



## C5 BSAI and GOA Groundfish Proposed Specifications and Other Issues

October 2025

### Action Memo

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Other Presenters: BSAI Plan Team: Dr. Kalei Shotwell (AFSC, Co-Chair), Dr. Steve Barbeaux (AFSC, Co-Chair), Dr. Cindy Tribuzio (Vice Chair)  
GOA Plan Team: Dr. Jim Ianelli (AFSC, Co-Chair), Chris Lunsford (AFSC, Co-Chair)

Action Required: C5a: Review Joint and GOA Groundfish Plan Team reports and recommend GOA groundfish harvest limits, prohibited species catch (PSC) limit apportionments, and halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs) for 2026-2027  
C5b: Review BSAI Groundfish Plan Team report and recommend proposed BSAI groundfish harvest limits, PSC limit apportionments, and halibut DMRs for 2026-2027  
C5c: Review spatial apportionment process proposal and provide feedback as needed  
C5d: Review BSRE Accountability Measures discussion paper and take action as appropriate

### BACKGROUND

#### C5a, C5b: Groundfish Plan Team reports and Proposed Harvest Specifications

The Council's BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Teams met jointly on September 16-17, and individually on September 17-18, 2025, to review and recommend proposed groundfish harvest specifications for the upcoming 2026 and 2027 fishing years, and to review reports from assessment authors to identify items to include in stock assessments that will be presented at the November Groundfish Plan Team meetings. The Joint Plan 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 Groundfish Plan Teams [eAgenda](#).

At this meeting the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, BSAI and GOA groundfish harvest specifications (overfishing limit (OFL), acceptable biological catch (ABC), and total allowable catch (TAC)) for the upcoming two-year period (2026 and 2027), which will notify the public of expected Council action to set final harvest specifications in December 2025. In addition, the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, halibut, crab and herring prohibited species catch (PSC) limits and updated halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs). Final harvest specifications in December 2025 will be

based on stock assessment reports included in the Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports for the BSAI and GOA, which will be released in late November 2025.

In December 2024, the Council adopted final harvest specifications for 2025 and 2026, which were published as a final rule in the Federal Register in March 2025 (90 FR 12640, March 18, 2025 (BSAI); 90 FR 12468, March 18, 2025 (GOA)). The existing 2026 specifications will be effective beginning January 1, 2026.

This year, one 2026 harvest projection (GOA Deep water flatfish complex) was reviewed at the September Plan Team meeting, rather than in November. The ABC/OFL for this stock with the harvest projection this year will not be reflected in the proposed 2026/2027 OFL and ABC harvest specifications (Table 1), for consistency with prior years. The ABC/OFL recommended by the SSC for this stock complex will be reflected in the final 2026/2027 OFLs and ABCs after the December SSC meeting. The Council will set TACs for all stocks at the December meeting.

### **C5a: Gulf of Alaska Groundfish**

The GOA Groundfish Plan Team's harvest recommendations for 2026 and 2027 are shown in the GOA 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda. The Team adopted proposed 2026 and 2027 OFLs and ABCs in **Table 1** which match the existing final 2026 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in March 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 GHF fisheries. Using the area apportionments from the proposed 2025 Pacific cod ABCs recommended by the Plan Team, the 2026 and 2027 Federal TACs for Pacific cod would be adjusted as listed in **Table 2** of the GOA 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda.

#### Octopus TAC adjustments

The Council will need to recommend Octopus TACs for the GOA that are a 16 mt reduction from the ABC to account for State GHF octopus fishery in Prince William Sound which was established by the Board of Fisheries in December 2024 for the 2025 fishing year.

#### 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 2026 and 2027 halibut PSC apportionments (**Tables 9, 10, 11** in the GOA 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda) are based on the recommended 2026 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 regulations.

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 2026 and 2027 in the BSAI and GOA and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations. Proposed 2026 and 2027 Pacific halibut DMRs for the GOA are shown in **Table 12** of the GOA 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda and did not change from the DMRs published in the harvest specifications in March 2025.

#### **C5b: Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish**

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team recommendations for the proposed 2026 and 2027 BSAI groundfish annual harvest specifications are shown in the BSAI 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda. The Team adopted proposed 2026 and 2027 BSAI OFLs and ABCs (**Table 1**) which match the existing final 2026 harvest specifications which were published in the Federal Register in March 2025, and rolled over the same limits for 2027.

#### TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery and sablefish fishery

In setting TACs for 2026 and 2027, 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% 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 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 2025 GHL sablefish catch, most of the State's 2026 and 2027 GHL sablefish fishery is expected to occur in State-waters adjacent to the federal Bering Sea subarea. Therefore, the Council may recommend that the 2026 and 2027 sablefish TACs account for the State's GHLs 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 2026 and 2027 CDQ and Amendment 80 ABC reserves have been provided by NMFS staff based on 2025 TAC levels and past Council action to set the ABC reserve at the maximum amount. The proposed 2026 and 2027 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 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda.

#### Bering Sea and Eastern Aleutian Islands Atka Mackerel jig fishery allocation

The allocation to jig vessels for Atka mackerel in the Bering Sea and eastern Aleutian Islands may be set at up to 2% of the TAC for these subareas. The criteria for determining this apportionment are:

- (A) The amount of Atka mackerel harvested by vessels using jig gear during recent fishing years;

- (B) The anticipated harvest of Atka mackerel by vessels using jig gear during the upcoming fishing year; and
- (C) The extent to which the jig-gear allocation will support the development of a jig-gear fishery for Atka mackerel while minimizing the amount of Atka mackerel TAC annually allocated to vessels using jig gear that remains unharvested at the end of the fishing year.

These regulations came from a 1997 FMP amendment to provide Atka mackerel as bait for the pot fleet. It was fished in 1994 and 1995 and the highest catch was 40 metric tons. It has not been fished since this time. The 2025 and 2026 final harvest specifications set the jig Atka mackerel allocation at 0.5% of the Eastern Aleutian Islands district and the BS subarea. However, the Council should consider setting the percentage at zero for the 2026 and 2027 final harvest specifications unless there is public testimony stating an intention to participate with jig gear, to stay in compliance with the regulation.

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

Final BSAI harvest specifications will include PSC limit apportionments for halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab (*Chionoecetes bairdi*), *C. opilio* crab, and herring, which are set in Federal regulations. Proposed harvest specifications for these PSC limits are shown as **Tables 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12** of the BSAI 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda. The proposed limits are based on the 2026 apportionments unless new biomass data is available as described below.

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 overall crab PSC limit by target fishery in the groundfish specification process. The 2026 and 2027 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. For halibut, the BSAI halibut limit for the Amendment 80 sector will be updated with the most recent abundance estimate from the IPHC setline survey when known, but the eastern Bering Sea shelf trawl survey index continues to estimate halibut abundance in 2025 as below the threshold level of 150,000 mt in the low abundance state.

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 2025/2026 Bristol Bay red king crab season, the area would be closed to nonpelagic trawl gear in 2026.

#### BSAI Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

At the September meeting the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs) for implementation in 2026 and 2027 in the BSAI and GOA and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations. Proposed 2026 and 2027 Pacific halibut DMRs for the BSAI are shown in **Table 13** of the BSAI 2026-7 Proposed Tables attachment on the eAgenda.

#### 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 to the eAgenda, which reports that 2025 three-system index of in river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim rivers is 176,334 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.

### **C5c: Spatial apportionment process - review proposal**

In December 2024, the Council requested that Council, NMFS Regional Office, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, and NOAA GC staff communicate with SSC and Council leadership regarding possible approaches to address some of the challenges associated with spatial apportionments during the groundfish harvest specifications process, and bring options back to the Council and SSC for discussion. The Council spoke to its intent that possible approaches would consider:

- the intended purpose of these apportionments
- the role of Council advisory bodies in recommending those apportionments
- the application of the [spatial management policy](#), and
- timing within the process.

The Council was scheduled to review the report on this information at the June 2025 Council meeting but due to timing constraints, was not able to do so. The SSC did receive the report in June and provided its report and feedback to the Council at that meeting.

At this meeting, staff will propose a process intended to increase efficiency and transparency regarding spatial apportionments in the harvest specifications process. Unless directed otherwise by the Council, staff plan to move ahead with the proposal and associated terminology change. Proposed harvest specifications for 2026-2027 will not reflect any of the proposed changes, however, any changes coming out of this meeting would be reflected in the final harvest specifications tables in December 2025.

### **C5d: Blackspotted Roughey Rockfish Accountability Measures**

A discussion paper addressing blackspotted and roughey rockfish annual catch limits was presented to the September 2025 BSAI Groundfish Plan Team and will be presented at the October meeting.

In December 2024, the Council requested staff develop a discussion paper ([motion](#)) for the stock-wide annual catch limit (ACL), which is equal to the ABC, for the BSAI blackspotted and roughey rockfish complex (BSRE), for review during the 2026 groundfish specification process. The Council later refined the scope of the discussion paper during their June 2025 meeting ([motion](#)). The ACL has been exceeded for three of the past four years. Current accountability measures (AMs) specified in the BSAI Fishery Management Plan have not prevented catch from exceeding the ACL.

The National Standard 1 guidelines require that the system of ACLs and AMs be reevaluated, and modified if necessary, when an ACL is exceeded more than once in a four year period. This paper summarizes potential AMs in addition to those already in the FMP. Possible AMs outlined in the discussion paper include modified inseason management authority, and reducing TAC in directed fisheries. We anticipate providing updated 2025 BSRE catch and 2025 ACL status at the December Council meeting, and the SSC will recommend updated ACL limits.