

August 21, 2018

Mr. Philip Anderson, Chair
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101
Portland, Oregon 97220-1384

Dear Chair Anderson and Council Members:

We write on behalf of Midwater Trawlers Cooperative, Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative, United Catcher Boats, and Whiting Mothership Cooperative to request the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) take Inseason Action to move darkblotched rockfish and Pacific Ocean perch (POP) that would otherwise go unused from the “Incidental Open Access [(IOA)]” and “Research” categories to the “Additional Buffer” category¹.

This action would allow the at-sea sectors of the whiting fishery to access additional bycatch from the buffer if needed, which could prevent significant economic harm. Our request is consistent with the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) recommendation from June 2018 ([Agenda Item E.5., Supplemental GAP Report 1, June 2018](#)), and previous Council actions (i.e., the Council took and NMFS implemented similar actions in 2015 (darkblotched from IOA), 2016 (POP from Research), and 2017 (POP from IOA))².

As highlighted by the GAP in June, for 2018 the at-sea sectors have sector-specific set-asides for darkblotched and POP, and access to fish in the “Additional Buffer” category. However, the Amendment 21-3 automatic closure authority provision is still in effect for 2018, creating the potential for the at-sea sectors to be closed prematurely. Premature closure of the at-sea whiting sectors, as the Council is aware, results in substantial economic harm because of lost revenue from foregone whiting harvest. Moreover, the threat of fishery closure destabilizes the at-sea sectors such that avoidance of these two species becomes the driving factor, greatly decreasing fishing efficiency and creating the potential for increased bycatch of other species of concern.

The potential economic harm is clear. It is also clear that moving unused darkblotched and POP from the “Incidental Open Access” and “Research” categories to the “Additional Buffer” should not create a conservation risk. Both stocks are strong, with significant Annual Catch Limit increases coming in 2019. This action would also be consistent with Council action to remove the automatic closure authority for these two species as part of the 2019-2020 management measures because decreasing the risk of unnecessary closure was a motivation for the prospective change for 2019. We also note that the “Additional Buffer” is available for use by other groundfish fishery sectors. Finally, there is no need to allocate or add fish to the at-sea sectors’ set-aside amounts because the additional fish would be added to the shared buffer.

¹ For reference, see [Agenda Item E.5.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, June 2018](#) Attachment 1. Allocations and projected mortality impacts (mt) of overfished groundfish species for 2018 (page 5).

² [Redistribution of Darkblotched Rockfish, October 29, 2015](#); [Transfer of POP to the MS Sector, August 31, 2016](#); and [Transfer of POP to the MS and C/P Coops, May12, 2017](#).

In spring 2018, the at-sea sectors had higher than projected POP and darkblotched bycatch, especially as efforts were made to avoid salmon and sablefish. Avoiding these two rockfish stocks is very difficult because of their abundance and because they are dispersed widely across the fishing grounds. These higher than anticipated encounter rates occurred even with industry efforts to avoid these rebuilt species. The mothership (MS) sector has caught 7.27 mt of darkblotched (set-aside amount = 11.8 mt) and 3.17 mt of POP (set-aside amount = 9.0 mt); the catcher-processor (CP) sector has caught 11.69 mt of darkblotched (set-aside amount = 16.7 mt) and 10.7 mt of POP (set-aside amount = 12.7 mt). The MS sector has 55% (47,875 mt) of whiting remaining; the CP sector has 58% (71,578 mt) remaining. Catch reports from shoreside fisheries indicate high darkblotched and POP encounter rates persist.

Attachment 1 from the June 2018 GMT Report (cited above), shows 24.5 mt and 2.5 mt of darkblotched rockfish allocated to “IOA” and “Research,” respectively. The 2018 Groundfish Total Mortality Report (Table 15)³ appears to indicate that “IOA” caught 6.82 mt and “Research” caught 1.67 mt of darkblotched rockfish in 2017. The GMT Report shows 10.0 mt and 5.2 mt of POP allocated to “IOA” and “Research,” respectively. The Total Mortality Report appears to indicate that “IOA” caught 0.29 mt and “Research” caught 1.12 mt of POP in 2017.

In closing, we respectfully request Council action to increase the “Additional Buffer” amounts for darkblotched and POP. This action will decrease the potential for economic harm in the at-sea whiting sectors without creating conservation risks for these species. The action would also increase the fleet’s ability to avoid others species of concern. The action would not preempt the activities of other groundfish sectors.

Thank you for considering our request. We will be prepared and available to answer questions and provide additional information, as necessary, at the September 2018 Council meeting.

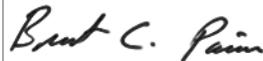
Sincerely,



Heather Mann
Midwater Trawlers Cooperative



Dan Waldeck
Pacific Whiting Conservation Cooperative



Brent Paine
United Catcher Boats



Joe Bersch
Whiting Mothership Cooperative

³ [Somers, K.A., J. Jannot, V. Tuttle, K. Richerson, N.B. Riley, and J. McVeigh. 2018. Estimated discard and catch of groundfish species in the 2017 US west coast fisheries. NOAA Fisheries, NWFSC Observer Program, 2725 Montlake Blvd E., Seattle, WA 98112.](#)