

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON THE PROCESS AND SCHEDULE FOR 2007-2008 BIENNIAL MANAGEMENT SPECIFICATIONS

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) spent a considerable amount of time discussing the proposed process and timeline for the 2007-2008 specifications and management process with representatives from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Council staff, based on the assumption that a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be required. The GMT would appreciate guidance on whether a full EIS would be required, or if an Environmental Assessment (EA) would suffice, to evaluate the effects of alternative 2007-2008 specifications and management measures.

Again, based on the assumption that an EIS would be required, Council staff, working with NMFS, developed a straw proposal for the GMT's and Council's consideration. The original, straw proposal was especially difficult for state fishery managers to meet, given the amount of time needed for state public meetings and constituent input, and the timing of the Allocation Committee meeting (which is after the November Council meeting). However, the process and timeline described in the Council's Operating Procedures, which would accommodate state public processes, is not achievable for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it was apparent that some sort of compromise was needed to reach a workable solution.

Council and NMFS staff reviewed the process, including the amount of time needed to craft environmental and economic analyses of the alternatives for the EIS, and the necessary review periods by NOAA General Counsel, and NMFS headquarters. At the same time, the states reviewed their need to sponsor public meetings to develop specific management measure alternatives, primarily for recreational fisheries, such as seasons, bag limits, time/area closures, and the need for guidance from the Allocation Committee on the commercial/recreational sharing for key overfished species (e.g., canary rockfish).

After much debate, Council staff and the GMT agreed to go with a revised timeline that is presented in the Council's briefing book (Agenda Item F.6.a, Attachment 1). Therefore, the GMT recommends that the Council approve the process and timeline as presented. The GMT would like to stress that this revised timeline is far from ideal and does not represent something that is easily achievable. It will take commitment and dedication on the part of all parties to adhere to the specified deadlines to have a chance of being workable.

The GMT also commits to drafting alternatives for commercial/recreational sharing for key overfished species at its October meeting to present to the Council in November. This will allow for the development of commercial management measures, and for the states to craft the range of recreational management measures. In November, the GMT would recommend that the Council provide the flexibility to the Allocation Committee to work with the GMT and Groundfish Advisory Subpanel in January to finalize the range of management measures with guidance on the sideboards around that range.

In general, with regard to the amount of issues requiring attention at the November Council meeting (see Attachment 1 appended to this report), and the magnitude of specific issues that have been added to the 2007-2008 specifications, the GMT is struggling with the lack of time and Council guidance to thoroughly address some of them, such as sector total catch limits and an acceptable biological catch (ABC) and optimum yield (OY) for spiny dogfish (prior to a formal assessment). The GMT has a meeting in October to prepare for the 2007-2008 specifications process, and would appreciate guidance from the Council to reduce the potential list of issues relative to these two items.

As noted in the GMT's statement on Amendment 18, most of the sectors lack adequate monitoring programs to accurately determine achievement of sector catch limits in a timely manner. However, if the Council would like to consider total catch limits, harvest guidelines, or harvest targets for 2007 and 2008, then the GMT would appreciate Council guidance to identify the sectors and species for consideration.

To determine an ABC and OY for spiny dogfish, the GMT would need to determine the amount of the "Other Fish" ABC and OY that was originally attributed to dogfish and subtract that amount. Then, the GMT would need to review historical catch data for all fisheries, including recreational, to determine the appropriate ABC and OY for dogfish, and notes that dogfish catch data for many of these fisheries are not available. And, according to the fishery management plan (FMP), for unassessed species, the Council would need to take a precautionary reduction of 50% of those historical catch levels to set the ABC and OY. As such, the resulting amounts may be set too low, and the OY may be artificially constraining to current commercial and recreational fisheries. On the other hand, if the Council chose to include a "buffer" against that uncertainty, then the resulting amounts may be set too high, which would compromise the integrity of the precautionary reduction. One way to approach this may be to apply management measures (i.e., trip limits) for spiny dogfish in 2007-2008, and then set an ABC and OY for dogfish beginning in 2009, after a stock assessment has been completed and approved in 2007.

The GMT also proposes that, as a check-in, we update the Council in March 2006 on the results of the 2005 groundfish fisheries, including total catch estimates and an evaluation of the effects of inseason measures. This review will provide an additional opportunity for Council guidance on the management measure alternatives for 2007-2008.

The GMT would like to express its appreciation to Council and NMFS staff for the productive discussion that led to as near a workable solution as possible. However, the GMT would advocate that the 2007 stock assessment process be scheduled in a manner which would allow for preliminary consideration of specifications (i.e., ABCs and OYs) for key species in September 2007. The GMT would also like to develop a timeline with Council and NMFS staff for the 2009-2010 process, prior to April 2007, which would better meet the needs of everyone assuming that an EIS would be required.

GMT Recommendations:

1. Provide guidance on the National Environmental Policy Act process and document needed for the 2007-2008 specifications and management measures (i.e., EIS vs. EA).
2. Adopt the process and schedule as presented to the Council, with an additional check-in at the March Council meeting on the results of the 2005 groundfish fisheries.
3. Provide guidance on the sector total catch limits, harvest guidelines, and/or harvest targets (i.e., identification of sectors and species).
4. Set an ABC and OY for spiny dogfish following approval of a formal assessment in 2007, to apply in 2009.
5. Provide guidance to NMFS to structure the 2007 stock assessment process to allow for preliminary considerations of specifications for key species in September 2007.