



D3 Sculpins to Ecosystem Component

April 2019 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Staff: Steve MacLean
Other Presenters: Megan Mackey (NMFS)
Action Required: 1. Discussion paper – review
2. Determine whether further action is warranted

BACKGROUND

In December 2018, the Council directed staff to produce a discussion paper evaluating the appropriate level of conservation and management required for sculpins in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Management Area (BSAI) and the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and National Standard (NS) guidelines. The Council’s motion directed staff to assess whether the best available scientific information indicates that sculpins could be managed as non-target species, specifically whether sculpins could be identified as “non-target ecosystem component species not in need of conservation and management.” Staff were also asked to assess regulations to prohibit directed fishing for sculpins, establish maximum retainable amounts for sculpins, and require recordkeeping and reporting to monitor catch and discards if sculpins were reclassified as non-target species.

Target stocks (or species) are those stocks or stock complexes that fishermen seek to catch for sale or personal use, including such fish that are discarded for economic or regulatory reasons. Non-target stocks are fish caught incidentally during the pursuit of target stocks in a fishery. Non-target stocks may require conservation and management and, if so, must be included in a FMP and identified at the stock or stock complex level. If non-target stocks are not in need of conservation and management as decided by a Council or the Secretary of Commerce, they may be identified in a FMP as ecosystem component (EC) species. This discussion paper explores the best available science as it applies to the appropriate classification of sculpins.

Next steps

Any action to move sculpins to EC status in the BSAI or GOA FMP would require a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. If the Council chooses to move forward with this action, it should identify a purpose and need statement and develop alternatives for consideration in an initial review draft analysis.

Fishery

Sculpins are currently taken only as bycatch in fisheries directed at other target species in the BSAI and GOA. It is likely that future sculpin catch will continue to be dependent on the distribution and limitations placed on other target fisheries, rather than on any harvest level established for sculpins. Since 2011 the sculpin complex total catch (retained and discarded) has ranged from 2-6% of the total estimated biomass in the BSAI and GOA (Table 2 in paper). Total catch in the BSAI has slightly exceeded the total allowable catch (TAC) in all years since 2011 except 2014. Catch in the GOA has been below the TAC

since 2011. Sculpins in the BSAI were moved to prohibited species status and required to be discarded on October 6, 2017.

Before 2010, sculpins were managed in each area as part of the “Other Species Complex” but have since been managed as an independent sculpin complex. Sculpins are managed as a Tier 5 complex in both areas. Specified OFLs for sculpins reflects the best available estimate possible with the available data. Sculpins, in general, are not retained and fishery observer data indicate that the retention rate has been below 10% in the BSAI and below 20% in the GOA. Since 2013, the retention rate has been below 5% in both the BSAI and GOA. Sculpins are not experiencing overfishing, and in the absence of a directed fishery are unlikely to be overfished.

Ex-vessel values for sculpins for product forms other than fish meal have ranged from \$0.00 to \$0.15 per pound from 2006 - 2017. Ex-vessel values for fish meal has been \$0.02 per pound from 2006 – 2017. A few Kodiak processors have experimented with processing and marketing sculpins. However, there is no current interest in developing a market for sculpin at this time. Retention and sale of sculpins is allowed subject to maximum retainable amounts (MRAs). Current MRAs for sculpins are 20% for all species in the GOA and BSAI except BSAI arrowtooth flounder (3%) and BSAI Kamchatka flounder (3%).

Requirements for Ecosystem Component Species

The MSA provides definitions for “conservation and management” and NMFS has recently published guidelines to aid Councils as they consider whether a stock requires conservation and management. The discussion paper provides detailed definitions and the NS guidelines for determining whether a species requires inclusion in a FMP and the appropriate category. Table 8 in the discussion paper considers the NS list of factors a Council should consider, and their relevance to sculpins in the BSAI and GOA.

Management Considerations

If sculpins were to be moved to the non-target category, in which case conservation and management would still be needed, TAC would no longer be required, but OFL and ABC would still be required. If sculpins were moved to the non-target EC category, conservation and management would not be considered necessary and OFL, ABC, and TAC would no longer be required. In either case, regulations would have to be revised to prohibit directed fishing for sculpins at all times in the BSAI and GOA groundfish fisheries.

At present, the OY cap in the GOA groundfish FMP is substantially greater than the total of all GOA TACs. Therefore, managing sculpins as a target species in the GOA does not require “funding” of sculpin TAC via reduction in TAC for any other groundfish species. In contrast, managing sculpins as a target species group in the BSAI FMP may have adverse effects on fishery total revenue, as managing sculpins as a target stock requires that sculpins would continue to be “funded” through reduced TAC of other more valuable species to maintain the BSAI OY below the 2 million mt cap. A reclassification of sculpins to a non-target category would have the effect of freeing up about 5,000 mt of TAC in the BSAI.

If sculpins were moved to non-target or non-target EC category, regulations would need to be amended to move sculpins from the target basis species category into the incidental catch species category consistent with a prohibition on directed fishing. MRAs could still be maintained, pursuant to Tables 10 and 11 of 50 CFR 679.

Any change to classification of sculpins would not affect NMFS’ ability to monitor the catch, retention, and discard of sculpins.