

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON THE
WORK LOAD PRIORITIES AND DRAFT SEPTEMBER 2005 COUNCIL MEETING
AGENDA

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) discussed items for the Council's September agenda and the three-meeting outlook, and has the following recommendations and comments. The GMT notes that the items described below require a full rulemaking (i.e., two-meeting) process and an Environmental Assessment(s) tiered from the 2005-06 Management Measures and Specifications EIS, and requests that these items be added to the Council's September and November meetings.

ABC and OY and Trip Limits for Spiny Dogfish

As mentioned in April, spiny dogfish are currently included in the optimum yield (OY) for "Other Fish" in the management specifications for the Pacific Coast groundfish fishery. Given the life history characteristics of dogfish and their status in other areas, the GMT recommends the Council consider adopting a separate ABC and OY for dogfish along with harvest control regulations (i.e., trip limits) to be implemented beginning in 2006.

Targeted fishing for spiny dogfish currently occurs by limited entry trawl, fixed gear, and open access vessels. The fixed gear and open access fisheries are prosecuted primarily during the winter and early spring months when dogfish occur in fishable concentrations off the northern coast, while trawl fishing for dogfish usually occurs in the spring and summer months. Additionally, dogfish are encountered in directed groundfish recreational fisheries coastwide.

Earlier this spring, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) was contacted by a freezer longline vessel that anticipated participating in the open access dogfish fishery, beginning in May. In response to bycatch concerns for canary and yelloweye rockfish, NMFS implemented an emergency rule to set bycatch limits for canary and yelloweye rockfish for the directed open access fishery. Using the GMT's estimated total catch amounts for the directed open access fishery as described in the GMT's bycatch scorecard, NMFS implemented a bycatch limit of 1.0 mt of canary rockfish and 0.6 mt of yelloweye rockfish. Because the action taken by NMFS was through an emergency rule, there is a limited duration of 180 days for the action, and these bycatch limits would not apply in 2006. However, the GMT initially recommends setting dogfish trip limits to reflect the pace of dogfish harvest in the traditional dogfish fishery, rather than continuing the bycatch limits for canary and yelloweye rockfish for the open access fishery in 2006. Maintaining the traditional harvest pace is anticipated to protect both dogfish and associated overfished species.

A formal stock assessment for west coast dogfish has not yet been conducted, but one is anticipated for the next assessment cycle (2007). However, even in the absence of a formal assessment, life history information indicates that characteristics of the spiny dogfish (slow growing, late maturing, low fecundity) make it susceptible to overfishing. Dogfish populations have been depressed as a result of fishing in areas of Puget Sound and have been declared overfished on the East Coast.

The Groundfish Fishery Management Plan specifies a process to set ABCs and OYs for species that have not been formally assessed. The GMT anticipates using this process to determine the appropriate ABC and OY for dogfish. The GMT notes that the portion of the “Other Fish” OY that had originally been included for dogfish would also need to be removed from the “Other Fish” OY for 2006.

Trip Limits for Pacific Cod

In April 2004, the Council applied a precautionary reduction of 50% (from 3,200 mt to 1,600 mt) to the OY for Pacific cod, as it is an unassessed stock, as part of the 2005-2006 biennial management process. However, Pacific cod have not been subject to harvest control regulations, such as trip limits. Pacific cod have increasingly been targeted in the trawl fishery in recent years and catches have been approaching the OY.

While no stock assessment efforts or management measures have been directed toward Pacific cod in the Council management arena, they have been very actively managed by Canada off of British Columbia. Stocks in this area were determined to be stressed and Canada has implemented a number of management measures in recent years to recover the stock (the Canadian quota for Pacific cod off the west coast of Vancouver Island was 500 mt for 2004-2005 season). Canadian catch and abundance information can serve to inform Council management of this trans-boundary species.

Also, Pacific cod can be targeted with trawl, fixed gear, and open access gear, and the potential for a freezer longline vessel to participate in the open access fishery (similar to the situation described above for dogfish) also exists for Pacific cod, with similar concerns for bycatch of overfished species.

As Pacific cod is distributed north of 40 deg, 10 min., the GMT would recommend that trip limits for Pacific cod apply to fisheries north of 40 deg. 10 min. for 2006. The GMT notes that while changing trip limits is a routine management measure, our understanding is that the creation of trip limits for a new species would require full rulemaking.

Limited Entry Trawl Gear Requirements

The GMT has received requests to evaluate several aspects of limited entry trawl gear requirements. One request was to consider modifying the selective flatfish trawl gear requirements to allow a four seam codend as well as the two seam codend that is already specified in regulations. This change would allow industry to make use of the four seam codends that they already have and not require them to purchase two seam codends.

The second request was to consider allowing chafing gear to encircle 75% instead of 50% of the net’s circumference to better protect the codend, especially selective flatfish trawl gear, and reduce wear and tear on the net.

The last request was to allow midwater trawl gear to be used before and after the primary whiting fishery for a targeted bait fishery during the primary sablefish season.

Additionally, the GMT notes that there are problems associated with tracking and modeling fishing effort and catch, as well as enforcing footrope restrictions, for vessels fishing both shoreward and seaward of the RCA during a cumulative limit period. In order to reduce these

problems, potential regulatory changes to consider are: prohibiting multiple trawl gears onboard a vessel during a cumulative limit period, or requiring large footrope gear to be stowed when the vessel is fishing shoreward of the RCA.

The GMT discussed these gear issues with the Enforcement Consultants and they agreed to meet with the GMT at our August meeting to through these issues.

Other September Meeting Agenda Items

In addition to those items listed above which require full rulemaking, the GMT also requests that the Council schedule an EFH EIS implementation update for the September meeting. The GMT plans to begin drafting regulatory language to implement the EFH EIS decisions beginning at our August meeting, and would like to have joint meetings with the GAP and Enforcement Consultants in September. We would like to provide the Council with an update on our progress, and would like the opportunity to highlight any issues for the Council which may arise and request guidance, if needed.

GMT Recommendations

The GMT recommends that the following items be scheduled on the Council's upcoming agendas:

September

- Preliminary action on a new ABC and OY for spiny dogfish and a revised ABC and OY for "Other Fish" for implementation in 2006
- Preliminary action to create new trip limits for spiny dogfish and Pacific cod for implementation in 2006 for public review
- Preliminary action to modify limited entry trawl gear requirements for implementation in 2006
- Update on EFH EIS implementing regulations (Council provide guidance, if needed)

November

- Final action on a new ABC and OY for spiny dogfish and a revised ABC and OY for "Other Fish" for implementation in 2006
- Final action to create new trip limits for spiny dogfish and Pacific cod for implementation in 2006
- Final action on limited entry trawl gear requirements for implementation in 2006

The GMT recommends that the actions for spiny dogfish and Pacific cod be addressed in one Environmental Assessment (EA), and that the gear issues be addressed in a separate EA.