



# C3 BSAI and GOA Groundfish Proposed Specifications, GOA Rockfish Spatial Management

October 2024 Council Meeting

## Action Memo

- Council Staff: Dr. Diana Stram (BSAI), Sara Cleaver (GOA)
- Other Presenters: Dr. Kalei Shotwell (AFSC, BSAI Plan Team Co-Chair), Dr. Jim Ianelli (AFSC, GOA Plan Team Co-Chair), Chris Lunsford (AFSC, GOA Plan Team Co-Chair), Dr. Steve Barbeaux (AFSC, BSAI Plan Team Co-Chair), Michael Fey (AKFIN)
- Action Required:
1. Review Joint, BSAI, and GOA Groundfish Plan Team reports
  2. Recommend proposed BSAI and GOA groundfish harvest limits, prohibited species catch limit apportionments, and halibut discard mortality rates for 2025-2026
  3. Review Halibut DMR Working Group discussion paper (*AP/Council only, no SSC*)
  4. Review GOA Rockfish Spatial Management discussion paper and take action as needed (*AP/Council only, no SSC*)
  5. ESP Updates for sablefish (*SSC only, separate SSC action memo*)

## BACKGROUND

### 1. Groundfish Plan Team Reports

The Council's BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Teams met jointly on September 17, and separately on September 18-19, 2024, to review and recommend, for proposed rulemaking, groundfish harvest specifications for the upcoming 2025 and 2026 fishing years. The Teams reviewed reports from assessment authors to identify items for inclusion in stock assessments that will be presented at the November Groundfish Plan Team meetings. The Joint Teams also received an overview of the climate and oceanography sections of the ecosystem status report (ESR) that will be finalized for the November Plan Team meetings. The complete list of items covered at the joint and individual meetings can be found on the Plan Team [eAgenda](#). Under this agenda item, the Council will receive: Reports from the Joint, BSAI, and GOA Groundfish Plan Team meetings, the Interagency Halibut DMR Working Group discussion paper, and the GOA Rockfish Spatial Management paper. All reports and papers are attached to the eAgenda.

## 2. Proposed Harvest Specifications

At this meeting the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, BSAI and GOA groundfish harvest specifications for the upcoming two-year period (2025 and 2026) which will notify the public of expected Council action to set final harvest specifications in December 2024. Proposed harvest specifications for the year after next (2026) are typically set equal to the proposed upcoming year (2025) harvest specifications. Proposed harvest specifications for 2025 and 2026 are listed in the BSAI 2025 Plan Team Proposed ABC-OFLs Table 1 and in GOA 2025 Plan Team Proposed ABC-OFLs Table 1 attachments.

In addition to harvest specifications, the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, gear and target fishery apportionments of prohibited species catch (PSC) limits for halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, opilio crab, and herring. The Council will also recommend updated halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs). Final harvest specifications in December 2024 will be based on stock assessment reports included in the Groundfish SAFE reports for the BSAI and GOA that will be released in late November 2024.

In December 2023, the Council adopted final harvest specifications for 2024 and 2025, which were published as a final rule in the Federal Register in March 2024 (89 FR 17287, March 11, 2024 (BSAI); 89 FR 15484, March 4, 2024 (GOA)). These existing 2025 specifications will be effective for the beginning of the 2025 groundfish fishing year.

New this year, the 2025 harvest projections were reviewed at the September Plan Team meeting, rather than in November. The ABCs/OFLs for stocks with harvest projections this year will not be reflected in the proposed 2025/2026 OFL and ABC harvest specifications (Table 1), for consistency with prior years. The 2025 harvest projections will be reflected in the final 2025/2026 OFLs and ABCs after the November PT meeting. The Council will set TACs for these stocks at the December meeting.

### **Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish**

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team recommendations for the proposed 2025 and 2026 BSAI groundfish annual harvest specifications are shown in the BSAI 2025 Plan Team Proposed ABC-OFLs Table 1 attachment on the agenda. The Team adopted proposed 2025 and 2026 BSAI Overfishing Limits (OFLs) and Acceptable Biological Catch limits (ABCs) (**Table 1**) which match the existing final 2025 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in March 2024, and rollover the same limits for 2026.

#### TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery 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 and Aleutian Islands are set for Pacific cod. The GHL in the AI will be set at 39% of the AI Pacific cod ABC (to a maximum of 15,000,000 pounds). The GHL in the BS will be set at 13% (up from 12% in 2024) of the eastern BS Pacific cod ABC. An additional 45 t will be set aside for the Area O jig fishery.

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 2024 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 account for the State’s GHs for sablefish caught in State waters.

#### Flatfish flexibility ABC reserve

Under Amendment 105, an ABC reserve is specified for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole. These species are allocated to CDQ groups and the Amendment 80 cooperative using formulas from the annual harvest specifications process. The ABC reserve for each species is specified by the Council by evaluating the difference between the ABC and TAC for each species (i.e., the ABC surplus) and considering whether the amount needs to be reduced by a discretionary buffer based on social, economic, or ecological considerations. The Council then designates some, all, or none of the ABC surplus as the ABC reserve. The Council provides its rationale for setting the ABC reserve at a particular level each year. The 2025 and 2026 CDQ and Amendment 80 ABC reserves have been provided by NMFS staff based on 2024 TAC levels and past Council action to set the ABC reserve at the maximum amount. The proposed 2025 and 2026 ABC Surplus, ABC Reserves, CDQ ABC Reserves, and Amendment 80 ABC Reserves in the BSAI for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole are shown in **Table 7** of the BSAI 2025 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

#### BSAI Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Limit Apportionments

Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limit apportionments for halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, opilio crab, and herring and gear type and target fishery apportionments, which are set in Federal regulations. The overall crab and herring PSC limits are determined under the authority of regulations outside of the groundfish harvest specification process, based on biomass from survey results. However, the Council does apportion the crab PSC limit by target fishery in the groundfish specification process. The 2025 and 2026 crab PSC limits have been revised using current biomass estimates, and herring PSC limits will be revised when the most current biomass estimates are known. Proposed harvest specifications for these PSC limits, and apportionments based on 2025, are shown as **Tables 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12** of the BSAI 2025 and 2026 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

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 ADF&G does not set a TAC for red king crab in the Bristol Bay area in the previous year. If a TAC is not set for the 2024/2025 Bristol Bay red king crab season, the area would be closed to nonpelagic trawl gear in 2025.

#### BSAI Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

At the September meeting the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs) for implementation in 2025 and 2026 in the BSAI and GOA and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group’s recommendations. Proposed 2025 and 2026 Pacific halibut DMRs for the BSAI are shown in **Table 13** of the BSAI 2025 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

#### Three-River Index for EBS Pollock Fishery Chinook Salmon PSC Threshold

Under BSAI Groundfish FMP Amendment 110, in addition to other bycatch reduction measures, the Council recommended, and NMFS implemented a reduction to overall Chinook PSC levels for the EBS pollock fishery sectors in times of low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon abundance. Low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon abundance is assessed annually using a three-system index of combined in-river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers. The PSC limits are reduced when this index of Western Alaskan salmon abundance is below a threshold of 250,000 Chinook salmon. Cap levels are then reduced from a performance standard of 47,491 to 33,318 and a PSC limit from 60,000 to 45,000. This reduction in cap levels in times of low abundance is designed to provide increased incentives for the pollock fleet to reduce bycatch to the maximum extent practicable to help in efforts to rebuild critically low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon stocks.

Reduced cap levels are enacted in all years when the index is below the designated threshold of 250,000 Western Alaskan Chinook salmon, which indicates very poor run sizes. All other provisions of Chinook salmon bycatch management will also be in place in these years.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) provides post-season abundance estimates to NMFS by October 1 to determine if adult Chinook abundance in the index system falls at or below the threshold level of 250,000. The performance standard and hard cap applicable to the Bering Sea pollock fishery will then be lowered in the year following the year in which the index was  $\leq 250,000$ . A letter from ADFG to NMFS is posted under this agenda item. The letter (attached to the eAgenda) reports that **2024 three-system index of inriver adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim rivers is 197,359 and is below the threshold level of 250,000**. Therefore, the performance standard will remain at 33,318 Chinook salmon and the PSC limit will remain at 45,000 Chinook salmon, as identified at 50 CFR 679.21.

### **Gulf of Alaska Groundfish**

The GOA Groundfish Plan Team's harvest recommendations for 2025 and 2026 are shown in the GOA 2025 Plan Team Proposed ABC-OFLs Table 1 attachment on the agenda. The Team adopted proposed 2025 and 2026 OFLs and ABCs (**Table 1**) which match the existing final 2025 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in March 2024 and rolled over the same limits for 2025.

#### Pacific cod TAC adjustments

The Council will need to recommend Pacific cod TACs for the GOA that are a 25% to 30% reduction from ABC to account for State GHL fisheries. Using the area apportionments from the proposed 2025 Pacific cod ABCs recommended by the Plan Team, the 2025 and 2026 Federal TACs for Pacific cod would be adjusted as listed in **Table 2** of the GOA Groundfish 2025 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

#### GOA Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Limit Apportionments

In addition to harvest specifications, the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, gear and target fishery apportionments of prohibited species catch (PSC) limits for halibut. Recommended 2025 and 2026 halibut PSC apportionments (**Tables 9, 10, 11** in the GOA 2025 Proposed Tables attachment) are based on the recommended 2025 apportionments for the GOA groundfish fisheries. Salmon PSC limits in the GOA groundfish fisheries are not specified on an annual basis because they are set in regulation.

The GOA Groundfish FMP (Section 3.6.2.1) sets out the procedure for modifying halibut PSC limit apportionments during the annual harvest specifications process. To adjust the PSC limit apportionments, the Council and NMFS must consider biological and socioeconomic factors about the halibut stock and groundfish fisheries that intercept halibut as bycatch. To accommodate these considerations, the FMP identifies a time-specific procedure for adjusting PSC apportionments to target fishery categories in the GOA, and seasonal allocations thereof, which requires this information to be provided for Council review in October, so the Council can set different apportionments in December. No additional information pertaining to GOA halibut PSC apportionments was requested by the Council for review.

#### GOA Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

At the September meeting, the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs) for implementation in 2025 and 2026 in the BSAI and GOA and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations. Proposed 2025 and 2026 Pacific halibut DMRs for the GOA are shown in **Table 12** of the GOA 2025 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

### **3. Halibut DMRs and Marine Mammals Discussion Paper**

In October 2023, the Council requested the Interagency Halibut DMR Working Group review methods used to estimate halibut mortality with a particular focus on marine mammal feeding on discards per their recommendation, for all fisheries with marine mammal interactions in the BSAI and GOA. This paper was presented at the Joint Groundfish Plan Team Meeting as an informational item, and staff will also present the paper to the Council.

### **4. GOA Rockfish Spatial Management Discussion Paper**

During the December 2023 groundfish harvest specifications process, the Council requested a discussion paper on: 1) the stock structure status for Gulf of Alaska (GOA) shortraker rockfish, rougheye and blackspotted rockfish, and thornyhead rockfish and the current ABC spatial management level; and 2) management or fishery implications resulting from alternative spatial apportionments of ABC (i.e., if there are no conservation concerns, what combinations of subareas are necessary to reduce or avoid fishery management implications).

This paper was reviewed by the GOA Groundfish Plan Team at its September meeting, and their comments are included in their report. Staff will present this paper to the AP and Council at this meeting.

### **5. Sablefish ESP Review (SSC only)**

At the December 2023 meeting, the SSC made recommendations for improved integration of economic, social, and community information into the management process. The Council supported this with a motion recommending that NOAA and Council staff review available data and recommend species-level socio-economic indicators appropriate for the Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profiles (ESPs). Council staff met with NOAA staff from the Alaska Regional Office and AFSC Economic and Social Sciences Research Program to discuss current products that include social, economic, and community information, plans to incorporate new information into existing products, and longer-term ideas to address this issue. The group determined that, given the concurrent timing of ESPs with the specifications process and current issues in the sablefish fishery, the sablefish ESP was the first product to target for including new socioeconomic indicators.

At this meeting, the SSC will review the proposed additions to the suite of indicators identified in the sablefish ESP. Staff will incorporate SSC feedback and finalize the ESP for consideration as part of final harvest specifications in December 2024. If appropriate, these new indicators will be included in other stock ESPs in the future, as feasible.

This is the first step in the process towards addressing the SSC's greater concerns regarding social, economic and community information.