

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT
CONSULTATIONS ON SALMON AND SEABIRDS

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) received information from Ms. Laura Todd, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) about the recently completed USFWS Biological Opinion related to interactions between the groundfish fishery and seabirds. The GAP also received an update from Dr. Peter Dygert, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) about the status of the ESA consultation for salmon in the groundfish fisheries. The GAP also reviewed sections of the NMFS report under F.9 (Agenda Item F.9.a, Supplemental NMFS Report 1, November 2017 – 23. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Endangered Species Act (ESA) mitigation measures) that pertain to these issues.

Relative to the USFWS BiOp, the GAP agrees with the NMFS recommendation to not include the new management measures in the 2019-20 harvest specifications because “more time for analysis and consultation with all stakeholders would be beneficial for this action.” In line with NMFS, the GAP recommends that the Council create a separate agenda item for the implementation of mitigation measures to meet the Incidental Take Statement terms and conditions “to ensure proper time and attention will be devoted.” For example, research indicates that requiring night setting (without use of streamer lines) has a similar seabird mitigation effect as streamer line use during day sets; in addition, vessel characteristics of the small boat fleet in California could make use of streamer lines impracticable and/or decrease vessel safety. The GAP believes full exploration of these (and potentially other) issues would be facilitated by putting this topic on its own track rather than including it in the 2019-20 specifications package.

Relative to ESA salmon mitigation measures, the GAP generally supports the direction and guidance previously provided to NMFS by the Council. The GAP notes that in their F.9 report NMFS states “[t]iming for the development of new mitigation measures stemming from the salmon consultation may not be ideal for the 2019–20 harvest specifications. Mitigation measures developed could require significant analysis and implementation work. Some measures may fit well with the trawl gear rulemaking package, while others may need to be addressed separately.” In order to ensure management measures in 2019-20 meet the BiOp objectives, NMFS appears to suggest in their report that the current salmon bycatch reduction measures should be evaluated in the 2019-20 specifications analysis to determine how they could achieve the anticipated mitigation objectives in the BiOp. The GAP supports this approach. As stated in previous GAP statements, the current BiOp appears to have been effective at ensuring that the incidental take of salmonids in the groundfish fishery does not cause jeopardy to any population listed under the ESA. The GAP anticipates providing more substantive comments at a future Council meeting after the BiOp is completed and management measure analysis has begun.

The GAP stresses the importance of finalizing the ESA salmon consultation because several regulatory changes seem to be dependent upon timely completion of the BiOp. Finally, the GAP urges the Council and NMFS to prioritize the collection and analysis of genetic information from incidentally caught salmon because it will inform a better understanding of the impacts to specific salmon Endangered Species Units.