

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON SPECIFICATIONS PROCESS FOR 2017-2018 FISHERIES

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) reviewed the items in the briefing book under this agenda item and received a briefing from Ms. Kelly Ames during our publicly noticed conference call on June 4, 2015 and has the following comments.

The GMT notes that for the most part, the decision-making schedule is similar to what it has been since the front-loaded schedule was adopted for the 2013-2014 specification process. We are hopeful that Amendment 24 and the work that was done for the 2015-2016 specifications process and documentation will result in efficiencies to the 2017-2018 specification process. In particular, the long-term impact analysis completed as part of Amendment 24 should streamline the analytical process, and allow the GMT to focus our analysis on key species.

Timeliness and Schedules

As the GMT has said in past biennial cycles, the front-loaded process is dependent on deadlines being met all along the way in order to meet the January 1 implementation deadline. Even with efficiencies that may have been created under Amendment 24 and with the Tiered analysis in place, the potential analysis of management measures coming out of the Groundfish Endangered Species Workgroup (Workgroup) Report, and the Council's reconsideration of the ecosystem component designation for big skate or possibly a broader consideration for all skates, will likely create substantial additional analysis that will need to be conducted over the winter. Under [Agenda Item D.4.a](#), the GMT recommended that the Council consider any management measures approved for analysis be considered under a separate regulatory process than the 2017-2018 specifications. However, if the Council elects to forward those through the biennial process, the GMT wants to highlight the **importance of final preferred alternatives for stock complexes that are currently scheduled for the November 2015 Council meeting are not delayed**. The schedule in [Agenda Item D.5, Attachment 1](#) proposes that any management measures recommended to the Council by the Workgroup would be considered for implementation through the existing management measures decision-making schedule (i.e., range of alternatives in November, preliminary preferred alternative in April 2016, and final preferred alternative in June 2016).

The GMT also notes the importance of completing all harvest specifications decisions for the November 2015 meeting to facilitate the winter analysis and final Council action on the annual catch limits in April 2016. Recall in the 2015-2016 cycle, harvest specifications for several key nearshore species and cowcod were delayed until March 2015, which subsequently delayed the management measure analysis. As noted in the previous paragraph, each decision must be accomplished according to the schedule in order to meet the January 1 implementation.

The GMT also discussed the 2017-2018 schedule with regard to the preliminary results of the canary rockfish stock assessment, which indicates that this stock may be rebuilt. As the Council is well aware, canary is caught in all sectors and thus a rebuilt declaration could mean adjustments to the two-year allocations and associated management measures (e.g., trip limits, bag limits, closed areas, etc.) across all groundfish fisheries. Under the proposed schedule, in

November 2015 the Council would provide guidance on two-year allocations for over-winter analysis by the GMT and possible consideration by the Groundfish Allocation Committee (GAC), if recommended by the Council. The Council is scheduled to adopt preliminary preferred alternatives for two-year allocations at the April 2016 Council meeting. **The GMT recommends that if a GAC meeting is desired, that it be scheduled earlier in the range of dates listed in the schedule to facilitate selection of the preliminary preferred management measure alternatives in April 2016.** That is, the schedule anticipates a GAC meeting sometime between February 9 and March 8, 2016. If the GAC meeting was held in February, for example, the GMT could provide analysis of the GAC preferred alternative in time for the April 2016 Council meeting. If the GAC meeting happens later, for example in March, there would be limited time to provide such analysis for the April 2016 meeting.

The GMT also recommends that the schedule also include Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) review of the harvest specification values in the analytical document and the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation document in March 2016. This recommendation is meant to ensure that all SSC-recommended values are accurately captured within the two documents. Recall, in November 2014, the SSC and Council had to reconsider select harvest specifications due to discrepancies between the two documents, which caused challenges in the rulemaking process.

Delivery of the final analytical document, scheduled July 15th, 2016

The GMT has some concerns with the timing of the June 2016 Council meeting that is scheduled to end on June 28, and delivering the final analysis of the final preferred alternative to NMFS on July 15, 2016. With the Council meeting concluding this late in June, it is likely that, given compensatory time off following the Council meeting and the subsequent July 4 holiday, that the first opportunity that Council staff and others will have to compile recommendations coming out of the June Council meeting and request any additional analysis will be July 6. This schedule will result in a potentially unrealistic and very short opportunity (seven working days) for the GMT to provide additional analysis under the final preferred alternative that would be due to NMFS by July 15.

With this concern in mind, the GMT notes that National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) scoping is scheduled for completion prior to the tentative March briefing book deadline (February 9, 2016). This is anticipated to allow for a better understanding of the proposed action and potential impacts that would be necessary to determine the appropriate type of NEPA analysis required. The schedule in [Attachment 1](#) provides for an update to the Council on the status of the 2017-2018 specifications process at the March Council meeting that will include NMFS' decision on the required NEPA analysis. This March update will give the Council some indication if there is flexibility to adjust the July 15, 2016 delivery date of the analysis of the final preferred alternative. **The GMT recommends that NMFS and Council staff keep this seven working day turn-around issue at the forefront and consider whether the time period could be extended when evaluating the schedule update that will come in March 2016.**

GMT recommendations:

- **Do not delay final preferred alternatives for stock complexes (currently scheduled for the November, 2015 Council meeting).**
- **If a GAC meeting is desired, schedule it earlier in the range of dates listed in the schedule (2/9/2016 - 3/8/2016).**
- **The GMT also recommends that, in March 2016, an SSC review of the harvest specification values in the analytical document and the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation document be added to the schedule.**
- **NMFS and Council staff work to keep the seven working day turn-around between the conclusion of the June 2016 Council meeting and the due date of the analytical documents to NMFS at the forefront, and consider whether the time period could be extended when, evaluating the schedule update that will come in March 2016.**

PFMC
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