Pacific Fishery Management Council Highly Migratory Species Roadmap

Introduction

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) manages commercial and recreational fisheries targeting Highly Migratory Species (HMS) in Federal waters off the West Coast under its Fishery Management Plan for West Coast Fisheries for Highly Migratory Species (HMS FMP). These fisheries include large-mesh drift gillnet (DGN), harpoon, pelagic longline, hook-and-line, and deep-set buoy gear. In addition to descriptions provided in the HMS FMP, regulations at 50 CFR Subpart K include fishing gear definitions and specifications as well as operational requirements. Existing regulations prohibit the use of pelagic longline gear within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone of the West Coast (out to 200 nautical miles). Alternative fishing activities that would otherwise be in contravention of the existing regulations would require an exempted fishing permit (EFP) and compliance with the terms and conditions of that permit.

The Council is concerned with managing bycatch of unmarketable finfish species and incidental take of protected species in HMS fisheries and EFP activities. National Standard 9 of the Magnuson Stevens Act requires the Council to minimize bycatch to the extent practicable, and bycatch monitoring and reporting methods are described for all fisheries in the HMS FMP. Protected species, including whales, dolphins, pinnipeds (e.g., seals, sea lions), sea turtles, and seabirds have special status under Federal statutes. Existing regulations for HMS fisheries include various mitigation measures to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act and other Federal requirements. As a result, bycatch of protected species has been substantially reduced; however, there has also been a coincidental decline in participation in these fisheries, resulting in a decline in landings as well.

Beginning in 2014, the Council solicited applications for EFPs to test alternative approaches or methods to target swordfish and other marketable HMS and drafted a Swordfish Management and Monitoring Plan (SMMP) for a holistic look at ongoing and potential future actions to manage fishing opportunities and bycatch. This plan served as a living document, which the Council periodically discussed when prioritizing workload among the interconnected analyses and management actions listed therein. Given changes in the management landscape in the intervening years, including a mandate to phase-out the DGN fishery by the end of 2027, the Council decided to overhaul the SMMP in 2023 and create this HMS Roadmap as a replacement document. Similar to the role of the SMMP, the Roadmap is intended to augment the Council's planning and prioritization of future workload and support the development of EFPs by offering a holistic view of management considerations for balancing economic viability with conservation objectives in HMS fisheries off the West Coast.

Roadmap Goals:

In March of 2024, the Council adopted goals for guiding workload considerations in the HMS Roadmap. These are as follows:

A. Support innovation and development of multi-species HMS fishing methods to increase the domestic supply of and meet the demand for swordfish and other marketable species.
B. Support and test fishing practices that have the potential to be economically viable and consistent with National Standard 9 guidelines.
C. Support the economic viability of West Coast commercial fisheries for swordfish and associated marketable species through a diverse range of HMS fishing methods.
D. Promote fisheries resilience by developing flexibility in management and other tools to account for changes in HMS distributions, ecosystem structure and function, and the communities dependent on HMS fisheries.
E. Engage fishery participants to preserve knowledge and help bolster resilience in future fisheries.
F. Support recreational HMS fishing opportunities.

Action Items

The actions listed in this HMS Roadmap reflect ongoing and potential future workload of interest to the Council. This workload is interrelated, and implementation of an action or sub-action may impact the nature of work on other actions or sub-actions. Some of the actions and sub-actions require Council decisions, whereas others reflect Council interest in providing guidance on capacity building, tool development, or other analytical functions serving the goals of the Roadmap. The actions in the Roadmap will consider the interconnectedness of commercial and recreational fishing sectors by exploring potential impacts to both fleets where appropriate.

1. Explore and Establish Management Strategies and Objectives

a. *Evaluate the need for developing bycatch monitoring, performance metrics, and finfish retention rates for managing HMS fisheries and EFPs. (Also supports EFP Framework Development)*

b. *Define acceptable levels of bycatch/bycatch mortality for protected and non-marketable species to be used in evaluation and management of HMS EFPs and authorized fisheries. (Also supports EFP Framework Development)*

c. *Define harvest goals for target HMS within the international context and consistent with catch or effort limits to which the United States has agreed.*

d. *Evaluate the harvest levels and market demand of HMS to develop a list of priority species for development of alternative fishing practices.*

e. *Consider use of individual accountability management approaches.*

f. *Promote resilience in community-level benefits from HMS fisheries.*

    i. *Identify fleets, fishing practices, or gears that may be more flexible and/or adaptable given current and anticipated environmental conditions, including climate change.*

    ii. *Identify characteristics or resources that would position communities to support HMS fisheries given current and anticipated environmental conditions including climate change.*

2. Develop EFP Framework

a. *Facilitate the use of EFPs to expand options for HMS fisheries to more fully access underutilized HMS stocks.*

b. *Develop EFP guidance, including Council application preferences, application review criteria, and performance metrics to meet Council management and data needs.*

c. *Support the development of EFPs utilizing new approaches to achieve economic viability balanced with conservation objectives.*

d. *Facilitate the use of EFPs which expand on existing gear types, to explore alternative fishing practices or management strategies for increased HMS production while limiting bycatch.*

3. Develop Fishery Management Decision-support Tools and Analyses

a. *Document sources of U.S. swordfish supply, considering all domestic and foreign-caught HMS and the potential to mitigate conservation impacts and reduce the seafood trade deficit.*

b. *Support ongoing efforts to develop and implement electronic monitoring.*

c. *Explore the use of dynamic ocean modeling tools, such as EcoCast, as part of an individual accountability-based management strategy.*

d. *Evaluate overall net economic benefits of HMS fisheries operations.*

e. *Consider impacts of potential competing current and future marine uses (i.e. offshore wind, aquaculture, etc.) in HMS fisheries management.*

f. *Develop an index of multispecies fishery production as a metric for comparing HMS harvest methods and evaluate bycatch relative to this index.*

4. Continue DGN Fishery Monitoring

a. *For each June Council meeting while the drift gill net fishery is allowed, continue to report annual drift gillnet fishery bycatch estimates against performance metrics for specified marine mammals and sea turtles, and monitor annual finfish retention rate and observed take of specified species.*

PFMC
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