PACIFIC SARDINE STOCK DEFINITIONS

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) has determined it is appropriate to reevaluate the fishery management unit (FMU) in the Coastal Pelagic Species Fishery Management Plan (CPS FMP). At this meeting, the Council is scheduled to establish the scope of an FMP amendment including adopting a range of alternatives and identification of a preliminary preferred alternative, as appropriate. In April 2025, the Council scheduled an agenda item to scope this action and to review the FMU defined in Table 1-1 of the CPS FMP, including the stock definition of Pacific sardine within it. The current FMU and management framework is based on the long-held hypothesis that Pacific sardine (*Sardinops sagax*) off the West Coast consists of three subpopulations, with the northern subpopulation (NSP) being exploited by U.S. fisheries. Recent scientific evidence and a review of historical information indicate that the sardine management unit described in the CPS FMP may not accurately represent the biological population occurring and being targeted in U.S. waters. Emerging data now question whether the subpopulations are distinct, suggesting that Pacific sardine along the West Coast may instead comprise a single, coastwide population. Complicating this further, Japanese sardine (*Sardinops melanosticta)*—a closely related and morphologically indistinguishable species—has recently become more prevalent in U.S. waters and appears in mixed landings. Therefore, several complex factors, including the prolonged closure of the directed sardine fishery and restrictive catch limits, new scientific publications on Pacific sardine population structure, and the recent emergence of Japanese sardine in the California Current, have led to this action.

Identifying and defining a stock is one of the most basic and essential steps in sustainable fishery management. The Magnuson–Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and National Standard 1 (NS1) require that fisheries be managed to prevent overfishing and to achieve, on a continuing basis, optimum yield. Meeting these goals depends on correctly identifying the biological population units being managed. Inaccurate stock definitions can undermine assessments of biomass and yield, leading to management measures that do not align with the true population structure or dynamics. This action is needed to reconsider which sardine species and populations are included in the fishery management unit and how stocks for these species are defined.

To ensure that the CPS FMU reflects the biological realities of sardine in U.S. waters, the Council must address two key questions:

1. Which species and populations of sardine should be included in the FMU?
2. How should those stocks be identified and delineated to align management with the true geographic and biological extent of the resource?

Put in other words, the Council's task is to determine whether the current FMU and the stocks defined within it adequately encompasses the population structure of Pacific sardine—and whether Japanese sardine should be added—so that management actions remain consistent with the principles of the MSA, NS1, and sound fishery science.

Attachment 1 provides information scoping this action and details for the Council to consider in their review of the FMU; it covers an overview of the factors driving this action, the framework for defining an FMU and stocks per the MSA and the National Standards, a summary review of

literature on sardine population structure, and management implications for adjusting the FMU. Within Attachment 1, staff have proposed a potential purpose and need statement to define the scope of this action and a potential range of alternatives for the Council to adopt at this meeting. The proposed range of alternatives provides two action alternatives that would add unmanaged Pacific sardine to the FMU, with the option to add Japanese sardine. The action alternatives differ in how Pacific sardine stock(s) are defined. If ready, the Council may adopt a preliminary preferred alternative from the proposed range. Due to a lack of appropriations, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) West Coast Region staff were unable to review and provide input on the final version of this document. As outlined in the Regional Operating Agreement, review of documents such as these is one responsibility of the NMFS.

Council Tasks:

1. **Adopt a Purpose and Need for the action.**
2. **Establish the Scope of the FMP amendment, Including adopting a Range of Alternatives.**
3. **Adopt a Preliminary Preferred Alternative.**

Reference Materials:

1. Agenda Item J.3, Attachment 1: Reviewing the Fishery Management Unit in the Coastal Pelagic Species Fishery Management Plan and its Stock Definitions for Sardine off the U.S. West Coast.
2. If received, Public Comments are electronic only (see e-portal)

Agenda Order:

J.3 Pacific Sardine Stock Definitions — Katrina Bernaus
   a. Reports and Comments of Management Entities and Advisory Bodies
   b. Public Comment
   c. **Council Action**: Adopt a Purpose and Need Statement, Range of Alternatives, and Preliminary Preferred Alternative, as Appropriate

PFMC
10/30/25