

Process review suggestions on the 2025 assessment cycle from the NWFSC and SWFSC stock assessment teams

January 12, 2026

The following bullet points outline high level elements that the assessment teams from the Northwest and Southwest Fisheries Science Centers recommend for consideration by the Scientific and Statistical Committee when planning for future assessment cycles. The document is outlined in three main parts and provides a summary of what we think worked well this past assessment cycle, topics that we consider should be prioritized for changes in future assessment cycles, and then large-scale topics that may involve more systemic changes in the current process. We conclude with comments and observations from the last assessment cycle that although smaller in scope than those in the three main sections are nonetheless important, and should be achievable without changes to the Terms of Reference for Groundfish Stock Assessments.

Things that went well

- Increased communication from all parties. For example, attendance and engagement from industry at pre-assessment workshops was up, and the GMT provided STATs with narrative text about the fishery. The PPMC and Science Centers re-prioritized a well-received public stock assessment session off of the Council floor (the Saturday afternoon assessment session in September) where STATs presented overviews of the assessments. STATs innovated their communications of assessment results through both the at-a-glances and engagement at the Saturday afternoon session. STAR panels went smoothly, were respectful, and made reasonable requests of STATs

High priorities for improvement

1. **Reconsider specifications for update assessments and how they are prioritized, reviewed, and used for management.** Update assessments serve an important role in the suite of assessment options, but the SSC has inconsistently subjected update assessments that recommend large management changes to additional review (e.g., 2023 sablefish versus 2025 widow rockfish update assessments). In addition, update assessments do not significantly reduce the workload for the STAT compared to a benchmark assessment because the amount of time spent finalizing data (the bulk of STAT time) is similar, and the restrictions on changes can be burdensome. Below, we present a number of possible improvements to the update assessment process. The list should not be considered prescriptive nor is it exhaustive.

- a. Reviewing update assessments within a single-day GFSC meeting does not seem to provide sufficient time to address even minor issues found during review. If these meetings were scheduled over two days, that could provide additional time for specific issues to be investigated before deciding whether to adopt the assessment. Similarly, scheduling GFSC review, SSC review, and council adoption in a single week makes it difficult to adapt to any unexpected circumstances without major impacts to the process.
 - b. Develop overarching guidelines on when an update assessment is and is not appropriate to conduct. Recommendations of STAR panel reports can be one source of information, but other factors to consider include the age of the benchmark assessment, recent changes in fishery dynamics, recent catch levels, and recent patterns in survey index and length data. The long intervals between assessments for many species reduces the feasibility and utility of update assessments in many cases.
 - c. Consider developing a pathway where, during the process of conducting an update assessment, if it meets certain criteria (e.g., large changes in OFLs under standard harvest control rules), the update could be cancelled and a benchmark assessment scheduled in two years. This should be applied symmetrically to both optimistic and pessimistic changes in perceived stock status and scale.
 - d. Clarify a default for what data should be reanalyzed versus appended to an existing model for an update assessment, and factors to consider when making that decision.
 - e. Consider advantages and disadvantages of how other regions (e.g., Alaska, Northeast U.S.) produce and review update-like assessments.
2. **Reconsider and rewrite the TOR description of assessment reports:** The TOR has been repeatedly revised across many cycles. This has led both the TOR and our assessment reports to become excessively long and more difficult to understand than necessary. Revision is no longer appropriate, and the TOR should be started anew beginning with the question “what should we be providing for each level of assessment?” NMFS has begun national efforts to standardize stock assessments across the country that could help inform this. Specific suggestions include (but are not limited to):
- a. Shortening and reevaluating the executive summary. The success of the two-page “at-a-glance” documents suggests that the executive summary is not working as intended.
 - b. Eliminate either appendix A or appendix C, as it is difficult to maintain internal consistency between them.
 - c. The risk table pilot was productive and intentionally not overly proscribed. As this effort moves forward, more clear guidelines for STATs about elements to go in the risk table along with criteria for scoring, as well as where ecosystem information belongs in the report would be helpful. The GFSC should also develop guidance on ways to compare across assessments to aid their final scoring and ensure consistency.
 - d. Consider whether the stock assessment report is ultimately a document used for the review of science or implementation of science in management. If the latter,

all minutiae of model fits, convergence, etc. could be included in an appendix for reviewers. Attempting to fulfill both purposes within the main document led to some of the document bloat and associated challenges in finding important pieces of information.

- e. Include forecasts in a separate document to speed up finalization of the documents. Or, alternatively, clarify that any additional forecasts using alternative harvest control rules do not need to be included in the stock assessment report .
 - f. The best practices document has also become quite long and a parallel effort to streamline that document should be undertaken.
- 3. Adhere to data deadlines:** The intention of the 12/1 data deadline was to make all non-terminal year data besides unread otoliths available at the start of the assessment process to leave more time for assessment teams to conduct model explorations.
- a. A number of STATs reminded data stewards of the new 12/1 data deadline and still received historical catch reconstructions near or after the 12-week data deadline.
 - b. Even if the STAT declines to use data received after the deadline, it is common for the STAR panel or GFSC to request it later be added in (as occurred with widow). This leads the STAT to accept data after the data deadline, which in turn sends a message to data stewards that the deadlines are not important.

Ideas for big systemic change

- The PFMC has used the STAR panel process, more or less in its current form, for over two decades. During that time, other regions in the U.S. and elsewhere have explored alternative approaches to reviewing and adopting stock assessments. The PFMC Stock Assessment Review and Adoption Process Evaluation being undertaken provides an opportunity to rethink how assessments are reviewed and adopted. Several ideas at NWFSC and SWFSC to consider include:
 - Research assessments conducted and reviewed outside of the typical odd-year stock assessment and review process. This could mean more time to explore data and models and arrive at stable models that are also more predictable for updates. It may mean an extra year between the terminal data year and adoption of the model in management, but with the goal of having assessments that could be updated, with less effort, multiple times. The intent is not for more benchmark assessments overall, but different timing of some of them. The benefit of research assessments for future updates would be felt most strongly if update assessments are conducted more frequently. Waiting 8-12 years before reexamining data will make many of even the most stable models difficult to update.
 - Consider potential benefits and costs of separating a STAR Panel into 1) a desk review preceding the in-person meeting (comments returned w/ sufficient time before panel meets, e.g. 2 weeks), and 2) a shorter (2.5-3 days) in-person review. Expanding review into two phases would lengthen the review period so would require broader changes before it is feasible.

- Ensure both STATs for a given STAR panel present and receive requests on the first day of the STAR panel. Ensuring both teams have a full 5-day week for the STAR panel could reduce STAT stress and burnout. Achieving this would likely require more clearly proscribing what content should be presented (and what content should *not* be presented), noting that many methods like index standardization have become more uniform across teams in recent years.
- Reports from the consistent CIE reviewer the past several cycles contain other good ideas for improving the review process and should be reexamined.
- Some stocks do not need a full assessment. For example, index-based methods could be adequate for low attainment species that have informative fishery-independent indices, such as many flatfish species (e.g., Dover sole).
- The biennial stock assessment prioritization process to decide which species will be assessed makes it difficult to plan stock assessment, life-history, and ecosystem research and data collection on medium-term time timelines. Moving to more of a predefined assessment schedule and rotation across species within the groundfish FMP would provide increased lead time for research to be conducted to improve assessments and would reduce the interval between assessments for many species. This approach would also reduce the existing Council and Science Center workload that is currently used for the stock assessment prioritization process.

Other recommendations:

- We would love to hear from more voices on the GFSC during reviews, and we believe increased input would improve our assessment products overall. We hope that everyone on the GFSC feels comfortable sharing their ideas.
- We were encouraged that, in many cases, there was an increase in the voices heard during the pre-assessment data workshops. During this past cycle, the fishing community again expressed a strong desire to have their perspectives incorporated. The data workshops are one opportunity for this, and we are also open to other ways to continue to improve participation and engagement.
- STAR panels should not feel a need to fill a full week if they are satisfied with the models and data. If STAR panel members and STATs end early in the planned week, there are always a host of community activities that can be done (STAR panel report, finalization of assessment documents, etc.) with the available scheduled time.
- While we are glad that the two-page “at-a-glance” summaries were well-received, we note that they are a product to communicate with managers, industry, and other stakeholders, not for scientific review. Therefore, to maintain flexibility, our preference is not to include them in the TOR.