

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON FINAL STOCK ASSESSMENT PLAN AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

Drs. Chantel Wetzel and Jim Hastie, Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) briefed the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) on proposals for stock assessment priorities and scheduling as well as additional considerations related to assessment frequency and capacity.

Selection of stocks to assess in 2025

It will be possible to conduct benchmark assessments for six species (or area models) during 2025, and one or two update assessments as part of a University of Washington graduate class mentored by NWFSC staff. Any data-moderate stock assessments that use age-composition data will require review by a Stock Assessment Review (STAR) Panel and would need to be accommodated within the STAR Panel schedule. Dr. Wetzel outlined two potential schedules for when the STAR Panels could take place given constraints related to data availability and the need to ensure that post-STAR assessment documents are reviewed by the SSC Groundfish Subcommittee (GFSC) and made available for the advanced Briefing Book deadline for the September Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting (pages 12 and 13 of Agenda Item F.3 Attachment 1). The SSC agrees with the NWFSC that option 1 (STAR panels in three of the weeks of 19 May, 2 June or 23 June, and 14 July) would be preferable given the need for adequate preparation time for the STAR Panels.

If the Council opts for a May STAR Panel, there are only a few stock assessments that could be reviewed owing to the availability of data. Specifically, a May STAR Panel could review full benchmark assessments for yellowtail rockfish north and south of 40° 10' N. Lat. If yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N. Lat. is an update assessment, full benchmark assessments for yellowtail rockfish south of 40° 10' N. Lat. and California quillback rockfish would be possible. There are many age structures for yellowtail rockfish south of 40° 10' N. Lat. that have yet to be processed. The availability of this data may be important for this stock given the past inability to conduct an assessment. It is currently unclear whether sufficient samples could be aged for yellowtail rockfish south of 40° 10' N. Lat. by the data deadline for a May STAR Panel.

The SSC considered the species identified for potential benchmark assessments for the 2025 assessment cycle.

Species the SSC continues to recommend for assessments during 2025

- California quillback rockfish. A concern with this assessment was the inability to effectively characterize growth and some new age-length data are available. The characterization of growth for younger fish will remain a challenge given that the age data for young fish will remain limited. Remotely operated vehicle (ROV) research is ongoing to provide indices or absolute estimates of abundance for use in the assessment.
- Rougheye and blackspotted rockfish. It should be possible to assess this species group as a benchmark assessment, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) will conduct the ageing. Given the need for ageing, the assessment of this species group should occur towards the end of the 2025 cycle.

- Sablefish. The assessment of this species should occur towards the end of the 2025 cycle given the need to conduct a substantial amount of ageing.
- Yellowtail rockfish. The northern population was last assessed in 2017, and has a target frequency of four years, so this population is overdue for assessment. There has not yet been an assessment for the southern stock above a category 3 (data poor) model, despite the considerable importance of this species for commercial and recreational fisheries in the southern area.

Species the SSC recommends for assessments during 2027 and onwards

- Chilipepper rockfish. The assessment of this species should be a full benchmark assessment. The SSC recommends that this assessment be conducted during 2027 so that there is sufficient time to age the available structures (either using FT-NIRS or conventional methods).
- English sole. Catch attainment of this species is very low at present, indicating that there is little need for an assessment during 2025.
- Yelloweye rockfish. This species is projected to be rebuilt by 2028. This assessment should be deferred to increase the likelihood of accurately estimating whether the stock is rebuilt. When scheduled, there should be consideration of conducting an update of the previous assessment, rather than a benchmark. If this species is assessed in 2025, it may still be necessary to conduct an assessment (benchmark or update) in 2027 if the stock is not estimated to be rebuilt.
- Petrale sole. The available data do not indicate changes in abundance, and the SSC agrees with the NWFSC that this species should not be assessed during 2025. Deferring the assessment would allow for further work to be conducted on the environmental index sensitivity, as the index presented within the 2023 assessment needs further refinement.

If the Council selects fewer than six species-area combinations that require STAR Panel review from the current list for 2025, it could conduct assessments of redbanded rockfish and/or greenspotted rockfish, both of which have relatively high catch attainment and sufficient structures available for ageing. Greenspotted rockfish was last assessed as a two-area model.

Stock assessment capacity issues

There is an increasing demand for stock assessments to meet target assessment frequencies. The ability to satisfy this demand is constrained by a lack of stock assessment scientists, the increasing number of areas for individual species, and the complex review process that includes STAR Panels, and GFSC and SSC review. The SSC recommends that the Council initiate a process to review and perhaps modify the aims of the STAR process in terms of the amount of time spent on review relative to the number of assessments conducted each year and to consider whether greater use of update assessments could enable the Council to meet target frequencies for assessments with available assessment staff capacity.

There would be value in understanding how other Councils conduct and review stock assessments and how they make use of their Center for Independent Experts (CIE) reviewers and of update assessments. Some other Councils make much greater use of what are essentially updated assessments compared to the Pacific Council, which increases the number of new assessments conducted each assessment cycle. Of the species identified for stock assessment during 2025 or

2027, update assessments could be performed for widow, yellowtail (north), and yelloweye rockfishes.

The SSC could also evaluate and reconsider how management advice for stocks that have not been assessed for more than ten years is provided and explore the use of methods that involve adjusting Overfishing Levels based on changes in survey indices of abundance or other approaches.

Terms of Reference

Only the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Groundfish Stock Assessment Review Process (Agenda Item F.3, Attachments 3 and 4) was updated this year. Most of the changes are editorial, with the major changes relating to how species with multiple areas are assessed, the expectations for how meetings are chaired, involvement of the Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) and Groundfish Management Team (GMT) in STAR Panels, the process for conducting projections after assessments are adopted by the Council, and deadlines for the data used in assessments.

The SSC supports inclusion of the proposed revised text on catch-only or catch-and-climate-only projections (Agenda Item F.3, Supplementary Attachment 7) in the TOR, except that the text “Catch-only projections update the assumed previous removals to actual catches from the Groundfish Expanded Mortality Multiyear (GEMM)” should be modified to “Catch-only projections update the assumed previous removals to actual catches from the Groundfish Expanded Mortality Multiyear (GEMM) and other sources”. The SSC notes that Agenda Item F.3, Supplementary Attachment 7 relates to the post-assessment process, which is currently not well documented. Consequently, there would be value in better documenting this process and for crafting the harvest specifications document.

PFMC
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