North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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IFQ Sablefish Release Allowance

Summary for IFQ Committee

March 2021[1]

Background

At its February 2021 meeting, the Council conducted an initial review of potential FMP and regulatory changes to allow voluntarily release of sablefish by fixed gear sablefish IFQ vessels. The Council then suspended further action on this issue and requested that the IFQ Committee provide recommendations on the action's relative priority. Relative priority, in this case, is interpreted to mean relative to other IFQ actions the Council is considering or developing. The IFQ Committee's recommendations on relative priority will be provided as part of its report at the April 2021 Council meeting. In response to the Committee's recommendations, the Council could either resume action on this issue or extend the timeline for action conditional on the fulfillment of other actions, or indefinitely. When/if the Council does resume action on this issue, it could include modifications to some of the action's elements and options. In its February motion, the Council does not appear to be requesting Committee development of any such modifications.

February 2021 Council motion:
"Postpone action on this item until the Council can consider recommendations from the IFQ Committee concerning the relative priority of this action."

The summary below is provided to highlight major points associated with the sablefish release action. Much more detailed information is in the meeting materials provided under "C3" on the February 2021 Council meeting eAgenda.

Summary of the Action

Unusually large recent year classes of sablefish have led to increased fishery catches of small sablefish with much lower economic value than more desirable market categories. Under current regulations, releases of any sablefish by the sablefish IFQ fishery is prohibited so long as there are lbs. of sablefish remaining in IFQ accounts for persons onboard the fishing vessel. Some sablefish IFQ participants think that removing the prohibition on release is needed because the existing regulations decrease the revenue value of sablefish deliveries, and they think that released fish would likely have a high survival rate. The Council initiated action to consider allowing sablefish to be released by the IFQ fishery in December 2019. Two alternatives for analysis were developed by the Council – Alternative 1 (no action) and Alternative 2 (Allow voluntary careful release of sablefish in the IFQ fishery).

The Action Alternative, including elements and options is provided below:

Element 1: DMRs

Apply a DMR to discarded sablefish of:

1. 5%, b. 12%, c. 16%, d. 20%

Sub-option: Select different DMRs for pot gear and hook and line gear

Element 2: Catch Accounting

[1] Prepared by Jim Armstrong, NPFMC staff

Option 1: Sablefish discards will be estimated using observer and EM data with a DMR applied annually as part of the specifications process.

Option 2: Sablefish discards will be estimated pre-season based on AFSC longline survey encounter rates of sub-three pound sablefish with the DMR applied annually as part of the specifications process.

Element 3: Discard Mortality Accounting

Sablefish discard mortality associated with the IFQ fishery will be accounted for in the stock assessment. The analysis should describe the potential implications of voluntary discards on the sablefish stock assessment and specifications process.

Element 4: Monitoring and Enforcement

The analysis should describe potential monitoring and enforcement provisions that could improve estimates of voluntary and regulatory discards.

Summary of the Analysis

Note that the intent of this action is to allow fishermen to release small sablefish, but the elements/options do not include a size limit for sablefish. Additionally, sablefish release mortalities would not count against a discard limit for the IFQ fishery. Under these conditions, IFQ vessels could release any quantity of any size sablefish during a given trip, which greatly influenced the potential outcomes characterized by the analysis.

The SSC recommended that additional analyses be added prior to any final action by the Council on this issue. The effects of different DMRs and retention selectivities on sablefish age structure and productivity, and the contribution of uncertainty in DMRs and selectivities to stock assessment uncertainty and possible buffers on ABC were highlighted by the SSC for a subsequent initial review. The AP recommended that a size limit be explored in any future analysis, also adding to the elements a scheduled program review and a requirement for careful release protocols .

Impacts to fisheries The expected *benefit* of a release allowance to sablefish IFQ operations would come from vessels catching enough high-value sablefish to overcome any revenue lost by releasing lower value fish, and that ability is expected to vary by operation and geographically. For example, fishery encounters with large sablefish are more common in the Southeast than in the Western GOA, so there may be greater potential for Southeast IFQ operations to increase their net revenues than for those in the Western GOA. The likelihood of *negative* impacts to IFQ operations and communities is linked to the probability that reduced sablefish ABC would lower IFQs to the point that operations cannot overcome their reductions by increasing the value of their landings. For trawl operations, any ABC reduction would be a negative impact. Additionally, trawl operations would be affected by earlier listing of sablefish as PSC, and by the potential for trawl catches to exceed sablefish TACs by even greater percentages than seen recently.

Discard mortality rates (DMRs) Few direct studies are available to narrow the range of potential sablefish DMRs and any study specific to sablefish in Alaska would take years to provide useful results. The lower end of DMRs under Element 1 (5%) is considered unlikely since it is drawn from halibut management and has no scientific basis for application to sablefish. The upper end of the range (20%) may be an underestimate. A 30% DMR is currently applied to the sablefish fishery in British Columbia. The assessment scientists/SSC will ultimately determine DMRs – it is not a policy decision.

Size composition of released sablefish Alternative functional forms for retention selectivity were explored in the analysis, and given the absence of a minimum size, a high potential for highgrading is suggested. In the State's Chatham Strait sablefish fishery, where voluntary release is allowed, there is evidence that the practice of highgrading is commonplace. Additionally, a lack of explicit size limits creates further difficulties for enforcement agencies and increases uncertainty in estimates of discards for reporting and assessment purposes.

Data collection There are challenges associated with using observer and EM approaches for characterizing the size and sex composition of sablefish releases, and these are critical assessment inputs. Novel approaches for collecting data include prohibiting discarding when an observer is onboard for

comparison with shore-based sampling, different estimation methods, or supplementary use of EM. For any of these, new programs would need to be developed and associated funding mechanisms would need to be identified.

Sablefish ABC Reductions The analysis identified a wide range of potential reductions in sablefish ABC (0.8% - 51%), any of which reflect particular combinations of assumed DMRs of released sablefish and retention selectivities. Because DMRs and retention selectivities are not well understood, the relative probability of the potential ABC reductions remains unclear.