

GROUND FISH 2027-28 STOCK ASSESSMENT TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) was provided with a draft of the Groundfish 2027-28 Stock Assessment Terms of Reference (TOR) and asked to review proposed changes and offer recommendations. The revised TOR includes a summary of major changes since the last version. This statement focuses on topics discussed by the SSC during the September and November meetings (2026) and its recommendations related to the proposed changes.

Diana Perry (Staff Officer, PFMC) gave a presentation outlining major proposed changes to the TOR as of September 16, 2026. Revisions included:

- the addition of a “research track” for stock assessments to complement the existing “management track” assessments,
- the addition of “risk tables”, which provide a more transparent process for determining scientific uncertainty (sigma),
- the removal of stock assessment reviews by the Groundfish Subcommittee (GFSC) following Stock Assessment Review (STAR) panels, except for when supplemental review is needed,
- the description of mid-cycle transitions between types of stock assessments (e.g., when an update assessment requires additional sufficient work to necessitate a benchmark assessment),
- revisions to the roles and responsibilities section,
- the specification that pre-assessment workshops should be conducted for both benchmark and update assessments, and
- the addition of a document prepared by the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) to convey fishery information during the pre-assessment workshops.

The SSC’s discussion of “research” vs. “management” track assessments focused on the need to clarify how assessments are categorized into these tracks. Part of the rationale for establishing research track assessments is to organize and document progress related to the assessment of an individual stock and assist with workload planning outside of the biennial management process. Research track assessments would include technical developments that extend beyond those that are addressed as part of Council-supported methodology reviews. Any species or stock could have assessments in one or both of these tracks at a given time, depending on the situation (i.e., a management track assessment could be conducted while a research track assessment is in development). Review of research track assessments may be conducted in even-numbered years or as part of the STAR panel process in odd-numbered years.

Regarding risk tables, the SSC first noted that language in the draft TOR referred to GFSC review of risk tables, which appears to have been left in the draft by accident. Since the GFSC’s post-STAR review of stock assessments is being replaced by a full SSC review at the September meeting, it does not make sense to require GFSC review of risk tables alone. The SSC also suggests that ecologists be added to the list of subject-matter experts who may help inform the tables, in addition to oceanographers. Lastly, rather than allowing risk table entries to be left

blank, an explicit statement should be included about the lack of information and/or other factors that might prevent completion of certain table entries.

The SSC also discussed the removal of the requirement for post-STAR panel review of stock assessments by the GFSC. This review step was originally intended, in part, to streamline meetings of the full SSC. Given that a) benchmark assessments require internal NOAA review and extensive external review as part of a STAR panel, b) many members of the SSC are also members of the GFSC, and c) demands on the GFSC have increased (due to increased workload and reduced membership), a separate GFSC review is inefficient. To ensure adequate time for Federal Register notices, a supplemental review should be scheduled during every cycle, with the caveat that the review will only take place “as needed.” Update assessments would still be reviewed by the GFSC prior to SSC review.

The SSC also reviewed draft language about mid-cycle stock assessment transitions between assessment types and review pathways (e.g., from update to benchmark when additional analyses are required due to identification of model or data errors). Additional comments included the need for a catch-all statement in the TOR to capture circumstances in which following Table 3 would lead to no usable management advice, and other approaches may be needed. Since both management track and research track assessments might be under development at the same time, and the focus of this topic is mid-cycle transitions, the SSC recommends removing the rows in Table 3 of the draft TOR that describe transitions to and from the research track.

The SSC supports the addition of a GAP-led report (referred to in the TOR as a “working document”) and presentation during the pre-assessment workshops. As noted in the TOR, the primary objectives of these workshops are to review available data sources and potential data gaps, discuss stock dynamics and fishery conditions, evaluate proposed assessment approaches and model structures, and identify key assumptions or issues that may influence the assessment. The addition of the GAP-led report provides a structured opportunity for stakeholder input on these topics prior to the assessment, and is likely to improve communication among the stakeholders, assessment authors, and Council.