

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON FINAL ACTION ON INSEASON ADJUSTMENTS

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) met with the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) to discuss progress of this year's fishery and possible inseason adjustments. The GMT discussion was led by Ms. Jessi Doeringhaus, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Salmon Advisory Subpanel (SAS) joined the GMT in the GAP to discuss potential salmon interaction in the groundfish fisheries.

SAS Chairman Butch Smith said the salmon industry has asked the GAP to recognize the severity of the Klamath fall Chinook conservation situation that will require closure of all directed salmon fishery in the Klamath Management Zone (KMZ). Additionally, an in-river parasitic disease (C. Shasta) may negatively affect survival of Klamath Chinook salmon returning in 2018, so it is likely that the Klamath fall Chinook conservation situation will extend into 2018 as well. With this serious situation in mind, the SAS is requesting that the groundfish fishery participants make every effort to minimize impacts on salmon, especially California/Oregon stocks.

The GAP is appreciative of the increased dialogue with the salmon industry in March and April 2017, and believes it has furthered understanding of the management issues in both fisheries. As the GAP noted in March, the groundfish fleets are not targeting salmon and use active self-management to move away from salmon and minimize unintended bycatch. GAP members noted it is the fleet's intention to continue to do so now and in the future.

The GAP offers the following recommendations and comments on proposed inseason adjustments to ongoing groundfish fisheries.

Open Access Fixed Gear Sablefish Fishery North of 36° N. Latitude

Current trip limit: 300 lb. daily/900 weekly/1,800 bimonthly

The GAP received multiple requests from northern open access fishermen exploring the possibility of increasing the sablefish trip limits. Inclement weather this winter has kept landings quite low, which is detailed in projected landing and attainment estimates seen in Table 1 of the GMT statement.

Having reviewed the trip limit options contained in Table 2 of the GMT statement, the GAP supports Alternative 1 “**300 lb. daily/1,000 lbs. weekly/2,000 lbs. bimonthly to go into effect June 1st.**” The GAP believes these trip limits will maintain a full season of fishing, though further adjustments may be necessary later this fall.

At-Sea Whiting Sector

The GAP recommends that the GMT determine a way to provide additional Pacific ocean perch (POP) to the at-sea whiting sectors as soon as possible, but no later than June. While there were modest increases to the POP allocations for both sectors in 2017, the record-high whiting total allowable catch (TAC) lessens the effectiveness of those increases to provide relief to overly constraining allocations. This results in very stringent movement rules similar to previous years. The at-sea sectors are concerned that they will not achieve their whiting allocations even with significant and costly bycatch mitigation measures in place. Exacerbating this problem is the dire situation in the Klamath Management Zone (KMZ) for salmon and the desire to reduce or eliminate Chinook bycatch. If the at-sea whiting fleets are to fish farther north and/or in deeper waters, then it is likely that they will need access to additional slope rockfish. The farther north the fleet fishes the less potential impact they will have on KMZ stocks. Specifically, if additional POP was made available to the at-sea whiting sectors it is highly likely these sectors will fish north of the Columbia River, which will greatly reduce the likelihood of encountering California origin salmon.

The GMT notes that the off-the-top buffer may only be able to be accessed after an unforeseen catch event. The at-sea sectors greatly appreciate the actions taken during the specifications process to increase allocations for POP and darkblotched to the at-sea sectors. As the whiting fleet attempts to fish more northerly and deeper to avoid impacts to KMZ stocks, the increases in these two species will likely still be overly constraining.

Each at-sea sector manages their fishery to maximize whiting target while minimizing bycatch. In the mothership (MS) sector, the fishery is managed under five seasonal pools. Catcher vessels declare whiting from 34 permits into the pools they plan to fish (after consultation with their processing platform) and the bycatch species are then allocated out to each pool on a pro-rata basis to the whiting in the pool. This management is necessary so that those who fish in the Spring don't pre-empt those who don't fish until later in the year. This results in the possibility that one of the early seasonal pools could close based on attainment of bycatch, stranding whiting and closing the pool, which causes economic harm and major disruption to the fishery. It does not mean that the overall MS cap would be close to being attained, and it may not meet the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) interpretation of "unforeseen catch event." Movement of adequate amounts of fish to the sector prior to the season start will allow for a more even playing field for the sector, and potentially allow for the fleet to fish more north and have less impact on KMZ stocks.

Allocations to the catcher-processor (CP) Co-op are divided amongst the Co-op member companies and then further divided to the individual CP vessel. This can lead to constraints both at the CP company and vessel level, especially if the CP sector is expected to fish in more northerly waters and/or deeper on the slope. In recent years, the CP sector has avoided darkblotched and POP by fishing farther south. Therefore, recent catch histories of darkblotched and POP are likely not accurate representations of what catch levels will be if fishing patterns change significantly in 2017.

For these reasons, the GAP finds compelling evidence to recommend the Council find a mechanism to provide additional POP to the at-sea whiting sectors as soon as possible. However,

if the Council/NMFS does not believe that moving the “off the top” buffer is an available tool at this meeting, then the GAP recommends that the 10 mt in the Incidental Open Access sector be moved to the at-sea sectors. The open access sector set-aside is primarily to accommodate bycatch in the pink shrimp fishery. This bycatch has been nearly eliminated in the last two years based on mandatory minimum grate requirements combined with the use of LED lights. If action at this meeting is not possible, then the GAP recommends the Council schedule this action to occur under inseason at the June 2017 meeting.

PFMC
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