NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Angel Drobnica, Chair | David Witherell, Executive Director
1007 W. 3rd Avenue, Suite 400, Anchorage, AK 99501
Phone 907-271-2809 | www.npfmc.org

Report from the Joint Meeting of the Groundfish Plan Teams

September 17, 2024

BSAI Groundfish Plan Team Members:

Steve Barbeaux	AFSC REFM (co-chair)	Kirstin Holsman	AFSC REFM
Kalei Shotwell	AFSC REFM (co-chair)	Andy Kingham	AFSC FMA
Cindy Tribuzio	AFSC ABL (vice chair)	Beth Matta	AFSC REFM
Diana Stram	NPFMC (coordinator)	Andrew Seitz	UAF
Lukas DeFilippo	AFSC	Jane Sullivan	AFSC ABL
Allan Hicks	IPHC	Steven Whitney	NMFS AKRO
Lisa Hillier	WDFW		

GOA Groundfish Plan Team Members:

Jim Ianelli	AFSC REFM (co-chair)	Pete Hulson	AFSC ABL
Chris Lunsford	AFSC ABL (co-chair)	Sandra Lowe	AFSC REFM
Sara Cleaver	NPFMC (coordinator)	Nat Nichols	ADF&G
Abby Jahn	NMFS AKRO	Jan Rumble	ADF&G
Craig Faunce	AFSC FMA	Paul Spencer	AFSC REFM
Lisa Hillier	WDFW	Ben Williams	AFSC ABL

Introduction

The Joint meeting for the Groundfish Plan Teams ("Teams") began on Tuesday, September 17, 2024 at 9:00 am AKDT. This was a virtual meeting conducted remotely via Zoom. Roughly 184 people attended the Joint meeting. All documents and presentations were posted to the Teams' electronic agenda. All presentations are also linked in the header for each agenda item in this report.

Future meetings: November 12-15, 2024; Tentative 2025 dates: Week of September 15-19 (4 days TBD). November 2025 date is TBD.

Council staff updates

Sara Cleaver provided logistical information for the meeting and presented updates on recent and upcoming Council agenda items. Several resources are available on the eAgenda (Plan Team Handbook, Climate Scenarios Workshop Report, etc.).

Data limited methods working group

Cindy Tribuzio presented updates on the Data Limited Methods (DLM) Working Group. The Teams discussed the schedule of the relevant SAFE report chapters and noted that should advances be made in the near term, the methods, priorities, and issues raised by this group would be useful for those chapters. The Teams agreed with the following recommendations from the Working Group:

● Stocks from only one area (GOA or BSAI) were considered for top priority in cases where both ranked highly in the scoring matrix, to allow room for other stocks.
● The BSAI and GOA shark assessment - scheduled for 2026 - should incorporate new DLM methods.

- Other highly-ranked DLM stocks should incorporate DLM methods as the assessment schedule and the authors' capacities to integrate new methods allow. These may include GOA octopus in 2025 and GOA SEO quillback and yelloweye rockfish (outside of SEO) in 2026.

The Teams also discussed the inclusion of BSAI octopus in the list of priority stocks because of the uniqueness of the current assessment methodology (using pacific cod consumption) and the stock's potential to limit other fisheries but left this decision up to the working group. The Teams requested another DLM Working Group progress report at the JGFPT meeting in 2025, if the schedule allows.

NMFS inseason management

Steve Whitney and Abby Jahn presented an update on the harvest of groundfish. The Team was reintroduced to the terminology of inseason management at the AKRO (the reasons they close fisheries and how the total allowable catch is divided). This was the first presentation of its kind to the Joint Plan Team, and the purpose of this presentation was to inform stock assessment authors of potential changes to this year's fishing patterns, and flag potentially important changes. Items with discussion from the Team and the public are included here.

- In the BSAI, depredation by whales was an issue in the 2023 Kamchatka fishery. This is because this fishery has high sablefish bycatch that attracts orca. This year, gear modifications have been made by the fleet that appear to be helping reduce whale depredation. Vessels that fish Kamchatka switched to northern rockfish in 2023, but not in 2024. Interest in fishing for northern rockfish appears diminished, but Team members also cited high catches from mid-July to early September (the most recent date for catch information as of this report).

- Pacific cod CPUE in the BSAI has been lower across all sectors, and the catch of flatfish in the Amendment 80 sector has been the lowest in a decade. It was suggested by a member of the public that this may have been due to high halibut bycatch during January - March.

- In the GOA, the harvest of pollock in the A season has varied from past years due to expected TAC changes. There was rollover of excess quota into the B season as is normally done. However, some of this quota was lost because it exceeded the amount that could be rolled over. This has not happened in four years. The public contributed that catcher processor fishing in the B season is largely done and salmon and herring bycatch was low.

- The Pacific cod jig fishery in the central GOA will likely catch all of their quota; as of the week of the Team meeting the sector had caught 98% of their allocation. Steve noted that catching their full allocation results in an increase of 1% for future allocations.

- POP was recently placed on bycatch status in the Gulf [not in presentation].

The Team appreciated the content and duration of the presentation including the links to the inseason management reports on the last slides. The Team would like to see this type of presentation in future years. They also encouraged assessment authors to review these presentations to help with understanding inseason management issues and practices.

ESR climate update

Ivonne Ortiz, Elizabeth Siddon, and Bridget Ferris provided an overview of the Ecosystem Status Report (climate and physical information) for the EBS, AI, and GOA, in an updated format that describes three pressure systems.

The Teams again acknowledge the immense effort of the ESR authors to collate and synthesize a broad array of environmental indices into a succinct summary that is useful for management advice. The Teams

appreciated the presentation and found it well presented and concise. In particular, the new format showing mean monthly winds compared to the climatology (longer-term mean) were useful to understand some of the cooling/warming processes and how seasons evolve.

There was discussion about deep water incursion onto the shelf that brings water that is cold, low-oxygen, high salinity and low pH. Additional discussion focused on terminology to describe marine heatwaves in the Aleutians, including: 1. how are "moderate," "severe," and "extreme" defined (the proportion of time spent between the long term mean and various percentiles of temperature), 2. how should "baseline" be defined, while acknowledging that changes are variable among areas, depending on data availability, and 3. When do we stop calling a heatwave a heatwave instead of a temperature shift? One minor suggestion was to align the colors of years among slides to facilitate easier comparison of different environmental variables in the same year.

AI trawl survey

Susanne McDermott presented the results for the biennial Aleutian Islands (AI) bottom trawl survey. The team is appreciative of the presentation and all of the work by staff to conduct the survey and to provide the data.

Due to the twenty percent reduction in stations the variance in the deep strata might have increased since those strata are difficult to sample and have fewer stations. The increased variance might contribute to the large changes in biomass of deep water rockfish.

The Team suggested taking this into consideration when allocating stations in deep strata for future surveys. For Kamchatka flounder the Team suggested presenting those results separately from arrowtooth flounder since Kamchatka flounder are important for fishers in the eastern Aleutians.

ESP & socioeconomic sablefish indicators

Kalei Shotwell and Rusty Dame presented an update on the ecosystem and socioeconomic profiles. The presentation provided an overview of the application of ESPs, the timeline of product delivery, new projects to build capacity, update on the national initiative, and coordination with the Economic and Social Sciences Research (ESSR) team. There are concerns with the current timelines and delivery of statistical importance results, specifically for crab ESPs, which cannot be incorporated into those stock assessments on the current schedule. Additionally, the ESP team is at capacity for creating full ESPs. Kalei provided an overview of potential solutions to the capacity issue of creating full ESPs, one of which is the ESP mini. ESP minis can be used for risk tables and an example was provided for arrowtooth flounder. Kalei clarified that this is the first time the Teams are seeing the ESP minis.

Team members discussed the use of ESP fishery performance outputs in risk tables. There was some concern that fishery performance does not align with the SSC's directive to include socioeconomic indicators that are tied to the health or the status of the stock. Socioeconomic information can include fishery performance (i.e.,CPUE and incidental catch) or other catch data as presented in the arrowtooth flounder ESP mini. Kalei also clarified that ESPs are products for multiple users and that they have multiple uses, one of which could be to inform management decisions at the Council. Given this discussion, the Teams would like clarification from the SSC on how socioeconomic information and fishery performance is incorporated into risk tables and the ESPs, and on the intended use for various products that contain socioeconomic information. Specifically, The Teams would like clarification on where the socioeconomic indicators that are intended to inform TAC setting should reside. There was further discussion on the use of socioeconomic information in the SSC's OFL and ABC setting process.

For the socioeconomic sablefish indicators, the Teams discussed how abundance factors into allocation of a species. There was concern that abundance of a species could be misinterpreted for allocation. The author noted this concern. After hearing the presentation on socioeconomic sablefish indicators, **the**

Teams recommended standardizing the sablefish size grade definitions and pricing information across processors. Team members appreciated the new format for the mini ESP and the value of the ESP products and their evolution. Team members also appreciated how much work has been done to develop the socioeconomic indicators.

Age and growth update

Derek Chamberlin presented an overview of the current A&G program and processes, including an update to implementation timelines of new aging technologies for specific stocks. The Team appreciated the information. The presenter asked for any guidance the Team may have for the A&G program, and the discussion then pivoted to additional stock assessment needs that were not presented. A Team member noted that there seems to be a lack of focus on maturity and asked if there might be any opportunity to do that work in the future. Several assessments rely on maturity data but most maturity indices have not been updated in years. Derek responded that they would like to prioritize that, but it would need to undergo a prioritization process similar to what was done for the aging process, in order to move forward in a targeted manner. The Team agreed and emphasized the importance of maturities and **recommended that the Alaska Fisheries Science Center make maturity analyses a priority in the near future - noting that the Age and Growth lab may not be able to provide this alone. A formal AFSC Maturity Working Group - with cross-collaboration among the A&G Program, SSMA, MESA, FMA, GAP, and any other relevant divisions - would be an ideal approach.**

Halibut DMRs

Michael Fey presented the Interagency Halibut Discard Mortality Rate (DMR) Working Group (WG) Report and DMR recommendations for 2025-2026. The WG continued using the methodologies established in November 2016, except a new methodology was recommended for the GOA hook and line CV sector. For the GOA CV hook and line sector, the WG recommended using observer estimates for the hierarchies as a means to get more estimates and a more robust rate. This would be the first change in methodologies since 2017.

Mike also presented a discussion paper requested by the Council on a previous WG recommendation regarding marine mammals feeding on discarded halibut. The WG noted that there is not a defined sampling frame for marine mammals feeding on discards. The WG was not able to put forward a recommendation on how to account for marine mammals feeding on discards in DMRs. The WG noted that a research avenue might be to explore the use of outboard cameras to monitor marine mammal predation.

The Teams asked if there were biases or an ability to detect biases from marine mammal predation. The author noted that it was extremely difficult for the WG to quantify any bias, or estimates from marine mammal predation. The Teams support continued research into methodologies to quantify biases and marine mammal predation.

The public asked why the BSAI trawl CV DMR increased. The author noted that the increase was relatively small and in line with previous changes resulting from observer data, and that small variations are to be expected.

The Teams recommended adopting the 2025-2026 DMRs as recommended by the Interagency Halibut DMR Working Group.

EBS trawl survey

Duane Stevenson presented the results of the 2024 Eastern Bering Sea bottom trawl survey. The Teams appreciated and congratulated the Bering Sea survey team for a quick turnaround of the data and providing a succinct and informative presentation.

The Teams asked if any species diversity indices had been tracked over time. Duane noted that tracking diversity would be confounded with changes in priorities, particularly for how detailed taxonomic records are for some invertebrates and other species. A question arose whether the elimination of the 26 "corner" stations could affect abundance and biomass estimates. Duane noted that work done by DeFilippo et al (2023) showed that for most species the abundance and biomass estimates without these stations are unbiased. He noted that a few species may have been impacted, for example yellow Irish lord that are generally found at higher density near the Pribilof Islands.

The Teams asked about planned changes in survey design which included reducing tow duration by half. One question that arose was if the change in tow duration alone could affect the size composition for different species. Duane responded that the survey team is collecting length data from paired tows and plans to investigate effects of tow duration on different sizes of many species. A second question arose regarding if the opportunistic acoustic data collection would change under the new protocols (e.g., for the AVO index used in the pollock assessment). Duane noted that the acoustic sampling may change but the extent should be about the same.

Ecosystem surveys

Ellen Yasumiishi presented the preliminary reports for the various 2024 ecosystem surveys in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. The Team commended the authors for their concise and well-organized presentation. The Team looks forward to future growth and temperature research results. The Team specifically appreciated the information on the rapid zooplankton assessments and the energetic indices for age-0 pollock, in particular the side-by-side comparison on northern Bering Sea with southern Bering Sea.

REMA diagnostics

Jane Sullivan presented an update on new validation tools and examples available for the random effects model (REMA) vignette. The Teams asked some clarifying questions on how to approach estimating additional observation error in regard to the GOA shortspine thornyhead rockfish example that led to discussion of future plans to improve REMA's parameterization of both process and observation error. The Teams also discussed if the validation features are ready for use by authors this November. The code works now for all operational REMA models and preliminary recommendations from the author are that more complex REMA models that use multiple surveys and incorporate additional observation error might benefit from the new diagnostics. The Teams commended the authors on their work developing the REMA package and including the validation guide and diagnostic tools. Authors are encouraged to explore the new features this vignette offers and include these diagnostics at their discretion.

Assessment guidelines

Melissa Haltuch presented information on the AFSC revised Stock Assessment Guidelines. The Teams' discussion focused on diagnostics provided in the guidelines and what should be brought forward in September for full assessments. Melissa reiterated the guidelines are internal guidance to assessment authors and will evolve over time.