


MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members

FROM: Clarence G. Pautzke
Executive Director 

DATE: April 9, 1999

SUBJECT: Shortraker, Rougheye, and Thornyhead Rockfish MRB Reduction

<p>ESTIMATED TIME 8 HOURS (for all D-1 items)</p>

ACTION REQUIRED

Final action to revise maximum retainable bycatch percentages for shortraker, rougheye, and thornyhead rockfish in the GOA.

BACKGROUND

At its October 1998 meeting, the Council requested that NMFS prepare an analysis of alternatives to reduce MRB percentages for shortraker/rougheye (SR/RE) and thornyhead rockfish in the Gulf of Alaska. This was in response to a proposal submitted by the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association during the summer 1998 call for proposals. The analysis addresses a number of factors: (1) high rates of SR/RE and thornyhead bycatch in other groundfish fisheries; (2) concerns that the existing MRB percentages are higher than incidental catch levels, which has allowed for undesirable levels of "topping off;" and (3) in 3 out of the last 4 years total removals of SR/RE rockfish have exceeded the ABC amount. As a result, the following alternatives were developed for analysis. The Council would have to take final action at this meeting for proposed changes to be in effect in time for the directed summer rockfish fishery so that the 1999 TACs would not be exceeded.

Alternative 1: Status Quo - Do not revise existing MRB percentages.

Alternative 2: Revise MRB percentages for SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish in the GOA as follows (options for a reduced MRB percentage relative to the deepwater species complex and shallow water species complex).

	MRB percentage for SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish relative to the deep water complex (sablefish, rockfish, rex sole, arrowtooth flounder ¹ , deep-water flatfish)	MRB percentage for SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish relative to the shallow water complex (pollock, P. cod, shallow-water flatfish, flathead sole, Atka mackerel, "other species", non-groundfish species)
Current MRB (Alternative 1)	15	5
Alternative 2 options	10	3
¹ The MRB percentage relative to arrowtooth flounder would remain at 0%.	7	2
	5	1

Alternative 3: Prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in the POP fishery.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
 National Marine Fisheries Service
 P.O. Box 21688
 Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

AGENDA D-1(b)
 APRIL 1999
 Supplemental

April 13, 1999

RECEIVED
 APR 13 1999
 N.P.F.M.C

Richard Lauber, Chairman
 North Pacific Fishery Management Council
 605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
 Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

Dear Mr. Lauber: ^{Rich}

At the April Council meeting NMFS will be presenting an analysis of a regulatory amendment to reduce incidental catch of shorttraker/rougheye (SR/RE) and thornyhead rockfish in the Gulf of Alaska. Due to TAC management difficulties, NMFS is requesting that the Council consider taking final action on an alternative that reduces the Maximum Retainable Bycatch (MRB) percentage for SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish so that NMFS can implement regulations prior to the start of the summer rockfish fisheries. Harvest of these species has exceeded the ABC amount at least once in every GOA regulatory area during the last 4 years.

In the process of analysis, it became apparent that restricting the Pacific Ocean perch (POP) fishery to pelagic trawl gear could reduce incidental catch of other rockfish and accomplish the same objective as an MRB reduction. Consequently, we included this alternative in the analysis for discussion purposes. However, given that the public was not given notice that such an alternative was under consideration, we do not recommend final action on such an alternative at this time. Should the Council wish to proceed with development of a gear restriction for the POP fishery, we recommend such action be scheduled for a subsequent meeting to provide the public with a fuller opportunity to review and comment on associated issues and for staff to augment the analysis accordingly.

Sincerely,

Steven Pennoyer
 Administrator, Alaska Region



Alaska Groundfish Data Bank

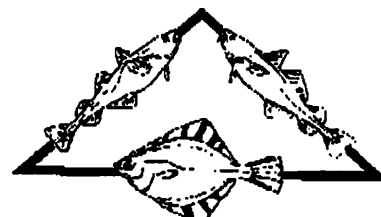
P.O. Box 2298 • Kodiak, Alaska 99615

TO: RICK LAUBER, CHAIRMAN
NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

RE: COMMENTS AGENDA ITEM D-1(b)

DATE: APRIL 13, 1999

SENT BY FAX: 18 PP



AGENDA ITEM D-1(b)

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED CHANGE IN THE MRB FOR SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD ROCKFISH

SUBMITTED BY ALASKA GROUND FISH DATA APRIL 13, 1999

ALASKA GROUND FISH DATA BANK POSITION

1. THE ANALYSIS IS DEFICIENT AND CANNOT BE USED TO IMPLEMENT OPTIONS B OR C.
2. NO PROBLEM EXISTS IN THE CENTRAL OR WESTERN GULF AND SINCE NO PROBLEM EXISTS THERE ARE NO GROUNDS FOR IMPLEMENTING OPTION B OR C IN THE CENTRAL OR WESTERN GULF.
3. THERE IS A PROBLEM IN THE EASTERN GULF WHICH COULD BE ADDRESSED BY REDUCING THE AGGREGATED ROCKFISH MRB.

I. EA/RIR OPTIONS

- A. Status Quo
- B. Remove shortraker/rougheye and thornyhead from the aggregate rockfish category and set a separate MRB for each of the two species AND revise the MRB for shortraker/rougheye and thornyhead in the Deep Water Complex within the range of 10 to 5% and in the Shallow Water Complex within the range of 3 to 1%.
- C. Prohibit the use of non-pelagic gear in the POP fishery.

II. COMMENTS ON FLAWS IN THE PROCESS AND IN THE OPTIONS

Agenda Item D-1(b) is a final action item which did not go through an initial review. Further the final analysis was not available for public review until late in the week of April of 4. AGDB appreciates the Council staff's effort in sending the document to AGDB as quickly as possible.

Were the proposed amendment simply a change in the MRB rate this lack of the full process could be overlooked. However, the option to prohibit non-pelagic gear for the Pacific Ocean Perch fishery elevates the proposed action to a major action which has severe economic and allocative ramifications, none of which have been analyzed, among the trawl fleets participating in the Pacific Ocean Perch fisheries.

Further the EA/RIR does not address changing the MRB for the aggregated rockfish complex. The effect of removing shortraker/rougheye and thornyhead from the aggregated complex without an analysis of the appropriate MRB for the diminished aggregated rockfish complex may result in a higher bycatch of all other rockfish.

AGDB feels these flaws alone in the EA/RIR are serious enough that the document should be sent back and redone with appropriate analysis and options.

AGENDA ITEM D-1(B) ROCKFISH MRB -- APRIL 13, 1999 - PAGE 2 OF 18**III. SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE BYCATCH BY GULF AREA 1991 THRU 1998
(TABLES 1 AND 2)**

WESTERN GULF: Out of the 8 years 1991 through 1998 the shortraker/rougheye quota was exceeded twice: by 9% in 1994, 27% in 1995.

The years 1991 through 1994 shortraker/rougheye ended the year on PSC status, but only actually exceeded the quota in only two of the four years. Since 1994 shortraker/rougheye has remained on bycatch status for the entire year.

CENTRAL GULF: Out of the 8 years 1991 through 1998 the shortraker/rougheye quota was exceeded three times: by 7% in 1992, 3% in 1993, 1% in 1995.

The years 1991 through 1995 shortraker/rougheye ended the year on PSC status, but actually exceeded the quota in only three of the five years. Since 1995 shortraker/rougheye has remained on bycatch status for the entire year.

EASTERN GULF: Out of the 8 years 1991 through 1998 the shortraker/rougheye quota was exceeded seven times: by 19% in 1992, 27% in 1993, 4% in 1994, 53% in 1995, 12% in 1996, 18% in 1997 and 60% in 1998. Shortraker/Rougheye has ended all the years 1991 through 1998 on prohibited species status.

In 1996 AGDB and Groundfish Forum submitted a proposal to reduce the MRB for trawl sablefish in the Gulf of Alaska from 15% to 7%. The new regulation became effective April 10, 1997. It was the opinion of the members of both AGDB and Groundfish Forum that sablefish was the bycatch target which resulted in the shortraker/rougheye quota being exceeded.

The Eastern Gulf has had only one year, 1991, when the shortraker/rougheye quota was NOT exceeded. AGDB members recognize that this is a serious problem and the MRB for Eastern Gulf trawl sablefish and aggregated rockfish should be adjusted.

**IV. SHARE OF THE CATCH OF SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE BYCATCH BETWEEN
TRAWL AND LONGLINE. (TABLE 3).**

WESTERN GULF: In the Western Gulf 1991 through 1998 the hook and line catch of shortraker/rougheye has increased from 3% of the quota to 74% and appears to be stabilizing around 65%. Trawl share has declined from 1991's 97% to around 35%.

CENTRAL GULF: In the Central Gulf 1991 through 1998 the hook and line catch of shortraker/rougheye ranges between 10 and 20% of the total catch. Trawl share ranges between 80 to 90 % of the total catch.

EASTERN GULF: In the Eastern Gulf 1992 through 1998 the hook and line catch of shortraker/rougheye ranged between 50 and 75% of the total catch. Trawl share ranged between 25 to 50% of the total catch.

V. THORNYHEAD QUOTA AND BYCATCH 1991 THROUGH 1998 (TABLES 1 AND 2)

1991 through 1997 thornyhead was a Gulfwide quota. Information of the bycatch by Gulf reporting areas was not provided in the EA/RIR. Gulfwide the thornyhead quota was exceeded two times: in 1993 by 29% and in 1994 by 3%. 1993 and 1994 were also the only two years in which thornyheads ended the year on prohibited species status.

Thornyheads were open for target fishing in 1991 and 1992. Since 1992 thornyhead has been on bycatch status starting January 1.

In 1998 the thornyhead quota was apportioned among the three Gulf reporting areas. In the Western Gulf 81% of the quota was taken, in the Central Gulf 89% was taken and in the Eastern Gulf 35% of the quota was taken. Gulfwide only 57% of the thornyhead bycatch was taken in 1998.

AGENDA ITEM D-1(B) ROCKFISH MRB - APRIL 13, 1999 - PAGE 3 OF 18**VI. SHARE OF THE BYCATCH OF THORNYHEAD BYCATCH BETWEEN TRAWL AND LONGLINE GEAR. (TABLE 3)**

Only Gulfwide catch data is available 1991 through 1997 for thornyheads. Gulfwide hook and line gear share of the bycatch ranged from 20 to 50% and trawl gear took 48 to 76% of the thornyhead bycatch.

In 1998 the thornyhead Gulfwide quota was apportioned among the three Gulf reporting areas.

In the Western Gulf longline gear took 55% of the thornyhead bycatch and trawls took 45%.

In the Central Gulf longline gear took 21% of the thornyhead bycatch and trawls took 79%.

In the Eastern Gulf longline gear took 88% of the thornyhead bycatch and trawls took 12%.

VII. COMMENTS ON OPTION 3 - PROHIBITING NON-PELAGIC TRAWLING FOR PACIFIC OCEAN PERCH.

This provision dramatically changes the economics of the Pacific Ocean Perch fishery by terminating the ability for trawlers to take sablefish as part of the Pacific Ocean Perch fishery. Further, in the Central Gulf, this provision would reallocate a large share of the trawl sablefish quota from the shorebased catcher vessels to the factory trawl fleet.

Shorebased operations started in 1995. At that time there had been no frozen rockfish fillets on the market and the shorebased operations had to develop markets. The marketing effort is moving along well and exvessel prices have increased.

The Japanese market prefers red rockfish with the scales on. Maintaining the red color requires that the fish be frozen on board, which precludes shorebased operations from the Japanese market. Even though at sea operations may receive a higher price for POP than shorebased operations, the sablefish bycatch is also important to at sea operations.

Trawl sablefish quota bycatch is taken in all the Deep Complex fisheries as well as in the Pacific Ocean Perch fishery. The MRB for sablefish is the trawl fleets' way of setting "trip limits" to assure all users a share of this valuable fish.

Were Pacific Ocean Perch to be designated a non-pelagic trawl only fishery, the trawl fleet could increase the catch of Deep Flatfish to take more sablefish. However, the halibut bycatch rates and crab bycatch rates are far higher in the flatfish fisheries than in the rockfish fisheries.

This option is a major economic and allocative action proposed without an analysis and contemplated for final action without appropriate process.

VIII. OTHER COMMENTS

- A. Using Gulf wide averages is inappropriate because each Gulf reporting area has its own fleets, different shelf widths, different fishing practices, different gear mixes and different makeups of vessel sizes.
- B. The table of discards by gear type on Page 5 should be done separately for Western, Central and Eastern Gulf.
- C. Setting separate MRB's for any one rockfish is problematic because many of the observers cannot reliably identify the many rockfish species which may be encountered. This is why the MRB for rockfish was originally made for rockfish in aggregate.
- D. Survey data is unreliable because there is inadequate survey of the deep strata due to budget constraints.

AGENDA ITEM D-1(B) ROCKFISH MRB -- APRIL 13, 1999 - PAGE 4 OF 18

E. Page 26. Last sentence under Alternative 3 is "This action would also reduce the impact of bottom trawling on the benthos, and therefore contribute to the overall health and viability of the ecosystem as a whole." has no place in this document unless the bottom type and impact of the gear on that bottom type has been researched and described and the impact on the ecosystem stated.

F. Page 31. Last sentence under Alternative 3 is "This would limit the economic effects to this (trawl) sector, which is composed of both small and large entities, and would spare new regulatory changes on the sablefish hook-and-line fleet which is composed primarily of small entities." There is no data to support this statement. Further the statement is not true for the Gulf trawl fleets. The Gulf shorebased trawlers are all small entities and most, if not all, of the factory trawl vessels fishing the Gulf POP fishery qualify as small entities

This sentence also states that trawl gear account for the greatest share of shortraker/rougheye and thornyhead taken as bycatch. For shortraker/rougheye this statement is not true for the Western or Eastern Gulf. It is true in the Central Gulf.

For thornyheads the trawl fleet appears to average about 10% more catch than the hook and line fleet Gulfwide.

By area in 1998 longline gear took 54% of the thornyhead bycatch in the Western Gulf and 88% in the Eastern Gulf. In the Central Gulf trawl gear took 78% of the thornyhead bycatch.

IX. **LOCALIZED OVERFISHING:** This issue, though not addressed in the EA/RIR, is of great concern when fishing site specific species. In 1997 AGDB requested that the plan team assess whether the Central Gulf Pacific Ocean Perch concentrations were being fished equally or if one group was being hit harder than other groups. In 1998 this review was completed with the opinion that the fishing effort was spread out appropriately. That paper is attached to these comments. AGDB thanks the Plan Team and paper author Chris Lunsford for their attention to AGDB's request.

Thank you for your consideration of these extensive comments.



Chris Blackburn, Director
Alaska Groundfish Data Bank

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TABLES 1, 2 AND 3

AGENDA ITEM D-1(b)

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED CHANGE IN THE MRB FOR SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD ROCKFISH

SUBMITTED BY ALASKA GROUND FISH DATA APRIL 13, 1999

**TABLE 1: SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD STATUS 1991 THROUGH 1998
1995 through 1998 contained in the EA/RIR, 1995 through 1998 added by AGDB from
NMFS Closure Summaries.**

**TABLE 2: SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD QUOTA AND CATCH 1991 THRU 1998
1995 through 1998 contained in the EA/RIR, 1995 through 1998 added by AGDB from
NMFS Inseason management end of the year catch report**

**TABLE 3: SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD QUOTA AND CATCH BY GEAR 1991
THRU 1998. Data from year end NMFS Inseason Management Catch by Gear report.**

TABLE 1 - PAGE 6 OF 18

TABLE 1				
SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish status of fisheries from 1991 through 1998				
Species/Y	Western GOA	Central GOA	Eastern GOA	Entire GOA
SR/RE				
1991	PSC (04/08/91)	PSC (06/21/91)	PSC (06/21/91)	
1992	PSC (02/21/92)	PSC (10/07/92)	PSC (07/01/92)	
1993	PSC (07/24/93)	PSC (07/24/93)	PSC (08/04/93)	
1994	PSC (08/03/94)	PSC (09/30/94)	PSC (08/03/94)	
1995	BYC (01/01/95)	PSC (10/01/95)	PSC (07/09/95)	
1996	BYC (01/01/96)	BYC (01/01/96)	PSC (07/14/96)	
1997	BYC (01/01/97)	BYC (01/01/97)	PSC (09/23/97)	
1998	BYC (01/01/98)	BYC (01/01/98)	PSC (10/01/98)	
Thornyhead				
1991				Open (01/01/91)
1992				BYC (10/10/91)
1993				PSC (07/22/93)
1994				PSC (08/02/94)
1995				BYC (01/01/95)
1996		PSC (07/22/96)*		BYC (01/01/96)
1997				BYC (01/01/97)
1998	BYC (01/01/98)	BYC (01/01/98)	BYC (01/01/98)	
Note: In 1991 & 1992, both species started the year (Jan. 1) as open to directed fishing.				
All other years both species on Bycatch Status as of January 1				
*This psc closure is in the EA/RIR, but the only PSC closure 7/22/96				
was for Other rockfish in the Central Gulf				

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TABLE 2

SR/RE and thornyhead rockfish overfishing, ABC, TAC, harvest amount, and percent of TAC harvested from 1991 to 1998

Species/category by year	Area	OFL	ABC	TAC	Harvest	% of TAC
SR/RE rockfish						
1991	W			100	73	73.00
1992	W		100	100	98	98.00
1993	W		100	90	85	94.44
1994	W		100	100	109	109.00
1995	W		170	170	215	126.47
1996	W		170	170	127	74.71
1997	W		160	160	137	85.63
1998	W		160	160	129	80.63
1991	C			1320	868	65.76
1992	C		1290	1290	1374	106.51
1993	C		1290	1161	1197	103.10
1994	C		1290	1290	886	68.68
1995	C		1210	1210	1223	101.07
1996	C		1210	1210	941	77.77
1997	C		970	970	931	95.98
1998	C		970	970	870	89.69
1991	E			580	410	70.69
1992	E		570	570	676	118.60
1993	E		570	513	650	126.71
1994	E		570	570	594	104.21
1995	E		530	530	812	153.21
1996	E		530	530	593	111.89
1997	E		460	460	541	117.61
1998	E		460	460	735	159.78
1991	Total		2262	2000	1351	67.55
1992	Total	2900	1960	1960	2148	109.59
1993	Total	2900	1960	1764	1932	109.52
1994	Total	2900	1960	1960	1589	81.07
1995	Total	2925	1910	1910	2250	117.80
1996	Total	2925	1910	1910	1661	86.96
1997	Total	2740	1590	1590	1609	101.19
1998	Total	2740	1590	1590	1704	107.17

Thornyhead rockfish

1991	All		980	1398	1085	77.61
1992	All	2440	1280	1798	1660	92.32
1993	All	1440	1180	1062	1369	128.91
1994	All	1440	1180	1180	1211	102.63
1995	All	2660	1900	1900	1113	58.58
1996	All	2200	1560	1248	1132	90.71
1997	All	2400	1700	1700	1240	72.94
1998	All	2840	2000	2000	1136	56.80
1998	W		250	250	202	80.80
	C		710	710	527	74.23
	E		1040	1040	362	34.81

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TABLE 3						
SR/RE rockfish catch by area by gear from 1991 through 1998						
Species/Year	Area	TOT CAT	Trawl - MT	Trawl - %	H&L - MT	H&L - %
SR/RE rockfish						
1991	W	71	69	97.18	2	2.82
1992	W	99	67	67.68	32	32.32
1993	W	85	25	29.41	60	70.59
1994	W	109	87	79.82	22	20.18
1995	W	216	97	44.91	119	55.09
1996	W	126	33	26.19	93	73.81
1997	W	138	50	36.23	88	63.77
1998	W	129	43	33.33	86	66.67
1991	C	869	857	98.62	12	1.38
1992	C	1374	1329	96.72	45	3.28
1993	C	1197	925	77.28	272	22.72
1994	C	887	692	78.02	195	21.98
1995	C	1250	1128	90.24	122	9.76
1996	C	941	827	87.89	114	12.11
1997	C	931	833	89.47	98	10.53
1998	C	869	691	79.52	178	20.48
1991	E	410	355	86.59	55	13.41
1992	E	677	333	49.19	344	50.81
1993	E	650	330	50.77	320	49.23
1994	E	593	173	29.17	420	70.83
1995	E	856	346	40.42	510	59.58
1996	E	593	255	43.00	338	57.00
1997	E	542	185	34.13	357	65.87
1998	E	735	181	24.63	554	75.37
1991	Total	1350	1281	94.89	69	5.11
1992	Total	2150	1729	80.42	421	19.58
1993	Total	1932	1280	66.25	652	33.75
1994	Total	1589	952	59.91	637	40.09
1995	Total	2322	1571	67.66	751	32.34
1996	Total	1660	1115	67.17	545	32.83
1997	Total	1611	1068	66.29	543	33.71
1998	Total	1733	915	52.80	818	47.20
Thornyhead rockfish						
1991	All	1062	812	76.46	250	23.54
1992	All	1660	1124	67.71	536	32.29
1993	All	1369	663	48.43	706	51.57
1994	All	1211	720	59.45	491	40.55
1995	All	1119	647	57.82	472	42.18
1996	All	1131	606	53.58	525	46.42
1997	All	1241	784	63.17	457	36.83
1998	W	202	91	45.05	111	54.95
	C	572	450	78.67	122	21.33
	E	363	42	11.57	321	88.43
	Total	1137	583	51.28	554	48.72

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APPENDIX 1

**COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED CHANGE IN THE MRB FOR
SHORTRAKER/ROUGHEYE AND THORNYHEAD ROCKFISH**

SUBMITTED BY ALASKA GROUND FISH DATA APRIL 13, 1999

**SIZE AND DISTRIBUTION OF PACIFIC OCEAN PERCH HARVESTED IN
LOCALIZED AREAS OF THE CENTRAL GULF**

BY CHRIS LUNSFORD , AUKE BAY LABORATORY, ASC

NOVEMBER 12, 1998

Draft

of
**Size and Distribution, Pacific Ocean Perch Harvested
In Localized Areas of the Central Gulf of Alaska**

By:

Chris Lunsford
Auke Bay Laboratory, AFSC
11305 Glacier Hwy.
Juneau AK, 99801

November 12, 1998

Report submitted to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Plan Team

Introduction

Concerns have been expressed recently regarding Pacific ocean perch (POP) populations in the central Gulf of Alaska targeted by catcher vessels near Kodiak. In 1998 an estimated 7,376 mt of Pacific ocean perch was caught in the central Gulf. Catcher boats have accounted for 2262 mt, 30 percent of the total catch from this region. Due to the limited range of catcher vessels and concerns expressed by industry about the size of fish caught by catcher vessels, we investigated the possibility of intense fishing pressure near Kodiak causing localized depletions of POP in the central GOA.

Methods

Observer data was analyzed to determine the length compositions of POP in commercial catches. Average length by year (1996-1998) was compared between catcher boats and catcher/processor boats. These average lengths were also compared to the average length of the exploitable population based on results from the POP assessment model.

The locations of commercial catches were plotted by gear type to examine the geographic distribution of fishing effort. The areas of high fishing pressure were compared to the NMFS trawl survey results from the 1993 and 1996 surveys. The distribution of effort by vessel type was compared among three general areas of the central Gulf of Alaska (Figure 1). Area 1 is strictly fished by catcher/processors, area 2 primarily by catcher boats, and area 3 by both types of vessels. For further comparison, the weight of POP catch was compared between the survey and commercial catches for these three general areas. It should be noted the commercial catches only represent those found in the observer database and have not been extrapolated to include all estimated catch in the central GOA.

Results

There does not seem to be any indication that the size of fish caught in the central Gulf is uncommonly small. Over the last three years the average size of fish caught by catcher boats has increased and appears to be larger than the average for catcher/processor boats (Figure 2). The mean size of fish for both vessel types is between 35.5 - 37.5 cm. The average length by haul was also computed for both vessel types combined and ranged from 17 cm to 45 cm (Figure 3). However, less than one percent of the total hauls had an average length of less than 32 cm. The average size of the exploitable population in the GOA has historically been between 33 - 38 cm (Figure 4). A cohort analysis indicates the maximum biomass of an unfished population occurs at age twelve, which is equivalent to a 37.9 cm fish (Figure 5). In addition, the 50% age at maturity for POP in the GOA was determined to be 10.5 years, or 35.7 cm.

The locations of commercial trawl locations and the locations of high survey catches are quite similar (Figures 1, 6, 7). Table 1 shows the proportion of POP biomass by area in the central GOA for the 1993 and 1996 surveys. For both surveys, area 1 had the highest proportion of biomass. However, in the 1996 survey the POP biomass was well distributed among all three areas. The observer data was weighted by the percentage of overall catch from each vessel type and summed over both vessel types to obtain a representative proportion of total POP catch for each area. The observer data indicates the proportion of catch by area fluctuated between 1996 and 1998 (Table 2). In 1997 only 23 percent of the catch came from area 3 but rose to 55 percent in 1998. When these proportions are broken down by vessel type it is apparent that area one was strictly fished by catcher/processor vessels (Table 3). It is also evident a large amount of catch was taken from area 3 by both vessel types in 1998 in comparison to previous years. Thus, fishery effort for POP by both vessel types is intense in certain geographical areas but fluctuates on a yearly basis. Further, when fishery effort is compared to survey biomass estimates in these areas and to the length frequency analysis above, it appears POP are not being disproportionately harvested in any particular geographical area within the central Gulf of Alaska.

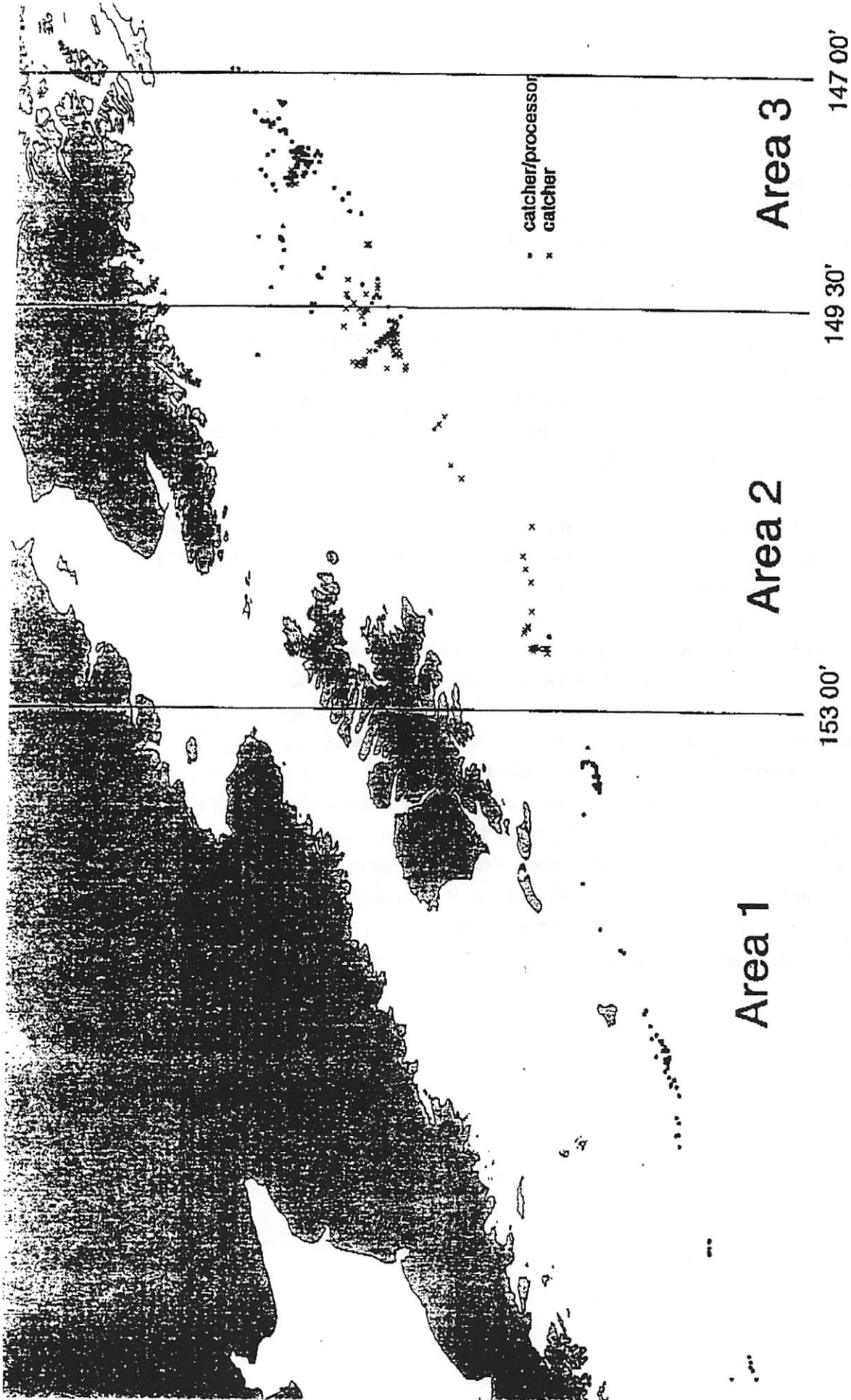


Figure 1. The central Gulf of Alaska stratified into three general areas based upon the location of effort by catcher vessels and catcher/processor vessels

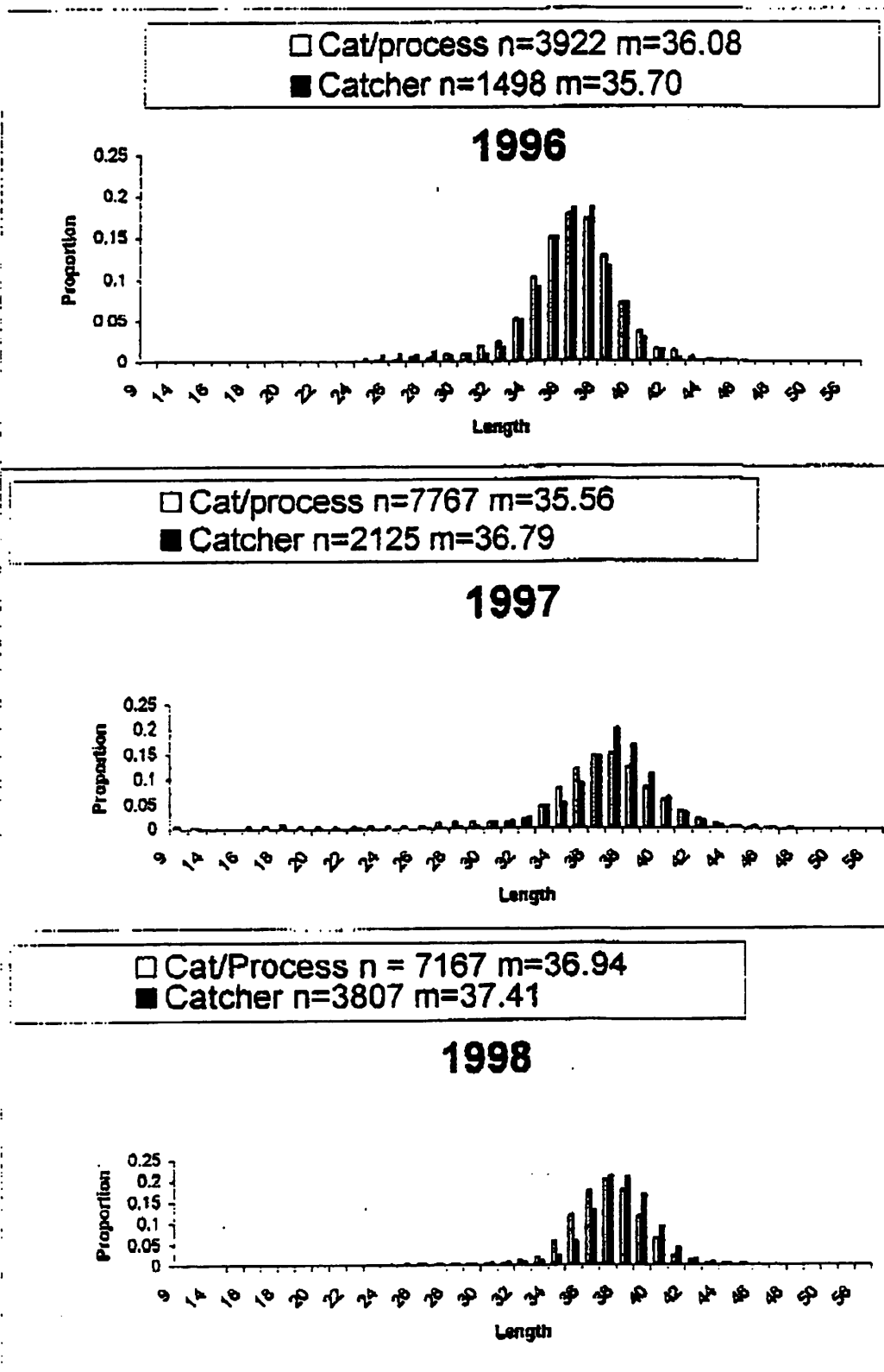


Figure 2. Length Frequencies of POP by vessel type for 1996-1998 in the central Gulf of Alaska. n = total measured, m = mean length (cm).

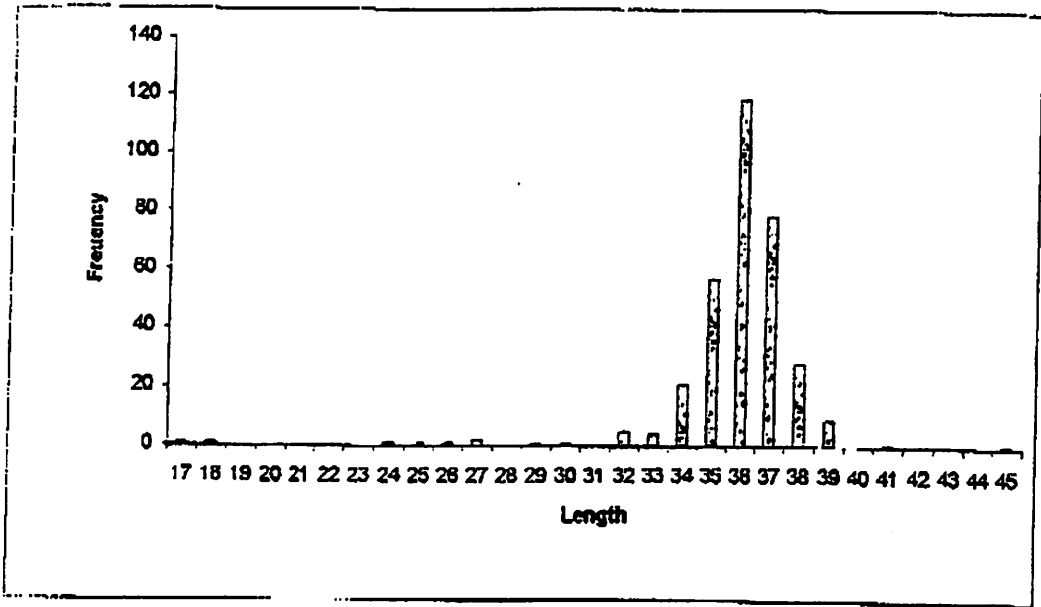


Figure 3. Average length by haul for commercial catches from 1996-98. Lengths rounded down to nearest cm.

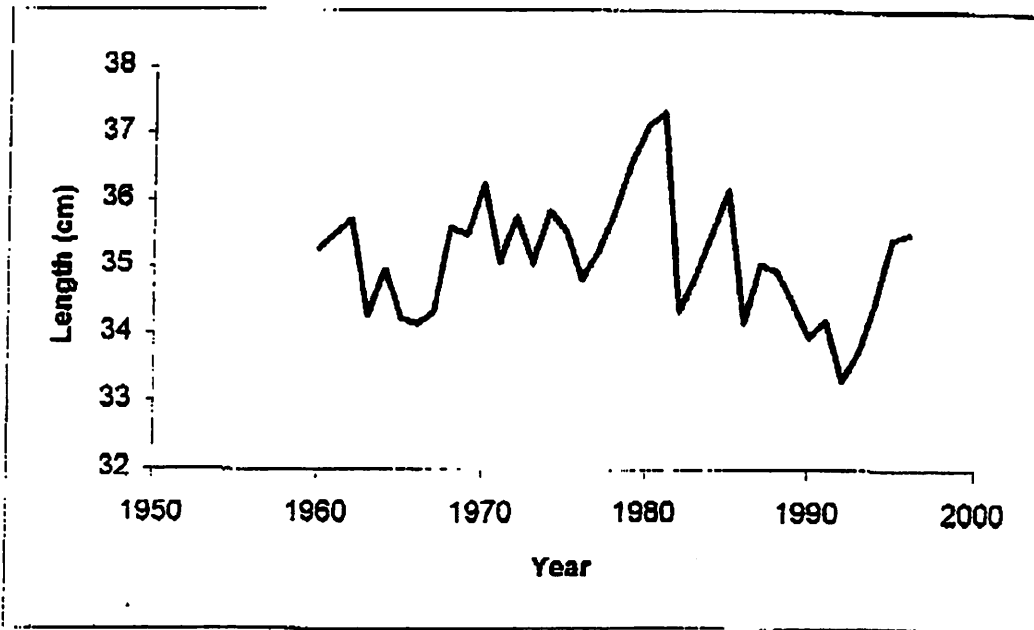


Figure 4. Average size of the exploitable population (age > 6 years) of POP in the Gulf of Alaska.

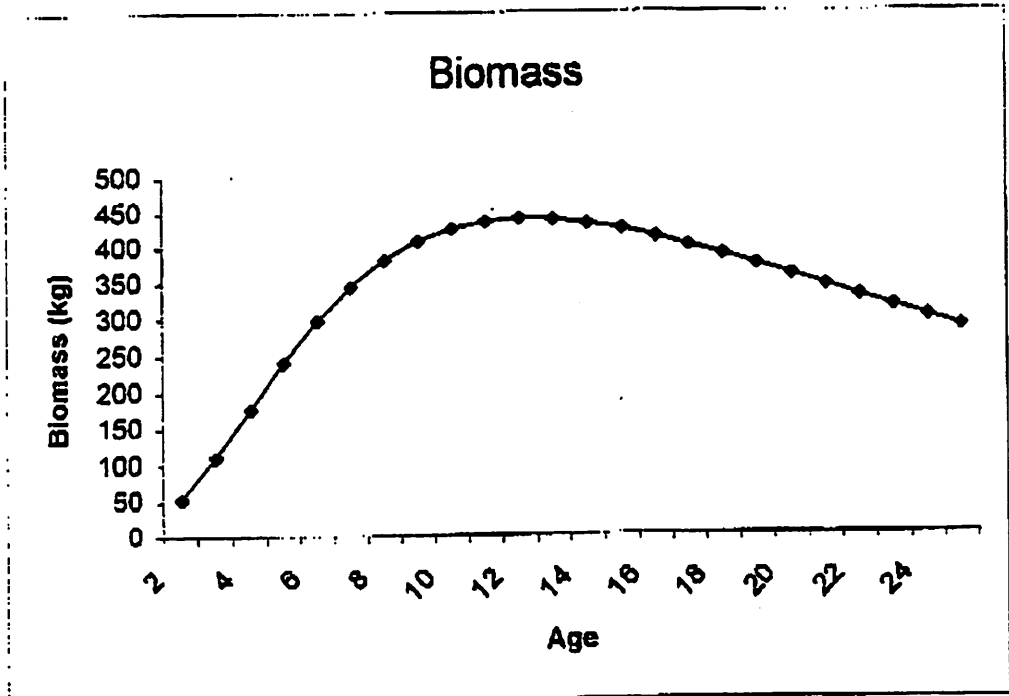


Figure 5. Projected biomass from a cohort analysis on an unfished population of POP in the Gulf of Alaska.

Figure 6. POP catch by quartile in the 1993 NMFS trawl survey.





Figure 7. POP catch by quartile in the 1996 NMFS trawl survey.

Table 1. Proportion of POP catch by area in the 1993 and 1996 surveys for the central Gulf of Alaska.

	1993	1996
Area 1	0.61	0.43
Area 2	0.30	0.23
Area 3	0.09	0.33

Table 2. Proportion of POP catch by area for observer data (vessel type combined) in the central Gulf of Alaska.

	1996	1997	1998
Area 1	0.20	0.41	0.19
Area 2	0.55	0.35	0.25
Area 3	0.25	0.23	0.55

**Table 3. Proportion of POP catch by area for observer data by vessel type in the central Gulf of Alaska. c/p = catcher processor vessels
c/p = catcher processor vessels c = catcher vessels**

	1996		1997		1998	
	c/p	c	c/p	c	c/p	c
Area 1	0.40	0.00	0.64	0.00	0.28	0.00
Area 2	0.24	0.88	0.05	0.91	0.08	0.65
Area 3	0.37	0.11	0.31	0.09	0.64	0.35

GROUNDFISH FORUM, INC.

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April 13, 1999

Mr. Richard Lauber, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

RECEIVED
APR 14 1999
N.P.F.M.C.

Re: SR/RE/Thornyhead MRB Reduction

Dear Chairman Lauber,

Groundfish Forum has a number of concerns regarding the contents of the EA/RIR/IRFA for a regulatory amendment to revise maximum retainable bycatch percentages for shortraker/rougheye and thornyhead rockfish in the Gulf of Alaska. The information provided in the analysis does not provide a compelling rationale for either an "across the board" reduction of the maximum retainable bycatch percentages (MRB) or a prohibition on trawling for Pacific Ocean Perch with bottom trawls.

Groundfish Forum has consistently supported the use of MRB as an effective means to meter the harvest rate of valuable species with relatively low TACs throughout the fishing year – a balance between excessive regulatory discards following a target fishery and the foregone value of unharvested groundfish. In fact, we have supported downward adjustments of MRB where trawl harvest rates threatened to preempt other fisheries or result in exceeding TAC (e.g., reduction of sablefish MRB from 15 % to 7% in GOA, 1996; reduction of SR/RE MRB in the Aleutian Islands, 1998). In this case, however, Groundfish Forum does not support the reduction of SR/RE and thornyhead MRB in the Central and Western Gulf of Alaska.

For the Eastern Gulf, Groundfish Forum recommends an adjustment to the MRB that will prevent SR/RE and thornyhead catch from causing the premature closure of the hook-and-line sablefish fishery while preserving the current share of those species between the trawl and hook-and-line sectors.

Please find below some of our specific points regarding the analysis and its conclusions:

The "problem" is limited to the Eastern Gulf of Alaska. In the past three years, the TAC for SR/RE has been exceeded three times in the Eastern Gulf of Alaska and not once in the Western or Central Gulf. The thornyhead TAC has not been exceeded in any area in the past four years. This being the case, the MRB levels in the Central and Western are appropriate at their current levels and need not be changed.

A reduction to the MRB in the Eastern Gulf will have allocative results that are not addressed in the analysis. Over recent years the amount of SR/RE taken by the trawl sector has decreased greatly and is currently only twenty percent of the total SR/RE catch while the amount taken in the hook-and-line sablefish fishery has steadily and dramatically increased. The trawl fleet's rockfish fishery in the Eastern Gulf is quite abbreviated (it lasted less than two weeks in 1998). This already greatly limits the fleet's access to SR/RE harvest. Reducing the MRB for both gear types will have the allocative result of further eroding the amount of SR/RE available to the trawl fleet while insuring that excessive SR/RE bycatch in the hook-and-line sablefish fishery doesn't prematurely close that fishery. The most effective and equitable solution in the Eastern Gulf is to adjust the MRB for the hook-and-line fishery so that their historical share of the SR/RE and thornyhead catch is not harvested prior to the close of the sablefish fishery. Allowing the MRB for the trawl fleet to remain unchanged will simply provide the fleet with the opportunity to preserve their already diminished share of the Eastern Gulf harvest.

The analysis includes incorrect and unsubstantiated conclusions regarding the prohibition of directed fishing for Pacific Ocean Perch with non-pelagic trawls and fails to address the allocative nature of such a prohibition. The author of the analysis claims that a pelagic fishery for Pacific Ocean Perch would "reduce impacts on the benthic environment" and would "contribute to the overall health and viability of the ecosystem as a whole." Groundfish Forum is alarmed by the presence of such strong conclusions in an analysis that contains no scientific justifications or comparisons of various gear types' impact on the benthos.

The document contains no examination of the sustainability of a 100% pelagic-only POP fishery and the possible effects of a pelagic fishery on local populations of the species. There is some evidence to suggest there are a very limited number of areas where POP can be harvested with a mid-water trawl. Directing 100% of the trawl fleet's POP harvesting efforts to these few spots could result in a rapid and severe depletion of those local populations.

While the analysis focuses on the fact that a pelagic-only POP fishery will drastically reduce the amount of SR/RE and thornyhead harvested by the trawl sector, it fails to point out that trawlers also retain sablefish bycatch in the POP fishery. The trawl fleet depends on its ability to "top off" on sablefish in the course of the rockfish fishery. Making the POP fishery pelagic-only would not only reduce the catch of SR/RE and thornyhead by the trawl fleet but would foreclose on an equally important economic opportunity to harvest sablefish as well. The document includes neither a quantitative nor a qualitative analysis of this economic loss to the trawl fleet.

The analysis states that "in 1998, the TAC [for SR/RE] was exceeded by 275 metric tons in the Eastern Regulatory Area" and that "if the alternative to prohibit non-pelagic trawl gear in the POP fishery had been effective, it is likely that the TAC would not have been exceeded in 1998." This vastly overstates the roll of the trawl harvests of SR/RE in exceeding the TAC in the Eastern Gulf. Please note that in 1998 the Eastern Gulf TAC was exceeded by 275 metric tons, yet the harvest of SR/RE by the trawl fleet in that area totaled only 181 metric tons.

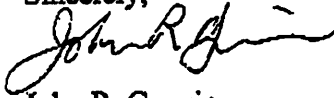
This point truly demonstrates the scale of the problem in the Eastern Gulf of Alaska and the need for the Council to craft an equitable solution for all gear groups. This shows that a 100%

reduction in SR/RE harvest by the trawl sector in the Eastern Gulf with reducing the MRB for the hook-and-line fleet would still result in exceeding the TAC.

In summary, Groundfish Forum recommends that the Council take no action in regard to the reduction of SR/RE and thornyhead MRB in the Central and Western Gulf of Alaska and the prohibition of directed fishing for Pacific Ocean Perch with non-pelagic trawls. In regard to the Eastern Gulf of Alaska, we recommend that the Council more carefully evaluate the allocative and economic impacts of an "across-the-board" reduction of the MRB. The Groundfish Forum requests that the Council take steps to insure that the trawl fleet's current access to valuable bycatch species in the Eastern Gulf is not further eroded as a result of any reductions in MRB.

Thank you for considering Groundfish Forums's views on this matter. Please don't hesitate to call me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



John R. Garvin