

**PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**

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March 26, 2004

CHAIRMAN  
Donald K. Hansen

Mr. Robert Lohn  
Regional Administrator  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
Northwest Region  
7600 Sand Point Way NE, Bin C15700  
Seattle, WA 98115-0070

Re: Council Recommendations for Pacific Whiting Fishery Management in 2004

Dear Mr. Lohn: *BJS*

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) met March 7-12, 2004 in Tacoma, Washington to consider, among other matters, a new stock assessment and harvest specifications for Pacific whiting for 2004 West Coast groundfish fisheries. One of the highlights of the week-long Council meeting related to this new stock assessment — the most recent science about the state of abundance of Pacific whiting indicates the stock has increased to a level above the rebuilding goal. This letter transmits the Council recommendations relative to the significance of this new scientific information on the overfished designation of Pacific whiting, as well as recommendations for the harvest specifications for managing 2004 Pacific whiting fisheries.

The new Pacific whiting assessment, "Stock Assessment of Pacific Hake (Whiting) in U.S. and Canadian Waters in 2003," was recommended by a Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee as the best available science for managing Pacific whiting in U.S. and Canadian waters. Both review bodies recommended two models from the assessment as equally probable. The distinction between the two models is the value of the catchability coefficient ( $q$ ) from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) 2003 hydroacoustic survey for Pacific whiting. The two assessment models ( $q=0.6$  and  $q=1.0$ ) indicate the presence of a strong 1999 year class, with an estimated spawning stock biomass in 2003 is either 47% or 49% of the stock's initial, unfished biomass (termed  $B_{47\%}$  and  $B_{49\%}$ , respectively) depending on whether the true value of  $q$  is 1.0 or 0.6. Both of these estimates of spawning stock biomass are above the threshold associated with the level necessary to sustain maximum fishery yields ( $B_{40\%}$ ).

In 2002, the best scientific information at the time indicated abundance in 2001 was less than the  $B_{25\%}$  threshold that determines the overfished status designation under the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. Consequently, 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. In adopting the new stock

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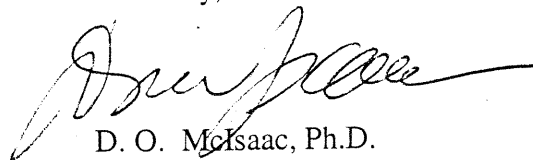
assessment that Pacific whiting are greater than the  $B_{40\%}$  level during 2004, the Council recommends NMFS implement the procedural necessities to de-list Pacific whiting as an overfished species. While only valuable in hindsight, the new stock assessment and STAR Panel reports note that the best scientific information available now indicates the Pacific whiting stock was not under the  $B_{25\%}$  level in 2001.

Additionally, the Council had scheduled the Pacific whiting rebuilding plan, known as Groundfish Fishery Management Plan Amendment 16-4, for adoption in a two-meeting process at the April 2004 and June 2004 Council meetings. Approval of a formal rebuilding plan was also the subject of a U.S. District Court order, to be completed by November 30, 2004. Based on the presumption that Pacific whiting will be de-listed as an overfished species, the Council has deleted Amendment 16-4 from future work planning.

Lastly, the Council also decided 2004 Pacific whiting harvest specifications using the newly-adopted assessment. The Council considered the scientific advice of equally probable abundance estimates and made the policy decision to select the  $q=1.0$  assessment model as the basis for determining the acceptable biological catch (ABC) level of 514,441 mt for the entire stock. The basis of this choice included the historical use of the  $q=1.0$  assumption in prior years' management of this fishery, the negative implication to future year stock abundance if harvest quotas were set using the  $q=0.6$  model in 2004, and the lack of compelling information to choose the less conservative option. Under the terms of the recently negotiated Pacific whiting treaty with Canada, which is still pending Senate ratification and federal rulemaking, the U.S. share of the ABC would be 73.88%, or 380,068 mt. However, the Council recommends U.S. fisheries be managed to an optimum yield (OY) of 250,000 mt. The Council did not want to consider higher Pacific whiting harvests that might risk exceeding the 2004 widow rockfish OY (an overfished species), as well as being cognizant of the effect of higher catches in 2004 on the status of abundance in future years. The Council also considered complications of adopting a level higher than 250,000 mt, which was the upper bound of the range analyzed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement of proposed ABCs and OY specifications for the 2004 Pacific Coast groundfish fishery. Adopting a higher Pacific whiting harvest in 2004 would have likely delayed the normal April 1 start of the Pacific whiting fishery, while further necessary analysis was done under the terms of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Should you have any questions on these matters, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



D. O. McIsaac, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

c: Dr. Bill Hogarth  
Dr. Rebecca Lent  
Mr. Jack Dunnigan  
Ms. Eileen Cooney  
Mr. David Balton