GROUNDFISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON FINAL STOCK ASSESSMENT PLAN FOR 2027, PRELIMINARY PRIORITIES FOR 2029 AND BEYOND

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) identifies the following stocks for various assessments in the 2027 and 2029 assessment cycles and provides comments on the proposed ten-year plan.

Full Benchmark Assessments for 2027
The GAP recommends the following species be considered for full benchmark assessments in 2027:

Lingcod coastwide
Lingcod is a highly sought after species for both commercial and recreational sectors. It ranks high on the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) prioritization tool at #5 and is recommended in Attachment 1. Since this assessment would be a two-area model, it would take up one whole stock assessment review (STAR) panel.

Yellowtail rockfish south of 40° 10' N. lat.
Yellowtail rockfish south is a very important stock both recreationally and commercially and has never been assessed. Yellowtail landings south of 40°10' N. lat. have increased substantially with the implementation of commercial non-bottom contact gear allowances.

Redbanded rockfish
Redbanded rockfish is a moderately important slope rockfish species for both fixed gear and trawl fisheries. It has never been assessed and ranks #8 on the NMFS prioritization tool, so a new benchmark assessment is warranted.

Update Assessments for 2027
Petrale Sole
Petrale sole is one of the GAP's priority species for an update assessment because it is a very important species for our trawl fisheries with high attainment. An update assessment would allow for an update in harvest specifications (greater than that would occur from a catch only update due to the extremely high attainment for petrale), allow the inclusion of new survey and age data, plus would reset time-varying sigma. The proposed target assessment frequency for petrale sole is four years and was last assessed as a full benchmark in 2023, thus warranting an update in 2027.

Shortspine Thornyhead
Shortspine thornyhead is very important to both non-trawl, as a target species, and trawl participants, which has become a constraining species - particularly with the reductions in other species (e.g., canary, petrale sole, and widow). The GAP would prefer a new benchmark assessment for 2027 but understands ageing capacity just isn't available at this time. See further GAP comments for 2029 full assessments.

Catch Only Updates for 2027
The GAP recommends the following species for catch-only updates in 2027. These species are constraining, even if they are moderately attained, and additional yield in the future could be extremely beneficial to the groundfish fishery. Note that these catch only updates are listed in order of GAP priority.

Full list of 2027 Catch Only Updates, Prioritized

- Canary rockfish
- California Scorpionfish
- Darkblotched rockfish
- Cowcod south of 40° 10' N. lat.
- Sablefish
- Yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N. lat.
- Widow rockfish

Preliminary Recommendations for Full Benchmark Assessments for 2029
In reviewing the proposed 2029 assessment schedule provided in Attachment 1, the GAP supports the following as a preliminary list of benchmarks for 2029 (not in priority order) and provides comments. We understand that the proposed slate of benchmarks and updates in Attachment 1 (and proposed by the GAP) is likely greater than the capacity of the Science Centers. The GAP hopes that additional information coming in through the stock assessment prioritization process will help clarify which species should ultimately be selected for benchmarks in 2029, but recognizes that it is likely to be a difficult discussion in 2028. Note that the GAP is not recommending spiny dogfish as a benchmark for 2029 as it is not a high priority for the GAP. Instead, we are recommending adding shortspine thornyhead to the list of benchmark assessments.

Full list of 2029 benchmark

- Widow rockfish
- Vermilion/Sunset rockfish
- Shortspine Thornyhead
- Black rockfish in Oregon/Washington
- Bocaccio
- Darkblotched rockfish

Widow Rockfish
The GAP supports the Science Center recommendation for planning to conduct a benchmark in 2029, since little new available data will be available in time for a 2027 assessment, and there doesn't seem to be willingness to consider adjustments to the model factors. This will also allow time for development of the fisheries dependent index and the eDNA methodologies that are proposed to be reviewed in the next year.

Vermilion/Sunset Rockfish
The GAP supports the Science Centers recommendation for a vermilion/sunset rockfish benchmark assessment in 2029 for all four areas. Vermilion/sunset is a key non-trawl commercial and recreational species- particularly in California.

Shortspine Thornyhead

The GAP would ideally recommend adding shortspine thornyhead to the 2029 list for a benchmark assessment, as it is important to both trawl and non-trawl sectors and is constraining the trawl fishery.

Fishermen have expressed concerns that the 2023 assessment largely underestimated population and productivity based on several factors, such as:

- Trawl footprint reduction and consolidation over past decades and individual fishing quota (IFQ) accountability starting in 2011; and shortspine are widely dispersed coast wide with far lower schooling tendencies than many other species.
- Abundance indices demonstrate an increase over last 20 years (Agenda Item E.4, Attachment 2, June 2026 – see figure 37 on page 52), which seems in line with fishermen's experience and observation of fishery trends over time.

There is not high confidence in the 2023 model because of the lack of good aging data. Poor aging data is a good reason to explore growth curves in a new benchmark that better fit abundance indices.

Additionally, a benchmark could seek to learn lessons from recent Alaska aging study publication. That study found 50 percent maturity at 12.8 years (whereas the West Coast stock assessment used 50 percent maturity at 25 years). Even if there could be limited work with Alaska study authors to get some samples aged to inform growth curve development, it would be better than what we have now, which is close to nothing. We are currently constraining fisheries based on what is widely known to be extremely insufficient science. We are just looking for improvement, not perfection.

While we understand that this would be an additional potential benchmark to the already long list, we think it's worth considering for the near term future.

Black Rockfish in Oregon/Washington

Black rockfish are a key recreational (Oregon and Washington) and commercial (Oregon) species. For Oregon, it is a limiting factor for recreational fishing opportunities. For Washington, black rockfish continues to be a main priority species for recreational opportunities.

Bocaccio

The last full benchmark assessment for bocaccio was conducted in 2015, with an update in 2017. Catch has been increasing, both commercially and recreationally, but well under the annual catch limits.

Darkblotched Rockfish

Darkblotched rockfish was last assessed in 2015 with an update in 2017 that declared the stock rebuilt. In recent years, there have been discussions by fishermen with history in both the bottom trawl survey and fishing decades ago in rocky areas seldom fished now that there is a lot more darkblotched out there than people realize. Additionally, at-sea vessels have been seeing increases in darkblotched encounters. While the 2029 list is currently overprescribed for the

capacity that is available, the GAP believes that darkblotched should be on the preliminary list for further discussion in the next two years.

Proposed Long Term Schedule
The GAP had a lot of discussion regarding the current stock assessment process, and the instability caused by stock assessment results (particularly in recent years). The GAP recognizes the need to figure out how to better plan stock assessments to be sure that assessors have the necessary data, particular ages, etc., to assess stocks. However, the GAP has concerns about some of the timings between assessments for key stocks. As an example, canary rockfish is currently scheduled for eight-year intervals between benchmark assessments with the next assessment being proposed for 2031. Canary rockfish is one of the most important species for all groundfish sectors and is one of the most constraining. Therefore, the GAP suggests potentially changing the interval (six years) and including an update potentially in 2029 when additional aging work could be done on canary.

Overall, the GAP supports the concept of the NMFS proposed ten-year plan and looks forward to further conversation in the future.

Comments on Proposed Change to One-Meeting Process
The GAP discussed the proposal from moving from a two meeting to a one meeting process and the proposed pros and cons. The GAP suggests that Pacific Fishery Management Council staff consider scheduling the item in April of even years, rather than June as proposed, in order to allow an additional meeting (June) to occur in case an issue arises in April.

PFMC
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