

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON THE NORTH PACIFIC ALBACORE STOCK ASSESSMENT

The Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) received a presentation by Dr. Paul Crone on the results of the latest stock assessment of North Pacific albacore. The assessment was conducted during the December 2006 meeting of the International Scientific Committee's (ISC) Albacore Working Group. The VPA-2Box model was used for the assessment as it was for the previous assessment. The results were generally similar to those of the previous assessment which was conducted by the North Pacific Albacore Workshop in 2004: 1) the estimated spawning stock biomass (SSB) of 153,000 mt for 2006 is near its highest level throughout the history of the data series (1966-2005), and 2) fishing mortality rate is high ($F_{17\%}$) relative to many commonly used reference points for tunas and tuna-like species. There is considerable uncertainty in the assessment, which may be attributed to recruitment variability and the inability to predict future recruitment. Future SSB projections, based on the average productivity of the stock over the time series and the current fishing mortality rate, estimate that SSB will decline to an equilibrium value of roughly 92,000 mt by 2015. The projected equilibrium value is somewhat below the long-term (1966-2005) average SSB of 100,000 mt.

The ISC Plenary reviewed the assessment results and concluded that given that F is high relative to most commonly used F reference points, that fishing mortality may need to be reduced. However, the ISC did not make recommendations regarding when, how, or to what degree reductions in F should be achieved. The degree to which reductions in fishing effort are necessary depends in part on the objectives of Regional Fishery Management Organizations managing the stocks. Neither the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) nor the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) have reviewed the assessment results, which were only made available during the July 2007 meeting of the ISC.

The HMSMT suggests that the Council, through the U.S. delegations, request the IATTC and WCPFC to review the albacore assessment during their upcoming meetings (scheduled for October 22-24 and December 3-7, respectively) and decide on their respective management objectives. However, for the WCPFC, Council input to the September 11-13 Northern Committee meeting is also important. The HMSMT suggests that the Council try to immediately communicate its recommendations to the U.S. delegation attending that meeting. The HMSMT supports the conclusion of the ISC Plenary that fishing mortality may need to be decreased to maintain biomass levels above a reference level consistent with management goals. However, those reference levels have yet to be established for North Pacific albacore. Similarly, reference points have yet to be established for many of the management unit species in the Council's Fishery Management Plan for U.S. West Coast Fisheries for Highly Migratory Species (HMS FMP). The HMSMT urges the Council to request that the IATTC and WCPFC continue to work toward developing reference points for North Pacific albacore and other HMS.

With respect to the IATTC and WCPFC resolutions currently in place, the HMSMT and National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Fisheries Science Center staff have done considerable work in defining the current level of fishing effort of the U.S. fleets on North

Pacific albacore in order to demonstrate that the U.S. is complying with the resolutions. The HMSMT suggests that the Council request that the IATTC and WCPFC require similar response of their member nations in order to demonstrate compliance. In addition, the IATTC and WCPFC should clarify what metric is to be used to define “recent effort.”

In summary, the HMSMT suggests that the Council make the following recommendations to the IATTC and WCPFC, through the US delegations, regarding North Pacific albacore. Recommendations to the WCPFC’s Northern Committee should be made immediately in order to be considered at their meeting of September 11-13.

1. Review the latest stock assessment;
2. Define management objectives for North Pacific albacore;
3. Work toward developing reference points for North Pacific albacore, as well as for other highly migratory species;
4. Clarify what is meant by “recent effort levels” for compliance with current resolutions;
5. Require documentation of compliance with current resolutions from all members;
6. Consider the conclusions of the ISC that fishing mortality may need to be decreased.

PFMC
08/23/07