

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON STOCK ASSESSMENT PROCESS REVIEW AND PROPOSED PROCESS REVISIONS

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) appreciates the efforts that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Science Centers have made to open up communication with stakeholders. This is a positive development and is appreciated.

Improving public access to and increasing the faith in the stock assessment process by including meaningful industry participation is a laudable goal. Even with significant process improvements, one of the biggest issues with our stock assessment process, from the GAP perspective, is how the process responds to gross changes in our understanding of a particular stock.

The [Evaluation of the Pacific Fishery Management Council Stock Assessment Review Process Report \(“Lynker report”\), Attachment 1](#) appears to cast the Council and constituents’ recently decreasing confidence in assessment results as largely rooted in a need for greater understanding and communication, especially between the scientific community and others. However, the GAP feels the greater cause of decreasing confidence in the assessments has to do with the high variability in stock status results between assessments. Several recent assessments have re-cast the stock status and biomass results of previous assessments at greatly different values for the exact same years. This has resulted in less confidence in assessments in general. Moreover, big swings in the allowable catch from one assessment to the next creates costly uncertainty within the fishery and investment within it. Another priority for the GAP is providing a meaningful nexus for fishermen’s knowledge and local and traditional knowledge to enter the stock assessment process.

The GAP previously provided our recommendations on science-related elements in [Agenda Item E.7.a, Supplemental GAP Report 1, June 2025](#), which summarizes many of the highest priority items for the GAP relating to the stock assessment process and aligns with what we’ve included in this report.

GAP Recommendations

The GAP provides the following recommendations for changes to the stock assessment process. Note that we provide comments on our highest priority items, both noted on the Lynker Report and discussed under Attachment 2 by Council staff, and other items we think should be incorporated. While the GAP does not provide comments on each item discussed in Attachment 2, we continue to support any improvements in the stock assessment process- specifically those that increase stakeholder engagement and incorporation of fishermen knowledge.

Review or Delay Adoption of Stock Assessments

One of the GAP’s main priorities is developing mechanisms to review or delay adoption of a stock assessment when there are serious concerns about its results. Item 2b-ii of Attachment 2 was proposed to “Establish a technical referral protocol that allows the Council to *request the SSC to reevaluate determinations when new information arises.*” Currently, this has been done on an ad-

hoc basis (e.g., widow and quillback rockfish), but the GAP is interested in further exploring this idea.

The GAP continues to recommend, as we did in June 2025, the Council develop a process to delay acceptance of a stock assessment if a deeper look is needed. For example, including an automatic review if a stock assessment result is a certain percentage different than last assessment. The pause would have to occur before it's deemed as best scientific information available (BSIA), between the stock assessment review (STAR) Panel review and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The pause mechanism would allow a review process to proceed with a prescribed set of actions that includes meaningful engagement with the industry. That is, industry could provide greater context to possible reasons for the change. This would ensure, to the maximum extent possible, a reasonable degree of certainty that the stock assessment represents the true state of nature for the stock. As part of the review, industry observations and knowledge, such as catch per unit effort rates, observations of abundance, changes in fishing patterns, spatial distribution of the stock, geographic changes in the fishing footprint and other perspectives would be given serious consideration before the assessment is formally adopted and used for management.

While the workload associated with developing these processes is likely a large lift (as noted by the red shading for 2b-ii in [Attachment 3, the Stock Assessment Review Action Table](#)), the GAP sees it as valuable for increasing the trust in the process and incorporating local knowledge. The inclusion of these mechanisms could further enhance the process to ensure stock assessments don't unnecessarily disrupt fisheries.

Pre-Assessment Workshops and Stakeholder Engagement

The GAP continues to stress the importance of pathways to meaningfully incorporate fishermen's knowledge into the stock assessment process. While pre-assessment workshops do provide some opportunity for participants, pre-assessment workshops are only available for benchmark assessments, and some participants cannot attend the workshop due to fishing schedules. Pre-assessment workshops provide a look at the new data and some of the assumptions being made, but they don't provide early visibility to what the impacts of these choices may be, or allow extensive ground truthing of those assumptions. By the time the draft assessment is published, and the STAR panel occurs, it can sometimes be too late for the fisheries knowledge to be incorporated. The GAP recommends that there be a new communication pathway from the Stock Assessors Team (STAT) to the industry (through the GAP representative to the panel) to understand how the information provided to the STAT in the pre-assessment workshop was addressed. There are recent examples where GAP and industry input could have addressed issues with recent assessments, such as quillback rockfish in California, widow rockfish and shortspine thornyhead, which had negative impacts to the fisheries.

While the GAP and the stakeholders we represent greatly appreciate the opportunities for engagement, the issue as we see it is more about ensuring that engagement (which takes a lot of volunteered time and effort to provide) is *meaningfully incorporated* into stock assessments. Currently the process for meaningful incorporation seems to be limited to qualitative input for items like risk tables (which only work within/below the harvest specification outputs of a stock assessment), or collecting years of NMFS-approved data sets (such as acoustic data recordings).

In terms of the Lynker Report, some measures, such as those noted below, would align with the GAP's recommendation. These measures represent practical, high-value opportunities to increase efficiency, transparency and stakeholder engagement while making the most effective use of available resources:

- 3b-i. Continue (and increase) investment in pre-assessment workshops; and
- 1b-iii. Maintain current contact lists with quarterly updates
- 3a-iii. Offer training in interpreting and incorporating local ecological knowledge.

Stakeholder Training

The GAP supports the use of the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP) to educate and inform stakeholders regarding the process as it relates to stock assessments. For some, MREP is the first contact a stakeholder has with the details of the Council process. This is highlighted in recommendation 3b-iii. Partner with the MREP or similar programs to adapt early learning modules for stakeholder audiences.

The GAP also greatly appreciates the monthly Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) stock assessment calls (also known as the "Jason Cope" calls), and improved engagement of stock assessors with the GAP, as mechanisms for those of us participating in the Council process to dive into the details of stock assessment questions.

Communication and Understanding of Risk and Uncertainty

The GAP continues to support changes to the stock assessment process that provide clarity to stakeholders on what goes into stock assessments. Specifically, what parameters are estimated versus fixed and other modeling choices that the STAT makes. While this information can be found in stock assessment documents, it is sometimes difficult for the general stakeholder to find and understand these choices. This relates to items 2a-i and 2a-iii in the Lynker Report.

The GAP previously recommended consideration of the impacts of the choice of SPR50 as the MSY Proxy, which targets a higher stock level than B₄₀ and reduces stock productivity and available catch by approximately 5 percent over the long term. The Council could include this in the Risk Management agenda item (currently shaded for November 2026).

Summary of GAP Recommendations

- Develop mechanisms to review or delay adoption of stock assessments when there are serious concerns about the plausibility of its results.
- Add a communication pathway from the STAT to industry (through the GAP representative to the panel) to understand how the information provided to the STAT in the pre-assessment workshop was addressed
- Continue to support MREP, the monthly NWFSC stock assessment calls, and engagement of stock assessors with the GAP to educate and inform stakeholders on stock assessments
- Improve communication and understanding of risk and uncertainty.