

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON STOCK DEFINITIONS-SCOPING

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) received an overview of this agenda item from Mr. John DeVore, Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff, reviewed the materials in the briefing book, and provides this report with information for Council consideration.

Background

In November 2021, the Council adopted a new stock assessment and draft rebuilding analysis of quillback rockfish off of California. Based on the outcome of that assessment, the Council also recommended quillback rockfish off California be removed from the northern and southern Nearshore Rockfish complexes (north and south of 40° 10' N. lat.), and the stock be declared overfished. The Council received a report from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS; [Agenda Item E.3.a, NMFS Report 1, March 2022](#)) in March 2022 that no formal status determinations would be made for quillback rockfish off of California pending an amendment to the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to define stocks (i.e., sub-populations of actively managed groundfish species) for making status determinations. The overarching issue identified by NMFS is that while the new assessment separated quillback rockfish into three assessment areas (i.e., by state), there is no language within the FMP that quillback rockfish should be managed as three separate stocks. NMFS recommended, and the Council decided, to proceed with an amendment to the Pacific Coast Groundfish FMP to define stocks in the FMP. The Council decided to pursue an FMP amendment (proposed Amendment 31) independent of the 2023-24 harvest specifications process to define stocks in the FMP.

Purpose and Need

Since this process will culminate in an FMP amendment(s), the GMT suggests having a well-defined Purpose and Need statement at the onset, which will help clarify what the specific task is and why it is needed, easing confusion on many fronts. It could also help put sideboards on what is included and what is not included in this task.

The overarching questions the Council should consider addressing in the Purpose and Need are:

- What is the Council's objective of this item?
- At what scale, coastwide or area-based, does the Council want to determine status (i.e., overfished/overfishing/etc.) for each species?
- What are the criteria the Council intends to use to define a stock (e.g., movement of adult or/and larval fish, genetics, management, etc.), and do we have sufficient information to inform stock areas?

Definition of a "stock"

To move forward with this analysis, an agreed upon definition of the term "stock" will need to be identified. [Attachment 1](#) contains some details on this topic for consideration, and Table 1 shows an example of how one species (i.e., quillback rockfish) could potentially be defined as one or more stocks. The GMT's understanding is that stocks for which the Council intends to continue managing as coastwide stocks do not need to be revisited as part of this action or formally codified as "coastwide" in the FMP.

Table 1. An example of potential quillback rockfish stock definition options that could be explored, although not an exhaustive list and not necessarily in any order of preference.

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 2
Area Delineation	Coastwide	North of 40° 10' N. lat.	Washington
			Oregon
		South of 40° 10' N. lat.	California

Timeline/Schedule

Since this action will require an FMP amendment, at least a three-meeting Council process is necessary. The GMT reminds the Council that when this item was discussed in March 2022, the Council signaled their intent to take the time necessary to conduct a thorough and thoughtful review of stocks and how to appropriately define them. However, the timeline laid out in [Agenda Item F.4, Attachment 1, June 2022](#) diverges from this intent of taking the time necessary to complete this action. If it is now the Council’s intent to complete this action in time for implementation by January 1, 2025, final action would need to be taken by the June 2024 Council meeting, which coincides with the final preferred alternative (FPA) for 2025-26 Harvest Specifications and Management Measures, in order to allow NMFS sufficient time to complete the rulemaking. Combining stock definitions and harvest specifications concurrently would constrain GMT capacity to consider new management measures that are not a direct response to stock assessment outcomes. The GMT notes that there are short-term needs in regards to status determinations for species that were assessed in 2021 and will be assessed in 2023. By November 2022, the Council will need to identify the stock definitions they intend to use to inform the 2023 assessments. These short-term needs might support a phased approach that allows them to be addressed sooner than the long-term needs (e.g., vulnerability scores, stock complexes) of this agenda item.

In March 2022, NMFS pointed out that, “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 SSC,” ([Agenda Item E.3.a, NMFS Report 1, March 2022](#)). It is the GMT’s understanding that, in the event that a stock assessment produces concerning results for a stock or portion of a stock that has yet to be defined for status determination, the Council can request that the Science Centers provide analyses similar to those used in rebuilding analyses to guide harvest specification decision-making, akin to what is currently being considered for quillback rockfish off of California. This would allow the Council to respond to potential local depletion with precautionary management measures while the stock definitions item is still given thorough review and consideration.

The GMT requests that the preliminary preferred alternative (PPA) and FPA actions not happen at consecutive Council meetings, as this would not allow the GMT and others sufficient time to conduct any additional analysis needed. This is particularly true for the March and April and/or September and November Council meetings due to the short time between those meetings. The

GMT also requests that when scheduling this item, other groundfish items with heavy workload be considered, especially the 2025-2026 biennial harvest specifications and management measures process, meetings, and analysis.

Ad Hoc Workgroup

As we have stated previously ([Agenda Item E.3.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, March 2022](#); [Agenda Item H.2.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, April 2022](#)), the GMT believes that the workload and expertise needed to complete the necessary work to define stocks are beyond the capacity of the GMT alone. Additional expertise will need to be brought in to conduct the necessary analyses, including experts on biology and life history, population genetics, habitat associations, geographic ranges, and productivity and susceptibility analysis. To ensure that the workload is manageable and conducted in a timely manner, the necessary expertise is included, and the various interested groups (GMT, Groundfish Advisory Subpanel [GAP], NMFS West Coast Region [WCR] & Science Centers) are all part of the process, the GMT believes that forming an ad hoc workgroup may be the best path forward. The GMT does not have formal recommendations on the full membership for the workgroup as that is up to the Council to determine, but suggests membership include at least:

- At least one GMT representative from each state
 - Ensuring that there is at least one commercial and one recreational representative
- One commercial and one recreational GAP member
- NMFS WCR policy/regulatory staff
- NMFS Science Center staff, with a variety of expertise (stock assessments, economics, genetics, life history, etc.)
- Tribal representative(s)
- State agency staff with needed expertise, as needed
- Conservation representative(s)
- Representative(s) of the Ecosystem Working Group or someone similar with ecosystem expertise

The GMT thinks that some of the work and associated meeting(s) should be able to be accomplished virtually (via RingCentral or similar platform) to save on travel times and costs. However, one in-person meeting may be necessary to accomplish the tasks and finalize any analysis and reports. The GMT urges the Council to establish this workgroup as soon as possible so that other workload capacity can be considered (e.g., stock assessments and biennial harvest specifications and management measures) and work toward this action can begin.

The GMT considered the possibility of incorporating a workshop in addition to the proposed workgroup and provides the following options and sub-options as possible ways in which the Council could delegate the work required to define stocks in the FMP:

- **Option 1:** Workgroup only
- **Option 2:** Workgroup + Workshop
 - **Sub-option 1:** Use the workshop to scope the topic of stock definitions (and possibly the list of workgroup participants) and the workgroup to work through the topic and take a deeper dive using a more targeted group of experts. Both the workshop and workgroup would need to address short-term and long-term needs.

- **Sub-option 2:** Use the workshop to address short-term needs (i.e., certain stocks being assessed in 2023), and use the workgroup to address long-term needs (e.g., stock complexes or other stock definitions not immediately being assessed).

The GMT notes that Option 1 would still require a consideration of short-term and long-term needs, given the immediacy of 2021 and 2023 assessments pointed out by NMFS. Additionally, consistency should be maintained if separating the work of short-term needs from those of long-term needs (i.e., Sub-option 2). The GMT is not providing a recommendation on these options but merely provides them at this time to help the Council discuss next steps moving forward, given that there are time constraints associated with this topic. If the Council decides that a workshop is appropriate, the Council and/or Council staff should clearly state the objective of the workshop, along with who should participate, how long it should take place, who will facilitate it, and when it should take place. Similar considerations apply to a workgroup approach as well.

Additionally, if thorough consideration is not given and flexibility is not built into defining the 90+ groundfish species as stocks, it is likely that new information (e.g., genetic, movement, management, etc.) suggesting that a new stock delineation is needed would require another FMP amendment. FMP amendments require a three-meeting process and can involve significant workload by the GMT, Council staff, NMFS, and others. Therefore, the GMT suggests that the form and format by which stocks are defined incorporate adaptability that accounts for the possibility of range shifts, new genetic information, and management changes.

Scoping Document Questions

Attachment 1 contains a non-exhaustive list of scoping questions. The GMT did not attempt to answer them at this time but appreciates the chance to consider them as we continue to think through this action. We anticipate that those questions and others that come up will be addressed by the ad hoc workgroup, or whomever is tasked with conducting the work.

Soufín Shark

The GMT reviewed the public comment letters concerning the status of soupfin shark as an ecosystem component species and considers it one of the many things that may be taken up as this process proceeds. However, we do note that soupfin sharks are largely incidentally caught by sectors not managed under the Groundfish FMP (i.e., incidental open access sectors), limiting the Council's ability to manage those catches (Table 3, [Agenda Item F.4, Attachment 1, June 2022](#)).

PFMC
06/10/22