

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON 2023-24 BIENNIAL HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

At the June 2021 Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting, the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) provided a preliminary list of management measures for 2023-2024 that have been identified thus far ([Agenda Item G.6.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, June 2021](#)). The Council requested the GMT provide some additional information. This report considers the preliminary list of management measures for 2023-2024 and discusses the expected workload and analysis that would be needed for those items. This report contains the GMT's preliminary examination of the relevant factors for analysis, potential benefits, and anticipated workload. The GMT offers no recommendations at this time, and numbering and order of items in this report should not be seen as any indication of prioritization by the GMT.

1. Adopt management measures necessitated by results of the new stock assessments (e.g., change in stock status)

Relevant Factors for Analysis

The outcomes of the Council's final adoption of the stock assessments will determine the analysis and actions needed to develop new management measures that may be necessary to stay within harvest specifications resulting from those assessments. New management measures may be needed if the scale of a stock has changed or if the status of a stock has changed (e.g., healthy to precautionary). Additionally, based on information from the assessments, the Council and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) may consider modifying one or more stock complexes, or how species within a complex are managed. Therefore, until the Council adopts stock assessments and the associated harvest specifications, the GMT is unsure about what the analysis will entail.

Potential Benefits

Management measures would help ensure that mortality from fisheries is within the appropriate harvest specifications, which would benefit the long-term sustainability of those stocks.

Anticipated Workload

Potentially high, depending on the species, complexes, and/or management measures necessary, as well as which sector(s) interact with those species. The GMT will be able to provide additional information once the Council adopts stock assessments and harvest specifications.

2. Prohibit directed fishing for shortbelly rockfish (Council motion on Agenda Item G.2, March 2021, [Council Decision Summary](#))

Relevant Factors for Analysis

As part of the 2021-2022 biennial harvest specifications and management measures implemented through [Amendment 29](#) to the Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP), shortbelly rockfish was designated as an Ecosystem Component (EC) species. Previously it had been managed as a single coastwide stock with an annual catch limit (ACL) of 500-3,000 mt. The ACL was set at a level to discourage targeting without constraining fisheries that encounter shortbelly rockfish as bycatch. As an EC species, no harvest specifications were established. However, the Council

stated their intention to monitor impacts closely inseason and take management action, should catches accrue faster or higher than anticipated. At the June 2020 Council meeting, the Council also set a 2,000 mt threshold of cumulative catch in a calendar year that would trigger further Council consideration of shortbelly rockfish impacts.

The Council prioritized analyzing a prohibition of directed fishing for shortbelly rockfish, given the growing global fishmeal market. This could be accomplished via the prohibition of a “directed fishery” in the Groundfish FMP. This would ensure specific objectives of this action are being met, and prohibition in regulation makes a clear path for enforcement. As part of this, the term “directed fishery” would need to be defined, likely to include amounts of shortbelly rockfish allowed, or ratio of shortbelly rockfish to other species. It is the GMT’s understanding that prohibiting a directed fishery requires an FMP amendment, but could possibly be included in the FMP amendment to implement the 2023-24 harvest specifications and management measures. At this time, the GMT is unsure what analysis will be needed or of the workload associated with this action.

Another possible path to prohibit a directed fishery from developing on shortbelly rockfish would be to designate it a Shared EC species, as was done for other species through [Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 1](#) (CEBA-1). There is a prohibition of directed fishing for species designated as Shared EC species through that process. Since this path has already been taken, the Council would not need to define, or redefine, “directed fishing”, as it is already specified in CEBA-1:

Directed commercial fishing for Shared EC Species. For the purposes of this section, “directed commercial fishing” means that a fishing vessel lands Shared EC Species without landing any species other than Shared EC Species, or lands Shared EC Species with other species and in amounts more than:

- (1) 10 mt combined weight of all Shared EC Species from any fishing trip; or
- (2) 30 mt combined weight of all Shared EC Species in any calendar year.

50 CFR §660.5(b)

During the CEBA-1 process, the analytical rationale for the 10 and 30 mt combined weight thresholds were chosen because they account for 99 and 97 percent of historic landings, respectively, between 2005-2014 of the combined Shared EC species identified at that time. If shortbelly rockfish were to be listed as a Shared EC species, could the combined threshold for all Shared EC species be raised to incorporate historical landings of shortbelly rockfish, while also updating the threshold for all Shared EC species? Alternatively, could different thresholds be examined for shortbelly rockfish, independent of the thresholds of other shared EC species?

In order to be considered a Shared EC species, it is the GMT’s understanding that it would also need to be demonstrated that shortbelly rockfish is a prey species for at least one fishery management unit species managed in each of the FMPs that the targeting prohibition is implemented into. Finally, since the scope of the action would expand beyond just groundfish, all FMPs may need to be amended at once. The GMT anticipates similar analysis will be needed to what was done for the other Shared EC species included in CEBA-1.

Regardless of the pathway chosen, analysis will need to include information on the amount of shortbelly rockfish that is currently encountered per vessel on a trip and annual level. This should help inform the appropriate levels or thresholds for shortbelly rockfish such that there is no incentive to target, but also such that bycatch amounts would not constrain fisheries targeting other stocks (e.g., whiting).

Potential Benefits

While no directed fishery currently exists, this management measure would prevent a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish from being developed in the future, providing further protections to the species, and benefiting other species that rely on it for prey.

Anticipated Workload

Potentially high, but the GMT looks to Council staff and NMFS for guidance.

3. Cowcod Conservation Area removal ([Agenda Item G.6.a, Supplemental CDFW Report 1, June 2021](#))

Relevant Factors for Analysis

The cowcod conservation areas (CCAs) were put in place to protect cowcod when they were determined to be overfished. Based on the [2019 assessment](#), cowcod are no longer overfished; therefore, areas closed to protect them may no longer be necessary to ensure the stock remains healthy. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has indicated that “Commercial and recreational sectors would still be managed in a manner consistent with areas outside the CCA, using depth constraints established by connecting a series of pre-established, defined waypoints codified within the Code of Federal Regulations.” Therefore, area-based management would still be in place in this area, as needed, under existing non-trawl rockfish conservation area (NT-RCA) designations.

Recent commercial and recreational catch rate data for various species are limited, which complicates any modeling of potential impacts. Fishery-dependent data from before the CCA was implemented and/or fishery-independent survey information may be able to provide some proxy information to inform projections; however, projections will be very uncertain.

As with other areas that have reopened after prolonged closures, habitat impacts will likely need to be analyzed to some degree. The GMT will be looking for guidance from Council staff and NMFS on the scale of analysis that will be required and notes that that could change the anticipated workload below.

Potential Benefits

This would allow fishers access to a considerable portion of the Southern California Bight and the many species of underutilized fish stocks that live there. This could also reduce pressure on more nearshore areas and species (i.e., copper rockfish). There will also be fewer enforcement resources required, as they would no longer need to patrol the CCAs.

Anticipated Workload

Potentially high. However, the GMT notes they are aware of CDFW’s ongoing mapping efforts for both this CCA item (#3) and the RCA item (#4) that may reduce GMT workload.

4. Adopt new coordinates for non-trawl rockfish conservation area boundary lines off of California ([Agenda Item G.6.a, Supplemental CDFW Report 1, June 2021](#))

Relevant Factors for Analysis

As mentioned under the previous item (removal of CCAs), it is the GMT’s understanding that CDFW intends to continue to manage commercial and recreational fisheries using area management similar to areas outside of the current CCA. In order to do that, management lines, defined by waypoints that approximate depth contours, will need to be included in the Federal regulations. The proposed coordinates will then be available for use in the same manner as all other NT-RCA boundary lines.

The GMT anticipates coordination with industry members and the enforcement consultants to ensure that the waypoints being proposed are accurate and enforceable.

The GMT is unsure what level of further analysis would be required to add management lines into regulation, since implementation of management lines typically occurs when impacts to fish stocks and habitat are analyzed.

Potential Benefits

This would provide additional fathom lines available for use in management.

Anticipated Workload

Medium

5. Allow additional rockfish retention in the salmon troll fishery, north and south of 40° 10' N. lat. when fishing inside the non-trawl rockfish conservation area

Relevant Factors for Analysis

Over the last couple of years, participants in the salmon troll fishery have requested additional access to groundfish species when fishing for salmon within the NT-RCA. Currently, salmon troll vessels are only allowed to retain yellowtail rockfish and lingcod within the NT-RCA on the condition that salmon is on-board (or using a ratio provision in the case of lingcod). All other groundfish species are prohibited to salmon trollers within the NT-RCA. If fishing outside of the non-trawl RCA, salmon troll vessels can retain the regular open access (OA) trip limits as listed in [Table 3 \(North\) to Part 660, Subpart F](#), the same as any vessel participating in the OA groundfish fishery. Off Washington however, commercial groundfish fishing is prohibited within state waters, limiting vessels to seaward (outside or offshore) of the NT-RCA. Additionally, the NT-RCA range of alternatives (ROA) agenda item is on the Year-at-a-Glance for the November 2021 meeting. The ROA for the NT-RCA is anticipated to include alternatives (e.g., use of mid-water hook-and-line gears within the NT-RCA or liberalizing the NT-RCA) that are likely to negate the need for the special provisions provided to the salmon troll fleet to retain groundfish in the NT-RCA in certain areas along the coast.

Further, trying to model or estimate projected impacts from modifications to the allowable groundfish retention will be difficult and highly uncertain. The salmon troll fishery is not subject to observers or electronic monitoring. Therefore, there are no data from this fishery on the incidence of encounters with rockfish or lingcod species with which to model trip limits and project discard mortality of rebuilding and sensitive species (i.e., yelloweye rockfish). Additionally, no data are available to indicate if there is a level of groundfish retention at which vessels may begin to target groundfish species, rather than just retaining those incidentally caught while trolling for salmon.

The salmon troll fishery is considered an incidental open access (IOA) fishery when tracking groundfish species. Projected impacts from IOA fisheries are deducted off-the-top of the ACL to set the fishery harvest guideline (HG), along with impacts from Tribal fisheries, research, and exempted fishing permits. The fishery HG is then allocated to the recreational and commercial groundfish fisheries, so any increase in the IOA fishery set-aside will decrease the amount of fish available to the directed groundfish fisheries. Species with high ACLs and low attainment, such as yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N lat., would not be an issue. However, for low ACL and high attainment species such as yelloweye rockfish, additional impacts set aside for IOA fisheries (or other off the top deductions) could reduce the amount available to recreational and commercial groundfish fisheries and potentially require further restrictions to those fisheries.

The Council will want to make policy decisions in regard to long-term management goals for the salmon troll and groundfish fisheries, and how they intersect.

Potential Benefits

Allowing additional rockfish retention on salmon troll trips could provide some additional economic benefit to troll vessels fishing within the RCA by allowing them to retain and sell additional species/amounts, particularly in years with low salmon quotas. This could also reduce regulatory discards, allowing industry to better utilize this resource and bringing additional seafood to consumers.

Anticipated Workload:

Medium to High

6. Remove the daily limit for the sablefish Daily-Trip-Limit Open Access sector north of 36° N. lat.

Relevant Factors for Analysis

There has been some discussion about potentially removing the daily limit for the OA daily trip limit (DTL) fishery north of 36° N. lat. by fishery participants from Washington. Previous discussions about removing the OA daily limit have raised concerns about the potential to flood the market and reduce the price paid per pound. In April 2020, in an effort to provide additional opportunity for the OA fleet, the Council recommended to NMFS through inseason action to increase the OA daily limit north of 36° N. lat. for the first time in more than 20 years from 300 pounds a day to 600 pounds day. The OA daily limit increase went into effect in June 2020, and since then the daily limits have not been constraining to most vessels.

Potential Benefits

This could provide additional economic opportunity and fishing efficiency, by allowing the limited number of currently constrained vessels to catch more sablefish on an individual trip or day.

Anticipated Workload

Low

PFMC

08/18/21