

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2025 PACIFIC WHITING FISHERY
UNDER THE U.S./CANADA AGREEMENT AND 2025 FISHERY

Pacific Whiting Treaty

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) recommends the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) encourage the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Joint Management Committee (JMC) to schedule future JMC and Advisory Panel (AP) meeting dates so that they occur before the March Council meeting, in order to allow for the Council to make timely recommendations in the case where the JMC fails to reach agreement on a coastwide total allowable catch (TAC). Moreover, the GAP and industry members are concerned with any outcome that could cause a delay in the whiting fishery opening on May 1, and we appreciate NMFS efforts to open the fishery on time.

Expectations for the 2025 At-Sea Whiting Fishery

With respect to Council expectations for the 2025 at-sea whiting fishery and set-asides, the GAP discussed (1) at-sea set-aside management and expectations, (2) Council data reporting, and (3) annual at-sea cooperative reports. The GAP would like to acknowledge that while there is one at-sea processor seat on the GAP that represents both the mothership (MS) and catcher-processor (CP) sectors, no other CP sector representatives participated in the GAP discussion. The GAP recommends and encourages CP representatives to attend and participate in future GAP and Council meetings to provide public input and help build a better understanding of these complex issues.

At-Sea Set-Aside Management and Expectations

The GAP discussed recent incidental catch in the CP sector that led to exceedance of the 2023 darkblotched rockfish, shortspine thornyhead, and sablefish set-asides and the 2024 shortspine thornyhead and sablefish set-asides. The GAP acknowledges that in these cases, there was room under the Annual Catch Limits (ACL). However, this is not always the case, and GAP members believe that the Council should clarify that each sector is expected to make every effort to manage to their pro rata share of the at-sea set-asides in 2025, particularly for species like canary and shortspine thornyhead where there is currently no ACL buffer in the system and there is a potential risk to other sectors. The GAP urges the Council to clarify this expectation.

MS sector participants from the GAP and public expressed how important at-sea set-aside management is to their operations. They are concerned that frequent exceedance of set-asides could erode Council trust in set-aside management and/or cooperative management, which undermines the work that has been done for two decades to build transparency and trust in cooperative management. Bottom trawl representatives expressed concern that frequent exceedance of set-asides could lead to future arguments that the at-sea set-aside amounts should be increased, thereby reducing the shoreside individual fishing quota allocations. Other trawl and

non-trawl GAP representatives expressed worry about the potential for impacts to the groundfish fishery should the set-asides be exceeded for the fishery's most constraining species (i.e. shortspine and canary) and the potential implications to those sectors in order to keep total mortality below a harvest specification, especially if it occurred between Council meetings with limited actions that could be taken by NMFS or the states.

The concerns presented here echo prior GAP and Council discussions and public comment that occurred at the June 2023¹, September 2023², April 2024³, and June 2024⁴ Council meetings. At the June 2023 meeting, the Council requested that each whiting cooperative bring an inseason report to the September 2023 meeting. At the September 2023 meeting, the Council encouraged the sectors to work collaboratively over the winter on an intercooperative agreement, including preseason and inseason measures for avoidance of incidental catch, sector guidelines, and data sharing, and provide an update to the Council prior to the 2024 whiting season. Sector representatives worked on the development of an intercooperative agreement that ultimately was not able to be reached, but resulted in the implementation of communication guidelines which were put into effect for the 2024 whiting season. At the June 2024 meeting, Council members discussed the need to agendaize fishery expectations and vessel-level reporting for the at-sea cooperatives, which is occurring at this March meeting.

The GAP continues to support at-sea set-asides as the most appropriate tool to manage non-whiting species for the at-sea sectors, and we encourage the sectors to work together to maintain the integrity of this management strategy. Hard caps or allocations are not appropriate for the at-sea sectors, and in general the GAP supports removing boxes and providing flexibility for all fisheries, as long as that flexibility does not harm other sectors.

Council Data Reporting

For data reporting to the Council, the GAP recommends that all Council and Groundfish Management Team (GMT) reports continue to display MS and CP sector catch values in separate columns (for example, in inseason reporting), as has been standard practice. In 2024, this was prevented because only two MS processors participated, and Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) confidentiality rules prevented 2024 MS sector catch from being reported in the PacFIN whiting report and Council-related documents (for example, see [Agenda Item I.6.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, November 2024](#)). The GAP received an update that the two MS processors agreed to sign confidentiality waivers to allow 2024 MS data to be shown in Council and PacFIN reporting (such as the [PacFIN Whiting Report](#)), as well as in United States/Canada Pacific Whiting Treaty

¹ [Agenda Item H.8.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, June 2023](#); [Agenda Item H.8, Inseason Public Comment and Council Discussion, June 2023](#)

² [Agenda Item G.8, Situation Summary, September 2023](#); [Agenda Item G.8, Attachment 2, Whiting Mothership Cooperative Inseason Report, September 2023](#); [Agenda Item G.8, Attachment 3, Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative Inseason Report, September 2023](#); [Agenda Item G.8.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, September 2023](#); [Agenda Item G.8.a, Supplemental GAP Report 1, September 2023](#); [Agenda Item G.8, Inseason Public Comment and Council Discussion, September 2023](#)

³ [Agenda Item F.3, Inseason Public Comment and Council Discussion, April 2024](#)

⁴ [Supplemental Information Report 4, Whiting Mothership Cooperative Annual Report, June 2024](#); [Supplemental Information Report 5, Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative Annual Report, June 2024](#); [Agenda Item C.7, Future Workload Council Discussion, June 2024](#)

documents. The GAP appreciates the release of this data, and if three or more MS processors do not participate in the MS fishery in 2025, the GAP encourages similar confidentiality waivers to be signed in the future.

In addition, the GAP recommends that Council and GMT reports display the at-sea set-aside amounts in columns pro rata to the MS and CP whiting allocations (41.38 percent to MS and 58.62 percent to CP), to compare each sector's catch against, rather than only showing the total set-aside value. While there would be no change to the management of the at-sea set-aside, displaying the pro rata portions for each sector would be informative to Council and advisory bodies and also to help set expectations (as recommended by the GAP above).

Annual At-Sea Cooperative Reports

With respect to the annual at-sea whiting cooperative reports for the 2024 fishery [see the Whiting Mothership Cooperative Report ([Supplemental Information Report 3, March 2025](#)) and the Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative Report ([Supplemental Information Report 5, March 2025](#))], both at-sea cooperatives have previously reported individual vessel-level catch, which is an annual reporting requirement in regulation (bolded for emphasis):

Mothership annual cooperative report requirements at [50 CFR 660.113\(c\)\(3\)\(ii\)](#):

(3) Annual co-op report. The designated co-op manager for the mothership co-op must submit an annual report to NMFS and the Council by March 17 each year, before a co-op permit is issued for that year. The annual co-op report will contain information about the previous year's fishery, including:

...

*(ii) The mothership cooperative's actual retained and discarded catch of Pacific whiting, salmon, Pacific halibut, rockfish, groundfish, and other species on a **vessel-by-vessel basis***

Catcher-processor annual cooperative report requirements at [50 CFR 660.113\(d\)\(3\)\(ii\)](#):

(3) Annual co-op report. The designated co-op manager for the C/P co-op must submit an annual report to NMFS and the Council by March 17 each year, before a co-op permit is issued for that year. The annual co-op report will contain information about the previous year's fishery, including:

...

*(ii) The C/P cooperative's actual retained and discarded catch of Pacific whiting, salmon, Pacific halibut, rockfish, groundfish, and other species on a **vessel-by-vessel basis***

These provisions were included in the regulations for at-sea sectors because the use of cooperative management was novel for the Council, and the Council wanted to ensure transparency at an individual vessel level would be available to the public.

The GAP understands that the regulatory requirement to report at the individual vessel level is inconsistent with Magnuson-Stevens Act confidentiality rules, which came to light in 2024. Despite this inconsistency, the Whiting Mothership Cooperative signed waivers with the Council to disclose and post the vessel-level data as part of their 2023 and 2024 annual reports. In contrast, the Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative (CP cooperative) did not disclose their data at the

vessel level in the Briefing Book, although this data is always available at the vessel level to fishery managers. The GAP reflected on the Council discussion on this topic at its June 2024 meeting⁵. The GAP encourages the Council to reiterate its desire to have both sectors report at the vessels level in order to provide transparency to the public regarding the performance of the fishery and its participants.

Summary of GAP Recommendations

- Encourage NMFS and the JMC to schedule future JMC/AP meeting dates so that they occur prior to the March Council meeting
- Encourage and support NMFS in making every effort to open the whiting season on May 1st, 2025
- Clarify the expectation that each at-sea sector make every effort to manage to their pro rata share of the at-sea set-asides in 2025, particularly for species like canary and shortspine thornyhead where there is no buffer in the system
- Maintain the at-sea set-aside management strategy for the future
- Reaffirm that Council and GMT reports continue to separate MS and CP sector catch data and descriptions
- Add MS and CP pro rata share of the total at-sea set-asides (41.38 percent MS and 58.62 percent CP) to Council and GMT reports to inform Council and advisory bodies and help set expectations

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⁵ [Agenda Item C.7, Future Workload Council Discussion, June 2024](#)