



C1 BSAI Groundfish Specifications

December 2024

Action Memo

Council Staff: Dr. Diana Stram

Other Presenters: Dr. Elizabeth Siddon (AFSC – BS ESR), Dr. Ivonne Ortiz (U. Wash – AI ESR), Dr. Bridget Ferris (AFSC – GOA ESR), Dr. Steve Barbeaux (AFSC, BSAI Plan Team Co-Chair), Dr. Kalei Shotwell (AFSC, BSAI Plan Team Co-Chair), Dr. Jim Ianelli (AFSC, GOA Plan Team Co-Chair)

Action Required:

1. Review 2024 Ecosystem Status Reports for the Eastern Bering Sea (EBS), the Aleutian Islands, and the Gulf of Alaska, and BSAI Plan Team reports
2. Approve the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report
3. Recommend Final 2025 and 2026 BSAI groundfish harvest specifications, including:
 - Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks
 - Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for all stocks, taking into account the State waters Pacific cod and Sablefish fishery
 - Annual ABC reserve for three flatfish species
 - Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits and season apportionments of Pacific halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, *C. opilio* crab, and herring to target fishery categories
 - Halibut Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs)

BACKGROUND

At this meeting the Council will review the Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) for the Eastern Bering Sea; adopt the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report; and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, ABC reserves for three flatfish species, PSC limits, and DMRs to manage the 2025 and 2026 BSAI groundfish fisheries. Once published in the Federal Register, these final 2024/2025 harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications implemented in March 2024 for the 2025 fisheries.

Joint Plan Team Meeting

The Joint BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Teams met in Seattle on November 12th to address issues common to the BSAI and GOA. Primary agenda items were the assessment of the Alaska wide sablefish stock, the Groundfish Economic SAFE Report, and items of joint discussion regarding assessment review. Minutes of the joint team meeting are available on the eAgenda.

BSAI SAFE Report and Ecosystem Status Report

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team met November 12-15, 2024 in Seattle, WA to prepare the BSAI Groundfish SAFE report. The SAFE report forms the basis for setting BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for the next two fishing years. The SAFE report introduction summarizes the Plan Team recommendations for each stock/complex. Links to the full report are posted on the eAgenda. The

Council will review and adopt the full SAFE report at this meeting. The Teams also reviewed Ecosystem Status Reports for the EBS and Aleutian Islands, as context for assessing BSAI species.

Minutes of the BSAI Groundfish Plan Team meeting are posted on the eAgenda. Some stocks are assessed annually while other are assessed less frequently, based on stock prioritization that includes assessment methods and data availability. Full assessments were produced for 20 stocks. Note stocks with harvest projections were approved in October. Recommended OFLs and ABCs for these three stocks are included in the SAFE report and tables. For stocks for which catch reports only were produced, specifications were rolled over from the last assessment for that stock. The revised stock assessment schedule shows when the next full assessment will occur for each stock and is included in the SAFE introduction chapter.

OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team's recommendations for final 2025 and 2026 harvest specifications are in the SAFE report introduction, and also attached separately on the eAgenda (Table 1 BSAI Plan Team Recommendations). In October, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications of OFLs and ABCs that were based on the 2023 assessments. In this 2024 SAFE report, the Plan Team has revised projections based on development of new models; collection of new catch, survey, age composition, or size composition data; or use of new methods for recommending OFLs and ABCs. The SSC's OFL and ABC recommendations, and the AP's TAC recommendations will be provided to the Council during the meeting.

The sum of the Plan Team's recommended ABCs for target species for 2025 and 2026 (including Alaska wide Sablefish ABC) are 3,590,907 t and 3,192,295 t, respectively. These compare with the ABC of 3,476,801 t in 2024. The 2025 primary increase from the previous year is due to increases in EBS pollock and Atka mackerel. The Team recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks, except for Greenland turbot and sharks.

TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod and sablefish fishery

In setting TACs for 2025 and 2026, the Council accounts for Guideline Harvest Levels (GHLs) for groundfish fisheries in State waters. The Alaska Board of Fisheries took action in 2018 that modified how GHLs in the Bering Sea (BS) and Aleutian Islands (AI) are set for Pacific cod. The GHL in the AI will be set at 35% of the AI ABC, or a maximum of 15 million pounds (6,804 t). The BS GHL will be set at 13% of the EBS Pacific cod. An additional reduction of 45 t is taken from the remaining EBS Pacific cod maxTAC for the Area O jig fishery. A table showing ABCs, GHLs, and resulting Federal maxTAC is attached on the eAgenda as part of the "Additional Tables" document.

The Board of Fisheries GHL for vessels using pot, longline, jig, and hand troll gear in State waters in the State's Aleutian Islands (AI) state-waters sablefish registration area that includes all state waters west of Scotch Cap Light (164° 44.72' W longitude) and south of Cape Sarichef (54° 36' N latitude). The State's sablefish GHL is set at 5 percent of the combined 2025 BS and AI ABC. The State's AI sablefish registration area includes areas adjacent to parts of the federal Bering Sea subarea (BS) subarea. Based on the 2024 GHL sablefish catch, most of the State's 2025 and 2026 GHL sablefish fishery is expected to occur in State-waters adjacent to the federal Bering Sea subarea. Therefore, the Council and Advisory Panel may recommend that the 2025 and 2026 sablefish TACs in the BS account for the State's GHLs for sablefish caught in State waters.

Flatfish flexibility ABC reserve

The Council annually recommends an ABC reserve for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole, which will be allocated to CDQ groups and the Amendment 80 cooperative using the same formulas that are

used in the annual harvest specification process. The ABC reserve for each species will be specified by the Council by evaluating the ABC surplus for the species (i.e., the differences between the ABC and TAC), and considering whether that amount needs to be reduced by a discretionary buffer based on social, economic, or ecological considerations. The Council will then designate some, all, or none of the ABC surplus as the ABC reserve. The Council should provide its rationale each year for setting the ABC reserve at a particular level for these three flatfish species.

During the Inseason Management Report (Agenda Item B2), NMFS will provide a report on flatfish exchanges by the Amendment 80 cooperative and CDQ groups this year. This informs the Council's decision whether to establish a buffer reducing the amount of ABC reserve available to the exchanged by eligible entities. The report will include information on the number of vessels used to harvest cooperative quota, the number of and dates of flatfish exchanges, the types and amounts of cooperative quota and Amendment 80 ABC reserves utilized. The report also includes the dates, types, and amounts of quota transfers.

Prohibited Species Catch limits

Apportionments of Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits are established for halibut, crab, and herring during the specifications process and are allocated between sectors and seasons as described below. PSC limit tables are attached to the eAgenda (Tables 16-19 in BSAI Groundfish Tables).

Crab PSC in Trawl Fisheries

Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limits for red king crab, Tanner crab, and *C. opilio* crab, which are established based on formulas in the FMP, and regulations. The Council recommends target fishery apportionments of these limits for the BSAI trawl limited access sector. The 2024 and 2025 crab PSC limits have been revised for 2025 and 2026 using the current crab biomass amounts.

Federal regulations at §679.21(e)(3)(ii)(B)(1) state that the Red King Crab Savings Subarea is closed to nonpelagic trawl gear if Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) does not set a TAC for red king crab in the Bristol Bay area in the previous year. A GHL has been set for the 2024/2025 Bristol Bay red king crab season, thus the area will be open to nonpelagic trawl gear in 2025. The Council recommends the red king crab bycatch limit for non-pelagic trawl fisheries within the RKCSS up to 25 percent of the red king crab PSC allowance (see § 679.21(e)(3)(ii)(B)(2)).

Herring

An overall herring PSC limit is established as 1% of the EBS herring biomass. This limit is apportioned to seven PSC target fishery categories. Herring PSC limits for 2025 are attached to the eAgenda (Table 14), based on the most current biomass estimates from the ADF&G that are available on the eAgenda.

Halibut PSC in Trawl Fisheries

The overall non-Amendment 80 trawl gear halibut PSC limit is fixed under BSAI Groundfish FMP apportioned as 745 t to BSAI Trawl Limited Access Sector, and 315 t to CDQ. Within the BSAI trawl limited access sector, the Council recommends apportionments of the halibut PSC limit to the trawl fishery categories. Additional reduction of 5% would occur if PSC limits are transferred from the BSAI trawl limited access sector to the Amendment 80 cooperative during a fishing year.

Amendment 122 implemented the Pacific Cod Trawl Cooperative Program which apportions the crab and halibut PSC limit for the Pacific cod fishery to the AFA catcher/processors, PCTC Program A and B season, and trawl catcher vessel C season. The PCTC Program A and B season halibut PSC apportionment will be reduced by 25% in 2025, and the crab apportionment is reduced by 35%. These apportionments are shown in Table 18.

Under Amendment 123 and its implementing regulations, the BSAI halibut PSC limit for the Amendment 80 sector will be based on the most recent halibut abundance estimates from the IPHC setline survey index and the NMFS AFSC Eastern Bering Sea shelf trawl survey index (87 FR 75570, December 9, 2022). The 2024 Eastern Bering Sea shelf trawl survey index estimate of halibut abundance is 125,145 mt and is below the threshold level of 150,000 mt in the low abundance state. The 2024 IPHC index estimate of halibut abundance for 2024 is 6,282 mt which is in the “low” abundance state. Therefore using Table 58 to part 679, the Amendment 80 PSC limit in 2025 will be 1,309 t.

Halibut PSC in Hook-and-line Gear Fisheries

The 710 t non-trawl gear halibut PSC limit, which is established in the FMP, can be apportioned by fishery categories. The halibut PSC limit for the hook-and-line Pacific cod fishery is divided between the hook-and-line CP and CV sector. The Council can provide varying amounts of halibut PSC by season to each sector, tailoring PSC limits based on the factors to be considered below.

Seasonal apportionment of PSC limits

The Council may also seasonally apportion the PSC limits listed above for the hook-and-line gear and BSAI trawl limited access sector. Regulations require that seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances be based on information listed below:

Factors to be considered for seasonal apportionments of bycatch allowances

1. Seasonal distribution of prohibited species;
2. Seasonal distribution of target groundfish species relative to prohibited species distribution;
3. Expected prohibited species bycatch needs on a seasonal basis relevant to change in prohibited species biomass and expected catches of target groundfish species;
4. Expected variations in bycatch rates throughout the fishing year;
5. Expected changes in directed groundfish fishing seasons;
6. Expected start of fishing efforts; and
7. Economic effects of establishing seasonal prohibited species apportionments on segments of the target groundfish industry.

Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

The recommended discard mortality rates for use in the BSAI for 2025-2026 are attached to the eAgenda (Table 20 in BSAI Groundfish Tables 15-20).

ACL overages

In the BSAI, the blackspotted/rougheye complex ABC has been exceeded for three of the past four years. Because the FMP sets the annual catch limit (ACL) equal to ABC, the ACL has been exceeded. When an ACL is exceeded, accountability measures must be implemented as soon as possible to correct the operational issue that caused the ACL overage, as well as any biological consequences to the stock or stock complex resulting from the overage when it is known. When an ACL has been exceeded more than once in four years, NMFS’s National Standard 1 guidelines at 50 CFR 600.310(g)(7) require that the ACL and accountability measures be reevaluated for this stock complex and modified if necessary to address their effectiveness. Staff will provide a discussion of accountability measures for BSRE during the presentation. Note that the stock assessment indicates that the blackspotted/rougheye complex biomass and ABC have increased during this same period.