



C3 BSAI Groundfish Specifications

December 2020 Council Meeting

Action Memo

- Council Staff: Steve MacLean
- Other Presenters: Dr. Elizabeth Siddon (AFSC – presenting BS ESR), Dr. Ivonne Ortiz (U. Wash – presenting AI ESR), Dr. Grant Thompson (AFSC, BSAI Plan Team Co-Chair – presenting to SSC), Dr. Steve Barbeaux (AFSC, BSAI Co-Chair – presenting to AP & Council), Dr. Diana Stram (NPFMC)
- Action Required:
1. Review 2020 Ecosystem Status Reports for the Eastern Bering Sea and the Aleutian Islands
 2. Approve the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report
 3. Recommend Final BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for 2021 and 2022, including:
 - Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks
 - Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for all stocks, taking into account the State waters Pacific cod fishery
 - Annual ABC reserve for three flatfish species
 - Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits and season apportionments of Pacific halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, *C. opilio* crab, and herring to target fishery categories
 - Halibut Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs)

Action

At this meeting the Council will review the Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) for the Eastern Bering Sea; adopt the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report; and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits, and halibut Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs) to manage the 2021 and 2022 BSAI groundfish fisheries. Once published in the Federal Register, these 2021/2022 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications implemented in March 2020 for the 2021 fisheries ([85 FR 13553](#)).

Joint Plan Team Meeting

The Joint BSAI and GOA Plan Teams met, virtually over the internet, on November 16 and on November 20, 2020 to address issues common to the BSAI and GOA. Primary agenda items were a report on the status of Grenadiers, one of the Ecosystem Component species in the GOA and BSAI FMPs, the Economic SAFE Report, and the assessment and apportionment of sablefish in the GOA and BSAI. Minutes of the joint team meeting are available on the agenda.

Sablefish

The Joint BSAI and GOA Teams recommended the author’s statewide OFL and ABC, as occurred in 2019. At this meeting, the Council will also determine an appropriate method to apportion sablefish ABC between the GOA and BSAI subareas. The Teams did not recommend a single method to apportion ABC to the GOA and BSAI subareas, but expressed a preference to move away from the current fixed apportionment methods that have been in place since 2013 and move toward the assessment author’s recommended non-exponential survey-based apportionment scheme. The team noted that there are no stock-wide concerns or biological differences among the apportionment options. Therefore, the Teams identified two apportionment methods, the status quo, fixed method and the author’s recommended non-exponential survey-based apportionment method, and **recommended that the SSC, AP, and Council identify the appropriate apportionment within the bounds established by the two apportionment methods.**

Dr. Diana Stram will provide an overview of Annual Catch Limits (ACLs)¹, Accountability Measures (AMs)² and the [Council’s apportionment and spatial management strategies](#), preceding the presentation of the Plan Teams’ sablefish recommendations. The Teams noted that proposed alternate methods for computing subarea ABCs constitute “spatial management measures” that are referenced in Step 1 of the Council’s Spatial Management Policy. **The Teams recommend that the SSC and Council consider application of the Spatial Management Policy and host a Council workshop in 2021 to evaluate both the fishing mortality rates by gear associated with different apportionment schemes as well as the management and socio-economic considerations of alternative apportionment methods.**

BSAI SAFE Report and Ecosystem Status Report

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team met, virtually over the internet, on November 18-20, 2020 to prepare the BSAI Groundfish SAFE report. The SAFE report forms the basis for setting BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for the next two fishing years. The SAFE report introduction summarizes the Plan Team recommendations for each stock/complex. Links to the full report are posted on the e-agenda. The Council will review and adopt the full SAFE report at this meeting. The Teams also reviewed Ecosystem Status Reports for the Eastern Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands, as context for assessing BSAI species.

Minutes of the BSAI Groundfish Plan Team meeting are posted on the e-agenda. Some stocks are assessed annually while other are assessed less frequently, based on stock prioritization that includes assessment methods and data availability. Although the COVID-19 pandemic precluded most surveys in the EBS in 2020, full assessments were produced for 21 stocks. For stocks for which partial assessments were produced, specifications were rolled over from the last assessment for that stock. The revised stock assessment schedule shows when the next full assessment will occur for each stock, and is included in the SAFE introduction chapter.

OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team’s recommendations for final harvest specification for 2021 and 2022 are in the SAFE report introduction, and also attached separately on the eAgenda (Table 1 BSAI Plan Team Recommendations). In October, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications of OFLs and ABCs that were based on the 2019 assessments. In this 2020 SAFE report, the Plan Team has revised

¹ **Annual Catch Limits:** The OFL is established statewide representing the overall area of the stock boundary. The ACL is assessed at the level of the overall stock (and thus the spatial area over which the OFL is specified). Sablefish ACL = Area-wide ABC (BSAI + GOA).

² **Accountability Measures:** Measures that should prevent exceedances of ACLs and correct or mitigate overages of the ACL if they occur. The FMP for BSAI and GOA Groundfish references the following as AMs: observer coverage, catch accounting, in-season management authority, and harvest specifications.

projections based on development of new models; collection of new catch, survey, age composition, or size composition data; or use of new methods for recommending OFLs and ABCs. The SSC's OFL and ABC recommendations, and the AP's TAC recommendations will be provided to the Council during the meeting.

The sum of the Plan Team's recommended ABCs for 2021 and 2022 are compared below to those adopted by the Council for 2019 and 2020.

2019	2020	2021	2022
3,367,578 t	3,273,825 t	2,732,597 t	2,683,717 t

Overall, the status of the stocks continues to appear favorable. All stocks are above B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy of $B_{35\%}$.

TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery

In setting TACs for 2021 and 2022, the Council accounts for Guideline Harvest Levels (GHLs) for groundfish fisheries in State waters. The Alaska Board of Fisheries took action in 2018 that modified how GHLs in the Bering Sea (BS) and Aleutian Islands (AI) are set for Pacific cod. The GHL in the AI will be set at 39% of the AI ABC, or a maximum of 15 million pounds (6,804 t). The BS GHL will be set at 10% of the EBS Pacific cod. An additional reduction of 45 t is taken from the remaining EBS Pacific cod maxTAC for the Area O jig fishery. A table showing ABCs, GHLs, and resulting Federal maxTAC is attached on the eAgenda.

Flatfish flexibility ABC reserve

The Council annually recommends an ABC reserve for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole, which will be allocated to CDQ groups and the Amendment 80 cooperative using the same formulas that are used in the annual harvest specification process. The ABC reserve for each species will be specified by the Council by evaluating the ABC surplus for the species (i.e., the differences between the ABC and TAC), and considering whether that amount needs to be reduced by a discretionary buffer based on social, economic, or ecological considerations. The Council will then designate some, all, or none of the ABC surplus as the ABC reserve. The Council should provide its rationale each year for setting the ABC reserve at a particular level for these three flatfish species. A table of ABCs, TACs, ABC surplus, and ABC reserves is attached to the e-agenda (Table 7 in BSAI Groundfish Tables 7-12).

During the Inseason Management Report (Agenda Item B2), NMFS will provide a report on flatfish exchanges by the Amendment 80 cooperative this year. This informs the Council's decision whether to establish a buffer reducing the amount of ABC reserve available to the exchanged by eligible entities. The report will include information on the number of vessels used to harvest cooperative quota, the number of and dates of flatfish exchanges, the types and amounts of cooperative quota and Amendment 80 ABC reserves utilized. The report also includes the dates, types, and amounts of quota transfers.

Prohibited Species Catch limits

Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits are established for halibut, crab, and herring during the specifications process and are allocated between sectors and season as described below. PSC limit tables is attached to the eAgenda (Tables 8-11 in BSAI Groundfish Tables 7-12).

Crab PSC in Trawl Fisheries

Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limits for red king crab, Tanner crab, and *C. opilio* crab, which are established based on formulas in the FMP, and regulations. The Council recommends target

fishery apportionments of these limits for the BSAI trawl limited access sector. The 2021 and 2022 crab PSC limits have been revised using the current crab biomass amounts.

At the October 2020 meeting, the SSC recommended a different model for *C. opilio* crab than was recommended by the Plan Team and published in the SAFE report. After the meeting, the assessment author recalculated the BS *C. opilio* biomass using the model recommended by the SSC. The new survey abundance estimate is 6.48 billion crab, and the resultant PSC limit is 7,191,840 crab.

Regulations allow the Council to recommend to NMFS a proportion of red king crab PSC for the Red King Crab Saving Subarea (RKCSS) lower than 25% of the total red king crab PSC. Since 2008, the RKCSS PSC limit has been set at the maximum limit of 25% of the red king crab PSC limit. However, the total PSC from the RKCSS has been substantially lower. The Council could set the limit for the RKCSS lower than 25% of the total.

Herring

An overall herring PSC limit is established as 1% of the EBS herring biomass. This limit is apportioned to seven PSC target fishery categories. Herring PSC limits for 2021 are attached to the e-agenda (Table 9), based on the most current biomass estimates from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that are available on the agenda.

Halibut PSC in Trawl Fisheries

The overall PSC limit is fixed under BSAI Groundfish FMP Amendment 111 at 2,805 t, which is apportioned as 1,745 t to Amendment 80, 745 t to Trawl Limited Access, and 315 t to CDQ. Within the Trawl Limited Access sector, the Council recommends apportionments of the halibut PSC limit to the trawl fishery categories. Additional reduction of 5% would occur if PSC limits are transferred from the BSAI Trawl Limited Access sector to the Amendment 80 trawl sector during a fishing year.

Halibut PSC in Hook-and-line Gear Fisheries

The 710 t non-trawl gear halibut mortality limit, which is established in the FMP, can be apportioned by fishery categories. The halibut PSC limit for the hook-and-line Pacific cod fishery is divided between the hook-and-line CP and CV sector. The Council can provide varying amounts of halibut PSC by season to each sector, tailoring PSC limits based on the factors to be considered below.

Seasonal apportionment of PSC limits

The Council may also seasonally apportion the PSC limits listed above for the hook-and-line gear and BSAI Trawl Limited Access Sector. Regulations require that seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances be based on information listed below:

Factors to be considered for seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances

1. Seasonal distribution of prohibited species;
2. Seasonal distribution of target groundfish species relative to prohibited species distribution;
3. Expected prohibited species bycatch needs on a seasonal basis relevant to change in prohibited species biomass and expected catches of target groundfish species;
4. Expected variations in bycatch rates throughout the fishing year;
5. Expected changes in directed groundfish fishing seasons;
6. Expected start of fishing efforts; and
7. Economic effects of establishing seasonal prohibited species apportionments on segments of the target groundfish industry.

Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

The recommended discard mortality rates for use in the BSAI for 2021-2022 are attached to the e-agenda (Table 12 in BSAI Groundfish Tables 7-12).