntarily avoid fishing areas with higher bycatch rates in the short-term (2004), until this option can be further explored. This information will be presented at the shoreside EFP meetings. For the longer-term, additional work in this area might provide a useful tool for managing bycatch in the whiting fishery.

#### Other Issues for Consideration

- How the proposed management measure alternatives would be applied to the treaty whiting fishery (i.e., the maximum OY of 250,000 may constrain the treaty whiting fishery in the absence of a conservation concern for whiting)?
- What would be the National Marine Fisheries Service’s inseason action mechanism to close the whiting fisheries if a widow harvest guideline is approached outside the Council meeting process?
- Monitoring of widow bycatch assumes that all widow caught is subsequently landed. The GMT notes that the vessel camera surveillance effort for shoreside vessels planned by NMFS may not be implemented until July.

#### GMT Recommendations

1. Adopt a whiting ABC based on the assessment results at the F40% level
2. Set aside a 5 mt widow “buffer” (as a minimum) in the bycatch scorecard
3. Choose a bycatch projection methodology (alternatives described on page 2)
4. Set the whiting OY at the level projected to be accommodated with available widow rockfish (220 mt) and specify the sector allocations of whiting
5. Include bycatch caps and widow “hotspot” areas as management options for the whiting fishery in 2005-06
6. Confirm NMFS authority to close and identify the inseason action mechanism (e.g., a conference call) if a widow harvest guideline is approached outside the Council meeting process