

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON ADOPTING STOCK ASSESSMENTS

Mr. John DeVore, Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff briefed the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) on the adoption of stock assessments to be used to inform management in 2023 and beyond. The GAP offers the following comments and recommendations on stock assessment adoption.

Full Assessments

Lingcod

The GAP supports the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) endorsement of the 2021 full assessments of northern and southern lingcod as providing the best scientific information available and suitable for informing management decisions for 2023 and beyond. Northern lingcod depletion is estimated to be at 64.3 percent of unfished biomass and southern lingcod stands at approximately 39.4 percent of unfished biomass.

Vermilion and Sunset Rockfish

The GAP also supports the SSC endorsement of the full assessments of vermilion and sunset rockfish as providing the best scientific information available and suitable for informing management decisions for 2023 and beyond. Estimated depletion values of 48.2 percent of unfished biomass for south of Point Conception, 42.7 percent of unfished north of Point Conception, 73 percent of unfished in Oregon, and 56 percent of unfished biomass in Washington suggest the stocks are in decent shape.

Catch-Only Projections

The GAP supports the SSC endorsements of the catch-only projections for arrowtooth flounder, petrale sole, canary rockfish, and darkblotched rockfish.

Yelloweye Rockfish Catch Report

The GAP reviewed the yelloweye catch report for 2015-2020 and noted total mortality has been under the ACLs, thus rebuilding should still be progressing along.

Spiny Dogfish

The GAP greatly appreciates the Council taking up the GAP's call to further review questions surrounding catchability coefficient (q) that were assumed in the assessment, and the further consideration about this important issue by the SSC. As noticed by the Council, the spiny dogfish assessment, notably survey q, will receive additional review at the upcoming mop-up Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel on September 29 and 30. The GAP will continue to track this

process and participate in the mop-up panel. We will provide additional comments at the November Council meeting based on the mop-up panel and information developed for Council consideration. For additional background, the GAP provided a rationale for this important review in our [June 2021 G.5 Report](#).

California Copper Rockfish, south of Point Conception

The model relied mostly on length comp data mainly derived from the recreational fleets. There was a poor fit to the Northwest Fisheries Science Center hook-and-line survey index which was somewhat troubling to industry, as that survey has been quite informative on many of our other rockfish stock assessments in the Southern California Bight. It was suggested that since copper is a nearshore rockfish there may be much greater fishing pressure on the stock closer to shore than where the hook-and-line survey takes place in mostly offshore areas such as within the Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA).

The GAP is still very troubled by the results that came out of the copper rockfish assessment for south of Point Conception. The GAP believes there are great inconsistencies in the model data trends suggesting recent declines in copper populations. This is not at all consistent with population trends we have observed in many other stocks that have been assessed in the Southern California Bight in recent years such as cowcod, bocaccio, chilipepper rockfish, and blackgill rockfish. Furthermore, the assessment results are in stark contrast to what fishermen are seeing on the water. Catches of copper rockfish have only been increasing in recent years.

Quillback Rockfish for California Coastal Waters

There was a lot of uncertainty in the model, specifically to growth and mortality. Growth was estimated through fish sampled in Oregon and Washington, which presents challenges due to sea temperature differences in California. Both growth and mortality ended up being assumed in the model. Depletion was estimated to be at 14 percent B/0 which is below minimum stock size threshold and would be considered overfished.

The GAP understands that the current Data Moderate assessments represent the best available science allowed under the terms of reference for these type of assessments. But industry strongly believes these assessments aren't truly reflecting what fishermen in northern California are seeing in their catches.

Quillback rockfish is one of the deeper nearshore species and therefore only harvested by commercial fishermen that possess a deeper nearshore permit. There are a limited number of these deeper nearshore permits. Commercial landings data suggest consistent catch with no signs of decreasing landings over time for the areas north of Point Arena. The data are readily available for review. The overall landings are not large because there are a limited number of deeper nearshore permits and not all of the permits are active.

One northern California fishermen, Mr. Lou Ferrari, has been longlining for rockfish for over 45 years. He states that the area where quillback rockfish are most prevalent is between 30 and 55 fathoms. The current Rockfish Conservation Area line in the northern areas from Point Arena to

Shelter Cove is at 40 fathoms. Fishing in this region is actually occurring on the inside edge of the area of most abundance of quillback. Historically, the Rockfish Conservation Areas have been more restrictive in the past, limiting access to quillback rockfish.

Fort Bragg fishermen believe the area north of Point Arena should be included as part of the Oregon assessment. These fishermen strongly believe the Quillback stock is healthy in northern California and nowhere close to overfished.

If this assessment is adopted, it will be devastating (unnecessarily) to the northern California ports.

More on Data Moderate Assessments

The GAP has some concerns that the SSC chose to deem Data Moderate assessments suitable for status determination (SSC endorsed assessments) for an overfishing declaration. These assessments were reviewed outside of the STAR panel process where normally assessments are peer reviewed for a whole week. The GAP believes an hour of review per assessment in an SSC groundfish subcommittee should not be sufficient to deem a stock overfished, or for that matter deem a healthy stock either. Remember that copper rockfish was previously assessed via a data-moderate assessment in 2013 that suggested the stock was at 76 percent of unfished biomass in southern California. The GAP also believes this current process hinders public comment, as these reviews occur during a Council meeting and corresponding results of the assessments are adopted at that same meeting. The most recent data-moderate assessments conducted for copper and quillback were reviewed in a matter of a few hours prior to a Council meeting. The results coming from these assessments are likely to impact fishermen and fishing communities for decades to come! If we are to continue moving forward with these data-moderate assessments in the future, it would seem like that review process needs to change.

The GAP believes there should be immediate action taken to have both California copper rockfish as well as quillback rockfish in California be assessed as full benchmark assessments as soon as possible. The GAP believes incorporation of age data and fishery-dependent indices in a full assessment is warranted given the serious fishery impacts that will likely ensue under a rebuilding plan. The GAP believes that the data-moderate assessments can be used in the interim to help inform precautionary management measures until that time those full assessments can be conducted.

PFMC
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