

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
EMERGENCY ACTION TO CONSIDER A SEASON EXTENSION FOR THE 2021
LIMITED ENTRY FIXED GEAR PRIMARY SABLEFISH FISHERY – FINAL ACTION

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) reviewed the documents under this agenda item, discussed the issue, and offers the following comments regarding an emergency rule to extend the limited entry fixed gear tier program beyond the primary season in 2021. The season end date currently in regulation is October 31; the industry is requesting an extension to December 31, 2021.

The GAP supports the request for the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) to take emergency action that would move the sablefish tiered fishery season and closing date to December 31, 2021, and also extend the incidental halibut retention to the last date allowed by the International Pacific Halibut Commission. The Council supported a similar emergency action in 2020, for which we are very grateful. For a long-term solution to this request, the Council is looking to address the sablefish tiered fishing program through the 5-year mandatory review in the spring of 2022, where an extended season can be permanently examined for this fishery.

For the purpose of section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Steven Act, the phrase “an emergency exists involving any fishing, is defined as a situation that:

- 1) results from recent, unforeseen events or recently discovered circumstance;
- 2) present serious conservation or management problems for the fishing; and
- 3) can be addressed through emergency regulations for which immediate benefits outweigh the rate of advance notice, public comment and deliberative consideration...”

This emergency action request is a continuation of the unforeseen events resulting from the COVID pandemic in 2020 and additional unforeseen events extending into the 2021 season. These unforeseen events have resulted in management problems for the harvesting fleet, processors, and sales managers to catch, process, and market sablefish in a timely manner that fit within the current opening and closing dates. The current tiered season opens April 1st and closes October 31st. The unforeseen events during 2021 have resulted in additional unforeseen circumstances this year for the fleet, processors, and markets to contend with. This justifies a longer operational season for 2021.

During the 2021 season, it was hoped that the vaccinations that were developed for COVID would correct how industry and the sablefish consuming markets adjusted to the pandemic during 2020. Going into the 2021 season many processors have had problems keeping a full contingent of process workers. A number of shoreside processors did not open when the season for sablefish opened. These processors were dealing with unvaccinated workers and keeping their operations safe going into the 2021 season. Vessel owners have experienced sailing with less than full crews in 2021. A typical catcher vessel ships a crew of 5 to 6 people. This year, many boats are fishing a crewperson short of a full crew. The reason for this is multi-faceted markets for sablefish crashed during 2020, resulting prices to the fleet dropping 50 percent. This resulted in depressed crew earnings, and consequently crews were not excited to return to sablefish operations in 2021.

Sablefish prices only rebounded about 15 percent in 2021. Additionally, government assistance programs that became effective during 2021 have reduced the supply of fishing crews and processing personnel. These encumbrances have resulted in delays in harvesting and processing and justify a longer season.

Based on recent import/export information from the Commerce Department, the nation of Japan consumes 60-65 percent of the sablefish exported from the United States. It was hoped going into the 2021 season that nation states like Japan would have vaccinated quicker and allowed their populations to resume retail and restaurant operations. Reuters reports that as of June 28, 2021, only 8 percent of Japan has been vaccinated, documented by the World Trade Organization . The vaccination process had some success but the new Delta variant of COVID has further depressed retail and restaurant operations not only in Japan but domestically, as well. The Delta variant developed during the 2021 season and has set back much of the industry. A lengthened season would help mitigate these developments and maintain supplies and marketing.

Based on landing numbers from PacFin (as of 8/24/2021), the tier fishery has landed 1,473,815 lbs. (668.5 metric tons). There are 2,859,697 lbs. (1292.21 mt) left. There is 66 percent of the harvest still available, representing a considerable amount of economic potential for the coastal communities. The price at the vessel level currently in Bellingham is about \$2.80 to \$3.10 per dressed pound. Ensuring the harvest of the quota would result in \$5 million to \$6 million of fish being delivered to the coastal communities. This would result in a total economic impact of \$15 million to \$18 million for the coastal community economy.

In conclusion, we believe our request meets the three requirements of the Council considering an emergency action. The 2021 effects from the COVID pandemic and the more recent Delta variant were completely unforeseen. These unforeseen events have negatively affected harvesters, processors, and the marketing of sablefish, which has been identified in past Council literature as the most important single species for the fishing industry on the West Coast. The GAP believes taking this emergency action will provide Washington, Oregon, and California economic benefits that otherwise would be foregone due to the season ending date of October 31st.

The GAP [supported a similar request in 2020](#); we also support it this year.

PFMC
9/13/2021