

The Annual Groundfish Harvest Specifications Process

Roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for public input

Every December, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommends scientifically informed harvest levels for groundfish stocks in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska.

These recommendations must be approved and implemented by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), on behalf of the Secretary of Commerce, in the form of regulations that authorize the fisheries to operate. The Council and NMFS follow a process to set harvest levels using the most up-to-date scientific information, while also ensuring regulations are in place allowing the groundfish fisheries to open in January. More information about the harvest specifications process is available on the Council website.

Steps in the harvest specifications process

Spring PEEC meeting: Identify early ecosystem trends

The Spring Preview of Ecosystem and Economic Conditions (PEEC) meeting is an annual workshop convened by the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC). PEEC meetings are an opportunity for scientists and others to share information on physical, biological, and economic conditions to inform groundfish and crab stock assessments.

Summer/ongoing: Data collection and processing

Fishery-dependent data (including catch, discards, and biological samples) are gathered from commercial fishing activity (year-round), and fishery-independent information (including information about fish abundance, condition, and other ecological and oceanographic information) are collected through research surveys, several over which occur during the summer months.

September Groundfish Plan Team meetings: Plan for fall stock assessments

September plan team meetings focus on review of new and updated stock assessment models to be presented in November. Assessment authors may present some final assessment products for Plan Team review at this meeting, if there are no significant changes to the models/assessments. The Plan Teams provide their recommendations to the SSC and Council.

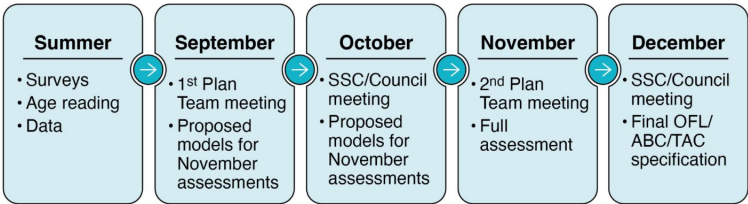
October Council, AP, and SSC meetings: Recommend draft harvest specifications

In October, the SSC and Council recommend *draft* harvest specifications (OFL, ABC and TAC) for all federally managed groundfish stocks based on the existing, currently approved specifications from the previous year. This preliminary step enables NMFS to initiate the draft rulemaking process, and notifies the public of the intent to recommend final harvest specifications in December.

November Groundfish Plan Team meetings: Review stock assessments

November plan team meetings include a review of the current year’s stock assessment outputs (which includes the most current AFSC survey data and fisheries catch data) and the Teams’ initial recommendations for OFLs and ABCs. The Plan Teams review and compile the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports and provide their recommendations to the SSC and Council.

*Schematic of annual Groundfish stock assessment and scientific review process.
Note not all new data are available by September and not all stocks are assessed annually. Spring PEEC meeting will be added to this diagram in later revisions.*



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Why does the Council recommend harvest specifications for two years at a time?

The Council recommends harvest specifications for two fishing years so that regulations remain in place while the next annual stock assessment and harvest specifications cycle is completed and implemented through rulemaking. Federal law requires a transparent, public rulemaking process, which provides time for the public to comment and for the agency to address public concerns before issuing final regulations. This two-year approach provides regulatory continuity while allowing harvest limits to be updated through the annual scientific review and harvest specifications process based on the best scientific information available.

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December Council, AP, and SSC meetings: Recommend final harvest specifications

In December, the SSC and Council receive final SAFE reports, which include stock assessments and information about fish stocks, fisheries, and marine ecosystems. After reviewing Plan Team recommendations, the SSC makes recommendations to the Council for OFL and ABC for groundfish stocks. The Council recommends final harvest specifications for the following two years based on the recently completed stock assessments and SSC recommendations. TACs can reflect social and economic considerations. The combined total of groundfish TACs by region must fall within the optimum yield ranges established in the FMPs and regulation for each region (for GOA 116,000-800,000 mt, for the BSAI 1.4 – 2.0 million mt). The Council may further divide groundfish TACs among fisheries, gear types, and areas.

Final rulemaking (January-March)

NMFS reviews the Council's final December harvest recommendations, public comments at the meeting, and public comments on the Proposed Rule. The agency then implements the final specifications through publication of a Final Rule, typically in March. These regulations supersede (replace) the previous regulations.

Several groundfish fisheries take place early in the year, including Pacific cod and pollock in the GOA, and Pacific cod, pollock, and Atka mackerel in the BSAI. These fisheries are able to reopen for the year prior the new final rule (usually published in March) because the previous year's final rule remains in effect. NMFS in-season management ensures that fisheries operating in the early part of the year don't exceed harvest limits.

How the public can participate

Plan Team, Scientific and Statistical Committee, Advisory Panel, and Council meetings are accessible to the public, and include opportunities for public testimony. Visit the Navigating the Council Process website for more information on how to participate.

Public input can be tailored to the purpose of each meeting and the role of the body that is meeting, whether the focus is on information sharing, scientific review, or policy recommendations. For example:

- **Spring PEEC meetings** are a good opportunity to share ecosystem observations and concerns.
- Testimony at **Groundfish Plan Teams and SSC meetings** should focus on scientific evaluation of the issue or analysis, rather than advocating for a particular policy outcome. For example, members of the public might comment on their interpretation of catch per unit effort (CPUE) trends or survey data.
- **Final TAC setting** in December is when the Council makes its final decisions on catch limits for the upcoming year. This is when the Council has the most discretion to consider public input on harvest specifications, and the public may testify on scientific, social, economic, community, ecosystem, and other information they think should affect how much a fishery can catch.
- The public also can provide additional comments during the NMFS public **rulemaking process**, before the final rule implementing the current year's harvest specifications is published in the spring.