

Whiting Mothership Cooperative – Inseason Report

The Whiting Mothership Cooperative (WMC) provides the following report on the 2023 spring mothership sector whiting fishery, along with the Cooperative's management plans to continue to minimize non-whiting species encounters this fall.

The WMC was formed in 2011 by the owners of the 37 trawl limited entry catcher vessel permits endorsed for operation in the Mothership sector of the Pacific whiting fishery. Following transfers of MSCV catch history assignments (CHA), there are currently 34 endorsed catcher vessel permits. Each year, approximately 15 – 20 catcher vessels actively participate in the fishery, many of whom have been independently owned for multiple generations. These boats leave their home ports in Oregon and Washington and deliver hake at-sea to one of the six motherships licensed to operate in the sector. Traditionally the fishery has operated seasonally with a spring fishery in May and June, and a fall fishery in September and October that occurs once the B-Season pollock fishery in the Bering Sea concludes.

A majority of WMC decisions are made by the Board of Directors, where Mr. Nate Stone serves as president. Ms. Kristin McQuaw is contracted to manage the Cooperative. The WMC also retains Sea State, Inc. as its monitoring agent. Each mothership carries two observers, while the catcher vessels utilize either electronic monitoring or carry an observer, ensuring that the fishery is 200% monitored. All WMC members provide confidentiality waivers to allow Sea State, Inc. to access NMFS Observer data and location data from VMS providers in real time. Sea State, Inc. queries the observer database on a daily basis to provide daily catch reports to all WMC members, processors and the Manager. The WMC also holds an information-sharing agreement with the Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative (PWCC) and the Shorebased Whiting Cooperative (SWC) so that we may share real-time bycatch data and any areas to avoid.

The Cooperative's Board of Directors and membership met twice in preparation for the 2023 fishery opener. During these meetings, the Board approved the WMC's bycatch agreement which is a legally binding agreement signed by the membership and all fishery participants. The agreement details the bycatch mitigation tools in place and penalties for breaching the contract. The Board also approved rate-based thresholds for the non-whiting species, to establish our movement rules. The cooperative has also developed a series of seasonal pools to further sub-divide bycatch access across the year and protect fall participants. The seasonal pools add another layer of protection to reduce the likelihood that the bycatch rate exceeds whiting catch and prevent the set-asides from being exceeded. For the 2023 fishery, the Board also approved 20 pre-season area closures and 11 advisory areas; the closures were shared with the CP sector. These are specific locations where historical data has shown an increased probability of encountering rockfish or Chinook during certain times of the year. In addition to these pre-set closed and advisory areas, the bycatch agreement provides both the Coop Manager and the Monitoring Agent with automatic hot spot closure authority, allowing them to close an in-season bycatch hot spot without consulting the Board. Other tools we utilize for bycatch management include conducting test tows when moving to a new area, platform standdown rules when a fleet has exceeded their share of bycatch, required use of salmon excluders, and restrictions on night fishing. The management structure and the mitigation tools referenced above were in place to start the 2023 season.

Four out of the six motherships participated in the fishery this spring, which opened on May 1. One of the motherships and the catcher vessels delivering to it were on the grounds May 2, the next mothership processor began fishing on May 10, followed by the other two fleets on May 15. Whiting catch per unit effort (CPUE) started out strong, but unfortunately declined as the spring season progressed. Fishing ultimately wrapped up early in the first week of June, with fleets citing the poor whiting CPUE not being worth the fuel costs and the risk of potentially increased bycatch encounters. The WMC’s whiting, Chinook and rockfish catch relative to the set-asides for the spring fishery are shown in Table 1 below. 68 out of the 460 Chinook intercepted by the Mothership fleet were caught between May 1 and May 15.

Table 1. Displays the at-sea set-asides and the mothership sector’s catch from 5/1/23 through 7/28/23, as reported by PacFIN. The 11,000 Chinook shared by all whiting sectors is shown below in place of a set-aside.

	MS Whiting (mt)	Canary (mt)	DKB (mt)	POP (mt)	Widow (mt)	Yellowtail (mt)	Chinook (#)
At-sea set-aside	91,247	36	76.4	300	476	320	11,000
MS catch	14,135	0.43	7.85	5.77	18.85	29.94	460
% of the set-aside caught	15.5%	1.2%	10.3%	1.9%	4.0%	9.4%	4.2%

While the fleet did not encounter any bycatch lightning strikes, the WMC vessels made significant efforts to keep incidental catches below the sector’s proportion of the set-asides. Under WMC bycatch rules, mothership fleets were forced to move 25 times this spring – 15 of these moves were for Chinook and 10 were for rockfish. Movement rules are triggered when a Mothership and the fleet of catcher vessels delivering to it exceed the predetermined threshold for at least one of the constraining non-whiting species. For example, some fleets moved on account of catching a total of four Chinook salmon in a single day, based on the amount of whiting simultaneously caught. It’s economically costly and inefficient to move away from good whiting fishing. One of the WMC fleets was also forced to stand down for 24 hours after catching a total of 3.6mt of Darkblotched. Due to the cooperative’s pool structure and fleet rates, the 3.6mt caught by four catcher vessels across five days was enough to trigger a stand down penalty. As listed above, the WMC also utilized area closures, night fishing prohibitions and salmon excluders to reduce incidental catch this spring. It is highly likely that the WMC could have caught substantially more whiting this spring had these rules not been in place, however this would be at the probable tradeoff of increased incidental catch.

At the conclusion of the spring fishery, the WMC initiated an inter-coop meeting with PWCC to reflect on the spring and further discuss how we might co-manage under the shared set-asides and Chinook hard cap. The WMC looks to continue these conversations in preparation for the fall fishery.

The WMC expects one mothership platform to begin in August, and others to join in September. The bycatch mitigation tools and management structure used in the spring remain in place for the fall fishery. The WMC continues to operate under its pool structure, with individual platform sub-allocations and stand down penalties. Objective movement rules, night fishing

restrictions, salmon excluder requirements, pre-season area closures and the hot spot closure authority provided to the Manager and Monitor also remain in place. In previous years, the WMC has demonstrated its ability to respond quickly and effectively to lightning strikes. Should an elevated bycatch event occur this fall, the Cooperative's fleetwide communication, near-real time data processing and management structure will support its ability to promptly take action where needed.

The WMC recognizes it is a privilege to operate under set-asides and an approved salmon mitigation plan. The Cooperative remains committed to continue responsibly managing our sector under the guidelines provided by the Council and NMFS.