

D2 Planning for 2026 Groundfish Stock Assessment Cycle

An internal agency workgroup composed of AFSC staff, Council staff and SSC members met in late January to discuss and prioritize stock assessments for the 2026 groundfish assessment cycle. The SSC received a presentation on the summary of the workgroup's recommendations by Sara Cleaver (NPFMC), Diana Stram (NPFMC), Melissa Haltuch (NOAA-AFSC), and Chris Lunsford (NOAA-AFSC). The SSC appreciates the efforts and care of all involved in this planning phase and would like to thank the AFSC for their flexibility and work in advance of the 2026 groundfish assessment cycle and their planned efforts to take on such a heavy load of assessments. The workgroup recommended that all stocks on an annual cycle be assessed in 2026, noting that the second GOA Pacific cod assessment is currently planned as a harvest projection for the fall. Due to time and staffing limitations, a number of stock assessments on two- and four-year cycles were not recommended to be assessed in 2026. The workgroup used several criteria (e.g., catch/ABC, new data, staffing availability) in making these decisions, and the SSC concurred with those outcomes. The stocks not recommended for operational assessments in 2026 will, however, have harvest projections (HP) or catch reports (CR) completed. The workgroup also identified several assessments that could be reviewed during the September/October meetings, as they received their first GPT/SSC review in September/October 2025.

The SSC agreed with the workgroup's recommendations of what stocks to complete with operational assessments, HPs, and CRs in 2026 and provided additional guidance to facilitate the timely and thorough review of all the assessments. The SSC recognized the importance of completing and reviewing as many assessments as possible during the 2026 assessment cycle after the government shutdown and lack of assessments in 2025. Therefore, the SSC explored the possibility of reviewing final assessments and having necessary process discussions that would normally occur in December, in June and October, instead of reducing the number of operational assessments from the list that the workgroup recommended. The SSC inquired of AFSC staff whether stock assessments could be completed in time for the June SSC meeting and, if so, which stock assessments could be ready for review at that time. AFSC staff indicated that some stock assessments could be ready for June review and suggested that GOA rex sole and arrowtooth flounder assessments were good candidates for SSC review at the June 2026 meeting to help alleviate time constraints in the fall. The SSC recognizes that this would require an additional GPT meeting prior to the June SSC meeting. The SSC recommends that its June agenda include the following, as practicable: 1) presentation and discussion responding to October 2025 recommendations to further investigate the potential impacts of the changes to the GOA survey design including comparisons of across groups of similar species, 2) discussion of how to determine flexibility in BRDs for Council-identified stocks, 3) the GOA rex sole assessment, and 4) the GOA arrowtooth flounder assessment. Since many of the fall assessments rely on the GOA survey results, the SSC wanted to ensure that there was sufficient time to review and discuss any potential concerns with the survey design changes so that assessment authors can incorporate any SSC recommendations into their upcoming assessments.

To the extent practicable, the SSC also had the following recommendations:

- scheduling final reviews of all GOA rockfish operational assessments for which there were large 2025 bottom trawl survey estimated decreases at the same meeting
- scheduling final reviews of stocks for which the Council recommended exploring potential flexibility in biologically-informed recommended distributions (BRDs) at the same meeting.
- scheduling as many final assessments as possible in the June and September/October meetings to balance the workload with the November/December meetings. The SSC reiterates that all

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assessments identified for potential final review in September/October already received their first review in the fall of 2025 and will therefore follow the same two-step review process as is the Council's normal practice

- exploration by AFSC staff as to whether it would be possible to change the operational full assessment for GOA shortraker to an operational update, to allow the potential review at the October meeting

The SSC recognizes the increased burden on assessment authors and review bodies to accommodate this ambitious schedule. **The SSC recommends that for stocks with operational full stock assessments authors bring forward only essential alternative models and revisions for review.** The SSC did not specifically define “essential”, and the goal was to allow authors to use their best judgement in balancing important changes included in operational full assessments with the timeliness and workload of the review process.