



C2 Bering Sea Chum Salmon Bycatch

April 2024

Action Memo for the SSC

- Council Staff: Dr. Kate Haapala, Dr. Diana Stram, Ms. Sarah Marrinan, and Dr. Nicole Watson
- Other Presenters: Dr. Pat Barry, Dr. Lukas DeFilippo, Susie Zagorski, Stephanie Madsen, Austin Estabrooks, John Hendershedt
- NMFS Staff: Doug Shaftel, Gretchen Harrington, Jennifer Mondragon, Mary Furness
- Other Contributors: Dr. Wes Larson, Dr. Lukas DeFilippo, Dr. Sarah Wise, Dr. Katie Howard, Terese Vincente
- Action Required:
1. Initial Review Draft Analysis – Review and provide feedback on analysis to determine whether it is sufficient for final action
 2. Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska Chinook and chum salmon bycatch genetics reports - Review
 3. Bering Sea Pollock 2023 IPA Reports and proposals– Review

BACKGROUND

The SSC's primary role under C2 is to review the preliminary Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Social Impact Assessment (SIA) on Bering Sea chum salmon bycatch for scientific merit and provide advice to the Council. The SSC may consider whether the analysis provided is adequate, meets the analytical requirements of applicable laws and executive orders, and provides the Council with a sufficient understanding of the probable impacts of a decision related to this action. Based on this review, the SSC may determine the analysis should undergo additional review or that the analysis is sufficient to inform the Council for final action. Should the SSC determine the analysis requires additional review, it could expect that review to be scheduled in fall 2024. If the SSC determines the analysis is sufficient, and the Council determines it is ready to schedule final action, there would be a slightly different process that occurs between the April 2024 meeting and the Council meeting at which final action is scheduled because NMFS has determined an EIS is warranted for this action.

As is typically done, analytical staff would revise the analytical documents as requested by the SSC and Council. Next, the document would be published by NMFS as a DEIS. As analytical staff make these requested edits, staff will also be working to synthesize the materials presented at this meeting to meet the new statutory page limits – the published DEIS and Final EIS will be limited to 150 pages, excluding the Executive Summary and any appendices. The methodologies and main findings of the impact analysis presented to, and potentially approved by the SSC at this meeting, would not change (unless requested) when the analytical documents are synthesized. It is analytical staff's understanding that the Council would consider the published DEIS and comment summary report at final action.

Given this focus, staff have organized a streamlined set of presentations for the SSC to help inform its review of the preliminary DEIS and SIA. However, there are several written materials related to this agenda item that are available to the SSC and may be discussed in relation to this agenda item.

The presentation of materials will include 1) the preliminary DEIS and SIA from Council staff, 2) the 2023 Chinook/chum salmon genetic reports by Auke Bay Labs geneticists with a particular focus on 2023 Bering Sea chum salmon genetics, and 3) presentation of the 2023 Incentive Plan Reports (IPAs) and proposals for additional changes to the IPAs by the respective representatives.

PRELIMINARY DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT AND SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Council staff will provide the SSC a presentation of the preliminary DEIS and SIA that are posted to the SSC's eAgenda. These documents are Initial Review analyses of that evaluate potential environmental, economic, and social impacts that could result from proposed alternatives to minimize chum salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery, consistent with National Standard 9 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and all other National Standards. The Council's purpose and need statement notes the Council intends to consider establishing additional regulatory measures for chum salmon bycatch that reduces the bycatch of Western Alaska (WAK) origin chum salmon while maintaining the priority objectives of the Amendment 91 and 110 Chinook salmon bycatch avoidance program.

The preliminary DEIS and SIA focus on the potential impacts that could result from the Council's adopted set of four management alternatives (October 2023). **Alternative 1** is the No Action alternative. Under Alternative 1, the status quo regulations for chum salmon bycatch management in the Bering Sea would remain in place. Under **Alternative 2**, an overall chum salmon PSC limit (or hard cap) would be in place during the B season fishery; the B season occurs during the summer months (June 10 – November 1) and is the primary pollock fishing season when chum salmon are encountered. Under **option 2 of Alternative 2**, the Council is considering three mutually exclusive indices for WAK chum salmon abundance. Whether an index meets its threshold(s) would determine whether or not an overall chum salmon PSC limit would be in place during the B season. The Council selected indices threshold(s) in October 2023. Recall that the SSC received a limited presentation from analytical staff in October 2023 on the Preliminary Review analysis, including the development of indices for WAK chum salmon abundance. In October, the Council requested a synchronicity analysis to determine how well the indices based on Yukon River summer chum salmon (suboption 2a) and Yukon River summer and fall chum salmon (suboption 2b) trend with the Western Alaska chum salmon abundance represented by the Three-area index in suboption 1. The full synchronicity analysis is provided in Appendix 7 and the results summarized in Chapter 4 of the preliminary DEIS.

Under **Alternative 3**, an annual WAK chum salmon threshold of 40,000 to 53,000 WAK chum salmon would be in place during the B season. The estimated number of WAK chum salmon in the total bycatch based on genetic data would accrue to a sector's apportionment of the threshold. Each sector's performance against their WAK chum salmon threshold would be evaluated over time. Alternative 3 must be implemented in conjunction with Alternative 2.

Alternative 4 would modify existing regulations implementing the salmon bycatch Incentive Plan Agreements (IPAs). In October 2023, the Council provided a list of potential measures that could be developed for incorporation into the IPAs and/or through regulation and requested IPA representatives to submit proposals for how to specifically address these types of changes prior to its February 2024 meeting for inclusion in the Initial Review analysis. The IPA proposals can be found in Appendices 2 and 3 of the preliminary DEIS. It is staff's understanding that the Council's intent with Alternative 4 is that the IPAs would incorporate additional measures to avoid WAK chum salmon on the pollock fishing grounds primarily through the Rolling Hotspot System (RHS) for chum salmon avoidance, and a policy choice before the Council at this meeting is to determine whether it would like to develop additional (or more specific) regulatory provisions for the IPAs to respond to. Analytical staff have described the current RHS system for chum salmon avoidance under the status quo alternative and provided a qualitative analysis of the measures contained in the IPA proposals compared to the current RHS system for chum salmon avoidance.

BERING SEA AND GULF OF ALASKA SALMON BYCATCH GENETICS REPORTS

The SSC will receive the written reports on the genetic stock of origin of Chinook salmon and chum salmon bycatch in the 2023 Bering Sea pollock fishery, and the 2023 Chinook salmon bycatch in the GOA pollock fishery, GOA rockfish and arrowtooth trawl CV fishery, and the GOA non-pollock CP trawl fisheries. However, the SSC will only receive a presentation on the 2023 Bering Sea chum salmon and Chinook salmon genetics reports from Auke Bay Labs geneticists (Dr. Patrick Barry) as they are related to the action under consideration. Different from prior years when the SSC typically receives presentations on all salmon bycatch genetics reports and provides comments on program modifications and improvements, this is primarily an informational presentation for the SSC. It is analytical staff's understanding that the geneticists with Auke Bay Labs are not seeking specific input from the SSC at this time although the SSC may provide comments as it sees appropriate.

IPA REPORTS

Regulations at 50 CFR 679.21(f)(13) require IPA entities to submit written reports that must include specific information such as the incentive measures for salmon bycatch avoidance that were in effect during the previous year, how incentive measures affected individual vessels (i.e., vessel-level incentives), how incentive measures affected salmon bycatch avoidance beyond current levels, the amount of salmon caught as bycatch and target catch (pollock) at the end of each fishing season, among others. These reports are annually provided to the Council at its April meeting and on occasion the AP. The SSC does not regularly receive written or oral reports from IPA representatives annually. However, all three bodies will receive a presentation from representatives of the three IPA entities at this meeting.

The SSC is scheduled to receive presentations from IPA representatives on to provide information and additional context for how the current IPAs function, recent performance under the RHS system for chum salmon avoidance, and to provide SSC members with an opportunity to ask questions. In addition, as stated above, Alternative 4 would modify existing regulations implementing the IPAs and IPA representatives were asked to provide proposals detailing potential modifications. The IPA representatives may provide information on their respective proposals if they so choose, which are intended to provide the SSC additional information and context relevant to the action under consideration. The SSC's role is to consider the scope of analysis presented in the preliminary DEIS should elements of these proposals be incorporated into Alternative 4 rather than the efficacy of the proposals.