

DEFINING STOCKS AND STOCK COMPLEXES IN THE GROUNDFISH FMP

In our preparation of stock status determinations for groundfish stocks based on the most recent stock assessments, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) identified an issue that affects the continued development of the 2023-2024 groundfish harvest specifications action. We recognize this issue is coming to the Council late in the specification process. As such, we wanted to provide this report which summarizes the issue and provides the Council information on options for a path forward.

What is the issue?

NMFS is not making a determination at this time that quillback rockfish off California is overfished. The overarching issue is that while the stock assessment broke quillback into three new stocks, there has been no determination that quillback should be managed as three separate stocks, taking into account management and policy considerations. Currently, quillback rockfish, like all species in the FMP, are listed as coastwide. However, the 2021 stock assessments separate quillback rockfish into individual units at the state boundary lines that could each have individual status determinations. Should the Council recommend and NMFS approve a decision to manage quillback as three stocks as described in the stock assessment, NMFS will at that point consider determining that a new stock off California is overfished. The status determination of an overfished stock obligates NMFS to notify the Council and that notification starts the two year clock for rebuilding plan implementation. [50 CFR 600.305\(c\)](#).

What should be done?

For the 2023-2024 specifications cycle, the Council should recommend management of quillback rockfish consistent with the best scientific information available in the 2021 stock assessment. However, the Council may choose to address the question of whether to split quillback into three stocks for management purposes as part of the 2023-24 specifications cycle, or in a separate, subsequent action. This separate action might address more comprehensively the identification of groundfish stocks in the FMP, and the process for making that identification.

With regard to the above issue, under the National Standard guidelines, Councils should identify stocks and stock complexes in their FMPs. Currently, the FMP identifies species in the fishery, but does not identify stocks. This is of particular concern for stocks managed at smaller than a coastwide geographic scale. Further, the FMP does not describe the stock complexes used to manage the fishery. For quillback, we recommend the Council consider whether to adopt the recommendation in the 2021 stock assessment to manage the species as three geographically delineated stocks or to take other action, as appropriate. In doing so, the Council should consider the best available scientific information as well as management and policy considerations. The factors described in [50 CFR 600.305\(c\)\(1\)](#) may be helpful in this analysis.

In addition, the Council should initiate action to ensure that stocks that are managed at a scale other than coastwide for the purposes of status determination¹, and other stocks, are clearly identified in the FMP. Additionally, the Council should identify the stocks managed in stock complexes and describe these complexes in the FMP. The majority of these stock and stock complexes are identified in regulations at Tables [1a](#) and 2a of 50 CFR 660, [Subpart C](#), and these descriptions could serve as a baseline for Council consideration.

What options does the Council have?

The issues outlined in this report are fundamental to the on-going management of the Pacific Coast groundfish fisheries. As such, the Council should initiate a process to address them as expediently as possible. We present two possible paths below, but recognize there is the potential for hybrid approaches. Under both of these approaches, the Council can and should continue to enact sub-management unit measures as necessary to address conservation concerns.

Option 1 - Initiate a new action to define stocks and stock complexes in the FMP

The Council could initiate an action separate from the 2023-2024 specifications to begin evaluating how to address these issues surrounding defining stocks in the FMP. This option would give the Council additional time to consider how to define stocks and stock complexes in the FMP and carry out a public process for identifying new stocks prior to managing those new stocks. Units used for stock assessment purposes do not predetermine the definition of stocks for status determination purposes, therefore, the Council should separately evaluate whether the information brought forward through stock assessments should lead to identification of new stocks and stock level status determination criteria. If as an outcome of such an action, the Council were to define quillback rockfish off California as a stock in the FMP, NMFS would reevaluate stock status and proceed accordingly.

NMFS sees the following topics as ones to include during initial considerations (numbered only for reference):

1. Whether species predominantly² occur in federal waters (the exclusive economic zone, or EEZ)
2. Whether some species may be more appropriately categorized as ecosystem component species, rather than stocks in need of conservation and management; and
3. A further evaluation of whether the current stock complex compositions are meeting the intent of the stock complex guidance at [§ 600.310\(d\)\(2\)](#).

¹ May include determinations such as “not overfished”, “overfished”, “subject to overfishing” and “not subject to overfishing”

² As defined in 50 CFR 600.10, *Predominately* means, with respect to fishing in a fishery, that more fishing on a stock or stocks of fish covered by the FMP occurs, or would occur in the absence of regulations, within or beyond the EEZ than occurs in the aggregate within the boundaries of all states off the coasts of which the fishery is conducted.

4. How the overfished stock status units align with the overfishing stock status units.

While this process is on-going, the Council should continue to manage the groundfish fisheries using the 2021 assessments as the best scientific information available. We would encourage the Council to consider management measures to reduce fishing pressure in areas of concern as suggested by the assessments and noted by the SSC³. The Council should also consider measures that would trigger a sorting requirement⁴ to better account for mortality, and potentially consider closing areas of federal waters and/or prohibiting retention in federal waters if necessary. NMFS would encourage the states to consider and implement measures in state waters in a manner that is consistent with the Council's management objectives.

If Option 1 is preferred, we recommend the Council prioritize this action under Workload and New Management Measure Priorities (Agenda Item E.6).

Option 2 - Define stocks and stock complexes as part of the 2023-2024 harvest specifications

The Council could consider an FMP amendment to add stocks and stock complexes to the FMP as part of the 2023-2024 harvest specifications and management measures action. Additionally the Council could recommend management of three quillback stocks as described in the 2021 stock assessment for the 2023-2024 cycle. Such recommendations should take into account those initial considerations 1-4 described above for Option 1.

If the Council were to specifically proceed with this amendment in the current specifications for quillback rockfish off California, then NMFS would reassess the status determination upon approval of the FMP amendment. This timeline would potentially start the rebuilding clock in December 2022/January 2023. As such, the Council would need to develop a rebuilding plan as part of the 2025-2026 specifications. Under this option, we would also recommend the Council consider management measures to address areas of concern from the stock assessments for the 2023-2024 biennium, as described above.

What are the future management process implications under either option?

Once stocks and stock complexes are identified in the FMP, an FMP Amendment would be needed to change a stock definition in the future so that NMFS could make status determinations using those stock level status determination criteria. The Council should consider how to front-load future stock boundary changes prior to when new specifications and management measures are developed and implemented.

³ "keep harvest proportional to biomass across the species range", [Agenda Item E.3.a Supplemental SSC Report 1, November 2021](#)

⁴ Per prohibitions at [50 CFR 660.12\(a\)\(8\)](#), several management measures would trigger a sorting requirement, including but not limited to an ACT or harvest guideline.