
2.2.7 Alternative 7 (The Preferred Alternative)

The Council approved the following motion at its April 2004 meeting as its preferred alternative:

Create a new Alternative 7 that includes elements of Alternatives 1, 4, and 5. Elements from Alternative 1 that would be included in Alternative 7 would be all current programs for bycatch minimization and management, including but not limited to: setting optimum yield specifications, gear restrictions, area closures, variable trip and bag limits, season closures, establishing landings limits for target species based on co-occurrence ratios with overfished stocks, etc. The FMP would be amended to more fully describe our standardized reporting methodology program and to require the use of bycatch management measures indicated under Alternative 1 for the protection of overfished and depleted groundfish stocks and to reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality to the extent practicable. These would be used until replaced by better tools as they are developed.

Elements from Alternative 4 that would be included in Alternative 7 would be the development and adoption of sector-specific caps for overfished and depleted groundfish species where practicable. We anticipate phasing in sector bycatch caps that would include: monitoring standards, full retention programs, and individual vessel incentives for exemption from caps.

Elements of Alternative 5 that would be included in Alternative 7 would be the support of future use of Individual Fishing Quota programs for appropriate sectors of the fishery. The FMP would incorporate the Strategic Plan's goal of reducing overcapacity in all commercial fisheries.

Additionally, baseline accounting of bycatch by sector shall be established for the purpose of establishing future bycatch program goals.

Alternative 7 would continue most of the current bycatch reduction measures and would reduce bycatch by expanding the defining catch or mortality limits for overfished species. *CATCH LIMITS* or caps for overfished groundfish species would be established for each fishing sector. All vessels in a sector would be required to stop fishing when a catch limit for that sector is reached. The inseason catch monitoring or verification program would be upgraded to ensure sector catch limits are not exceeded. Larger retention limits for non-overfished groundfish would be made available to vessels carrying an approved monitoring system (observer or other method).

In order to prevent sector catch limits from becoming a series of derby fisheries, methods to restrict individual vessels will continue to be necessary. The most

effective way to do this without increasing groundfish (discard) bycatch would be to establish individual vessel catch limits in addition to the sector caps. However, in the short term this will not be feasible with the current monitoring and catch verification system. Until greatly expanded monitoring is available, the primary means of slowing the rate of fishing will continue to be trip (retention) limits. However, individual vessels may take an observer at their own expense in order to gain exemption from their sector catch limits. Such vessels could be assigned individual catch limits for designated species, and they would agree to stop fishing for all groundfish upon reaching any catch limit. These vessel caps would not be transferable between vessels and would expire at the end of the specified period.

In the short term, vessel trip limits for each sector would be continued, and landings of target species would be monitored throughout the season as they are now. Catch of overfished species by each sector would be estimated during the season based on assumed co-occurrence rates for each sector. Those rates would be adjusted from year to year based on updated observer data. In the longer term, the observer program will be upgraded to provide inseason catch data on overfished species. At that time, catch of overfished species will no longer have to be estimated based on target species landings, and each sector will be managed based on current information.

Eight commercial fishery sectors are identified under the current regulations: limited entry trawl; limited entry longline; limited entry pot; three whiting sectors (catcher/processor, mothership and shore-based); open access; and tribal. The recreational fishery is also a recognized sector. Additional sectors could be established by subdividing any of these sectors. Under this alternative, each sector would be monitored separately with stratified, partial observer coverage. Catch rates and closure dates for each sector would be projected based on observer reports. If individual commercial vessel caps were adopted, every vessel would need to be monitored.

This alternative would modify the definition of trip limits to include catch (mortality) limits and would also establish catch (mortality) caps for each sector. Vessels would no longer be required to discard overfished groundfish species, although they could choose to discard them. Non-overfished groundfish would be managed the same as under the status quo (no action) alternative, except that vessels carrying an observer (or other approved monitoring system, if any) would be eligible for larger trip (retention) limits for non-overfished species. However, they would still be required to stop fishing upon reaching a catch limit. The NOAA Fisheries West Coast Groundfish Observer Program would monitor each sector by placing observers on a portion of the vessels in each sector. Catch rates of overfished/restricted species would be projected to all unobserved vessels operating in the sector. Vessels not carrying a NOAA Fisheries-funded observer could carry an observer at their own expense in order to be eligible for the larger trip limits and to gain exemption from the sector caps. An electronic monitoring

(video) option may be available if NOAA Fisheries determines such a program would provide the necessary catch/mortality information. This could require increased retention of certain species.

Economic bycatch could also be addressed under this alternative by prohibiting discard or limiting the amount of groundfish that may be discarded. If allowed, discard would be measured by onboard observers (or electronic monitoring). If discard were prohibited, economic (non-regulatory) bycatch of groundfish would be greatly reduced.

The option of creating more sectors could reduce the need for other controls to limit fishing activities. To accomplish this, vessels would be assigned to one or more sectors, perhaps through an endorsement attached to the limited entry permit. When a sector limit is reached, further fishing by those vessels would be prohibited or severely curtailed. Alternatively, sectors might be defined by target fisheries that would be closed when a catch limit is reached. Bycatch (discard) under such an approach could be controlled by requiring *FULL RETENTION* or placing limits on discards.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF THE CATCH CAP COMPONENT OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The description of the preferred alternative focuses on the implementation of sectoral and vessel-specific catch caps. Elements of this component of the alternative include:

- Sectoral total catch caps are established for overfished groundfish species. Eight current regulatory-based sectors are identified; additional sectors could be added.
- In the short term, the current cumulative trip limit regime would continue.
- Vessels carrying an “approved monitoring system” (e.g., at-sea observer) would fish under larger retention limits (cumulative trip limits) for non-overfished species.
- Vessels could opt out of sectoral catch caps by voluntarily carrying a fisheries observer (or approved monitoring system). These vessels would be eligible for nontransferable vessel-specific catch caps. Vessels could carry an observer at their own expense in order to become eligible for these vessel-specific catch caps.
- In the short term, total catch of overfished species will be estimated using current methods of modeling the relationship between landings and total catch. With future improvements in the monitoring program, total catch could be estimated directly.
- Once a sector has reached the total catch cap for any overfished species, all vessels in the sector must stop fishing, except for those vessels that have qualified for vessel-specific caps. They could fish until any of their caps were reached.
- Retention requirements could be a feature of this bycatch mitigation program. The FEIS does not describe the specifics of such a feature, such as to which species, or in what circumstances, a retention requirement would apply.