



## D2 Sablefish Trawl Overages

June 2021 Council Meeting

### Action Memo

Council Staff: Steve MacLean  
Other Presenters: Mary Furuness, Steve Whitney (NMFS Alaska Regional Office)  
Action Required: Review discussion paper, action as necessary

### BACKGROUND

In December 2020 the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) requested that staff prepare a discussion paper to examine management tools that the Council may consider to limit or prevent overages of trawl sablefish area- and sector-specific allocations. The Council specified that the discussion paper should provide relevant data and consider management measures to address sector allocating overages that may include:

1. Time/Area closures;
2. Reduced allocations to target species with high sablefish bycatch;
3. Inter-cooperative agreements and incentive programs;
4. Lower Maximum Retainable Amounts (MRAs) or extended MRA status (i.e., no trawl sablefish directed fishing);
5. Actions take by other councils to manage sector allocations.

The Council also directed that the discussion paper should include a discussion of management implications of restraining catch to regional, area and sector allocations, any benefits to the sablefish stock of reducing juvenile sablefish fishing mortality, and projected impacts to the trawl and fixed gear sectors.

The Council initiated this discussion paper in response to public comment and a letter submitted to the Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries in October 2020, identifying a number of complaints about the trawl sector exceeding its sablefish allocation.

In addition to the management measure discussion requested by the Council, this discussion paper also provides context for understanding sablefish ACLs and how they are managed, and sablefish catch in the trawl fisheries.

### Sablefish stock assessment and fishery management

The abundance of sablefish has fluctuated since at least the 1960s, and reached its lowest point in 2015. Since then, several large year classes have greatly increased the predicted biomass to the highest relative population numbers in the time series. Spawning stock biomass (SSB) has lagged survey biomass, but is expected to increase rapidly as the strong year classes recruit to SSB. Until the strong year classes mature, the age composition of the stock remains skewed toward younger fish.

The best available science suggests that a single sablefish stock occupies the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Gulf of Alaska. In December 2019 the SSC considered the state of the science and concluded that the

sablefish stock structure supports a single, Alaska-wide Overfishing Level (OFL) specification. Current model predictions indicate that this stock is not subject to overfishing, not overfished, and not approaching an overfished condition. Acceptable Biological Catches (ABCs) for sablefish continue to be specified by management areas. In December 2020, the SSC and the Council agreed with the Plan Team that a substantial reduction in the 2020 and 2021 ABCs from the maximum permissible ABCs was warranted. Because of the precaution shown in establishing ABC, the increase in biomass, particularly in young, small fish has greatly outpaced the increase in ABC and the associated TACs.

Alaska-wide sablefish Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) and total catch are well below biomass estimates from annual stock assessments. Total Allowable Catches (TACs) have been set at a precautionary level relative to ABC to address concerns with the sablefish stock assessment. A consequence of setting TACs low relative to the maximum permissible ABC is that it becomes more difficult to avoid encounters when strong recruitment is driving a greater abundance of fish in the water.

### **Trawl Sablefish Catch**

Trawl fisheries have exceeded several area-based trawl sablefish allocations in recent years (Table 3 in discussion paper). Catch data suggest that this is a recent occurrence coincident with incoming large year classes (Fig 1 and Fig 2), and occurs primarily in the Bering Sea and Central GOA (Table 3). Before 2016 total sablefish catch in the trawl fisheries was less than 5% of the trawl allocation of the TAC in the BS, AI and Western GOA, and less than 60% of the TAC in the Central GOA (Table 3). Since 2018, the AFA CV sector sablefish catch has increased markedly over their catch from 2013 through 2017 (Table 4), again coincident with the large increase in young sablefish observed in the surveys.

Trawl fisheries in the BSAI and GOA operate under a number of sector- or cooperative-level hard caps and PSC limits that influence their ability to respond to emerging incidental catch encounters. The Amendment 80 sector works with the most varied portfolio of allocated target species in a catch share program as well as profitable groundfish species that are not allocated to the Amendment 80 program, such as sablefish. Details of the Amendment 80 operations can be found in other Council analyses, such as the BSAI Halibut ABC PSC Limits analysis.

Pelagic pollock trawl fisheries in the BSAI operate within a number of bycatch and PSC hardcaps that are monitored closely by the cooperatives. The CDQ, CV, CP, and mothership sectors have developed methods to track rates of bycatch for multiple species, including Chinook and chum salmon, herring, and sablefish. Bycatch data are used to identify “hotspots” where bycatch rates are higher. If appropriate, the cooperatives can enact temporary closures for some or all of their cooperative members in areas with high bycatch rates.

### **Potential management measures to prevent trawl sablefish overages**

Section 4 of the discussion paper addresses each of these management measures, but does not attempt to predict the effect of implementing them on total sablefish catch, or quantitatively predict the impact on trawl or fixed gear sectors. When possible, staff have included qualitative summaries of potential impacts on each sector, with the caveat that predicting the behavior of the fleet under hypothetical management measures is difficult.