



C6 BSAI and GOA Groundfish Proposed Specifications; Plan Team Reports; Risk tables

October 2021 Council Meeting

Action Memo

- Council Staff: Sara Cleaver (GOA), Steve MacLean (BSAI)
- Other Presenters: Dr. Grant Thompson (AFSC, BSAI), Dr. Jim Ianelli (AFSC, GOA)
- Action Required:
1. Review Joint, BSAI, and GOA Plan Team reports
 2. Recommend proposed BSAI and GOA groundfish harvest limits, prohibited species catch limits, and halibut discard mortality rates for 2022-2023
 3. Finalize risk table guidance for inclusion in future stock assessments

1. Plan Team Reports

The Council's BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Teams met jointly on September 20-21, and separately on September 22-23, 2021, to review and recommend, for proposed rulemaking, groundfish harvest specifications for the upcoming 2022 and 2023 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 that will be finalized for the November Plan Team meeting, and a presentation on the SSC's most recent guidance on the use of risk tables. The complete list of items covered at the joint and individual meetings can be found on each Plan Team [agenda](#). The Joint BSAI/GOA Groundfish Plan Teams report will be presented during this agenda item, along with the individual BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Team reports. All three reports are attached to the agenda.

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 (2022 and 2023) which will notify the public of expected Council action to set final harvest specifications in December 2021. Proposed harvest specifications for the year after next (2023) are typically set equal to the proposed upcoming year (2022) harvest specifications.

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 2021 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 2021.

In December 2020, the Council adopted final harvest specifications for 2021 and 2022, which were published as a final rule in the Federal Register in February 2021 (86 FR 11449, February 25, 2021 (BSAI); 86 FR 10184, February 19, 2021 (GOA)). These existing 2022 specifications will be effective for the beginning of the 2022 groundfish fishing year.

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Groundfish

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team recommendations for the proposed 2022 and 2023 BSAI groundfish annual harvest specifications are shown in the BSAI Plan Team's Proposed ABC-OFL attachment on the agenda. The Team adopted proposed 2022 and 2023 BSAI Overfishing Limits (OFLs) and Allowable Biological Catch limits (ABCs) which match the existing final 2022 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in February 2021, and rollover the same limits for 2023.

TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery

In setting TACs for 2022 and 2023, 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 10% of the eastern BS Pacific cod ABC. An additional 45 t will be set aside for the Area O jig fishery.

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 2022 and 2023 CDQ and Amendment 80 ABC reserves have been provided by NMFS staff based on 2022 TAC levels and past Council action to set ABC reserve at the maximum amount. The proposed 2022 and 2023 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 Plan Team's 2022 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

BSAI Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Limits

Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limits 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 2022 and 2023 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 2021, are shown as **Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11** of the BSAI 2022 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 GHL is not set for the 2021/2022 Bristol Bay red king crab season, the area would be closed to nonpelagic trawl gear in 2022.

BSAI Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

At the September meeting the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs) for implementation in 2022 and 2023 in the BSAI and GOA, and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations. The Team agreed that the GOA nonpelagic trawl CP sector now has the sample size to calculate the GOA trawl CP DMR instead of using the BSAI DMR. The revised recommendation using the two-year average is 83%. Proposed 2022 and 2023 Pacific halibut DMRs for the BSAI are shown in **Table 12** of the BSAI Plan Team's 2022 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. The PSC limits are reduced when an index of Western Alaskan and Upper Yukon Chinook salmon abundance is below a threshold of 250,000 Chinook salmon. Cap levels are 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.

As established under Amendment 110, historically low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon abundance is assessed annually using a three-system index of in-river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers, combined. Under the Council's specified process, 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 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 reports that **the three-system index of in-river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers is 165,148 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 2022 and 2023 are shown in the GOA Plan Team's Proposed ABC-OFL attachment on the agenda. The Team adopted proposed 2022 and 2023 GOA OFLs and ABCs which match the existing final 2022 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in February 2021 and rolled over the same limits for 2023. Final harvest specifications will be based on stock assessment reports included in the GOA Groundfish SAFE report that will be released in late November 2021.

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 2022 Pacific cod ABCs recommended by the Plan Team, the 2022 and 2023 Federal TACs for Pacific cod would be adjusted as listed in **Table 2** of the GOA 2022 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

GOA Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Limits

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 2022 and 2023 halibut PSC apportionments (**Tables 9, 10, 11** in the GOA 2022 Proposed Tables attachment) are based on the recommended 2022 apportionments for the Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries. Salmon PSC limits in the GOA groundfish fisheries are not specified on an annual basis because they are set in regulation.

GOA Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

At the September meeting the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs) for implementation in 2022 and 2023 in the BSAI and GOA, and supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations. The Team agreed that the GOA nonpelagic trawl CP sector now has the sample size to calculate the GOA trawl CP DMR instead of using the BSAI DMR. The revised recommendation using the two-year average is 83%. Proposed 2022 and 2023 Pacific halibut DMRs for the GOA are shown in **Table 12** of the GOA 2022 Proposed Tables attachment on the agenda.

3. Risk Table guidance

As part of the Joint Plan Team report, the Council will receive Groundfish Plan Team recommendations and final SSC guidance on the use of risk tables in future stock assessments. At the June meeting, the Council supported preliminary SSC guidance on the application of the risk tables, provided additional comments, and asked the SSC to present those recommendations for Team review. The Plan Teams provided several recommendations coming out of their September meeting, which are included in the report.