

## CLARIFICATIONS IN TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE GROUND FISH STOCK ASSESSMENT REVIEW PROCESS FOR 2025-2026

In review of Agenda Item F.3 Attachments 3 and 4, the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the groundfish stock assessment review process for 2025-2026, National Marine Fisheries Service Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) and Pacific Fishery Management Council staff propose the following clarifications regarding the definition and general process for catch-only projections and extended projections. The intent is to clarify the current process, including relevant details, terminology, and timelines aligned with the stock assessment process. Draft language provided by the Groundfish Management Team and adopted by the Council for consideration ([Agenda Item F.3.a Supp GMT Report 1 March 2024](#)) regarding removal assumptions was incorporated into the TOR for stock assessments in Section 5.4 of Attachment 3 and 4, which is also proposed in Section 8 for catch-only projections below.

The following are excerpted sections with proposed clarification edits in **red-line**.

### **Excerpt Section: 2. Introduction**

There are several distinct types of assessment products, which are subject to different review procedures.

- **Catch-only or catch and climate-only projection:** In some cases, only recent fisheries catch or catch and climate information are added to an existing, approved stock assessment model to generate catch-only or catch and climate-only projections for the stock. The latter case is applicable only to benchmark assessments that include a relationship between environmental variables and environmental parameters, in which case the projections should consider these relationships.
  - **Catch-only projections are commonly considered when the following criteria are met:**
    - catches are below the annual catch limit (ACL),
    - future ACLs are appreciably decreasing due to full attainment assumptions and
    - future ACLs are anticipated to constrain fishery sector(s).

The start year for time-varying sigma (i.e. the sigma that increases through time) remains based on the year of the previous assessment and is not “reset” (e.g. is not changed).
  - Generally, the Council recommends the species for catch-only or catch and climate-only projections during the June Council meeting (in even years) during the stock assessment prioritization agenda item.
    - If errors are identified during the development of harvest specifications and management measures, the SSC/GFSC may request a catch-only projection to correct them and provide updated projections. This situation may occur outside of a Council meeting and requests to the STAT will be coordinated by PFMC staff, in collaboration with the SSC GFSC and GMT.

- Catch-only and catch and climate-only projections are conducted in the spring and summer months of odd years (assessment season) and reviewed in the late summer and fall by the ~~relevant~~ SSC Groundfish subcommittee ~~of the SSC~~ rather than by a STAR panel. ~~The review of catch-only and catch and climate-only projections for groundfish stocks should take place by September to allow incorporation of new total catch estimates in the Groundfish Expanded Mortality Multi-year (GEMM) product.~~
- Catch-only projection documents are short, but still require careful review, including ensuring catches are correctly distributed among fleets in fixed and forecasted years. Improved catch-only projection reviews would require a longer time for review, with additional metrics presented, and/or specifically assigned reviewers. The GFSC Chair and NMFS should make plans that ensure sufficient review.
- In contrast, extended projections do not update assumed removals and only extend existing projections for informing future harvest specifications. These are conducted during the summer months of odd years when requested in writing by the SSC Staff Officer and reviewed by the SSC or SSC Groundfish subcommittee before or during the September Council meeting. The start year for time-varying sigma (i.e. the sigma that increases through time) remains based on the year of the previous assessment and is not “reset” (e.g. is not changed).

### Excerpt Section: 8. Catch-Only and Catch and Climate-Only Projections

In some circumstances, a STAT may be asked to produce an update assessment using only recent fisheries catch or catch and climate information to generate stock projections. Assessments of this type do not include the most recent survey abundance index estimates. Projections with only catches revised will have no new data to inform the stock-recruitment relationship in the model. Projections with catches and climate may have new data to inform the deviations around the stock recruitment relationship in the model. Additional requests can also be made to the STAT if the amount of uncertainty associated with assessment results (e.g., due to highly variable recruitment) should be evaluated further. All projections become more uncertain with increasing the projection period. Catch-only and catch and climate-only projections are initially reviewed by the ~~relevant~~ SSC **Groundfish** subcommittee, then subsequently reviewed by the full SSC.

Catch-only projections update the assumed previous removals to actual catches from the Groundfish Expanded Mortality Multiyear (GEMM). The GMT is tasked with allocating GEMM catches to fleets within the assessment model, estimating the final year of catches that are not yet available, and specifying removal assumptions for the current biennium. The default assumptions for specifying removals in projections and decision tables for all subsequent years is to assume full attainment of the ABC (or ACL when appropriate).

In the event in-season adjustments result in fishery management measures that differ significantly from GMT catch assumptions, a written request for reconsideration may be submitted to the GMT. Requests to revise catch assumptions to values that differ from the GMT provided values should differ by an amount such that they would have a demonstrable impact in how the fishery is managed compared to the GMT estimates. A rationale for the differences and

details on the methodology for derived values should be provided to the GMT in writing to inform review of the request.

Requested revisions to the catch assumptions in the first two years of the projection period should be submitted in writing two weeks before the September Council meeting to PFMC staff for GMT review assuming that the catch-only projection documentation will be in the advanced briefing book (roughly four weeks before). If the revisions to catch assumptions are approved by the GMT, the SSC Staff Officer will coordinate with the STAT team to determine whether the revised projections can be accommodated with sufficient time for full SSC review (i.e., two weeks in advance of the November Council meeting).

~~Full ACL or harvest guideline attainment should be assumed for the catch projections in the absence of a strong rationale from the GMT that an alternative assumption is appropriate. Recent average catch distribution among fleets should be used for projections unless the GMT requests an alternative distribution.~~

In contrast, extended projections do not update assumed removals and only extend a current set of existing projections to inform future harvest specifications. These are conducted during the summer months of odd years when requested in writing by Council staff and reviewed by the SSC or SSC Groundfish subcommittee before or during the September Council meeting. The time-varying sigma is not reset (e.g. the start year of the sigma increases remains the year of the previous assessment).

PFMC  
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