



## Joint Meeting of the Groundfish Plan Teams

### Plan Team Report

November 13, 2023

#### BSAI Groundfish Plan Team Members:

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

#### GOA Groundfish Plan Team Members:

Jim Ianelli	AFSC REFM (co-chair)	Abby Jahn	NMFS AKRO
Chris Lunsford	AFSC ABL (co-chair)	Sandra Lowe	AFSC REFM
Sara Cleaver	NPFMC (coordinator)	Nat Nichols	ADF&G
Kristan Blackhart	NMFS OS&T	Cecilia O’Leary	AFSC RACE
Craig Faunce	AFSC FMA	Jan Rumble	ADF&G
Lisa Hillier	WDFW	Paul Spencer	AFSC REFM
Pete Hulson	AFSC ABL	Ben Williams	AFSC ABL

### Introduction

The Joint meeting for the Groundfish Plan Teams (“Teams”) began on Monday, November 13, 2023, at 9:00 am PST at the AFSC. Participation was both in person and offered remotely via Zoom. Roughly 40 people attended the meeting in person, with many more signed in remotely, but attendance varied throughout the 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:* Dates for 2024 meetings are: September 17-20th, November 12-15th. The virtual meeting on groundfish research priorities will be January 17th.

### Council staff updates

Diana Stram and Sara Cleaver presented relevant recent and upcoming agenda items from the October Council meeting.

### General recommendations on Stock Assessments

**The Team recommended the AFSC consider the feasibility of producing harvest projection assessments in time for the September Plan Team meeting to alleviate review time in November and allow for additional work on stock assessments that are operational updates or full assessments in October.** Under this scenario these assessments would not be reviewed by the SSC until December with the minutes from this review appended to the November Plan Team report.

## Groundfish Economic Status Report

Brian Garber-Yonts presented the report on the Economic Status of the Groundfish Fisheries off Alaska.

The Teams asked Brian if data or methods are available to evaluate the impact of groundfish catches on the greatest national good from providing seafood to consumers. In particular, how many people can our fisheries feed, what is the quality of the nutrition provided, and how does this seafood impact consumers of different socioeconomic levels? Brian indicated that with the available information, it is difficult to evaluate or compare the impact of management decisions on vulnerable fishery communities versus low-income consumers trying to provide nutritious and affordable food for their families, and both groups are likely to be underrepresented in public testimony. Brian noted that quantifying the difference between sustained and optimum yield is difficult, and that AKFIN had created a Human Dimensions of Fisheries Data Explorer application, but that the application probably could not address this question.

The Teams asked if there was information on how competitive North Pacific sectors are in light of increased competition from whitefish aquaculture and competing protein commodity companies that are much larger than those operating in Alaska (and in some cases larger than all of the production from Alaska). There is anecdotal information that some stocks are no longer fully utilized because of economic constraints. In light of that, there was a question regarding whether anything can be done to make Alaska fisheries more competitive (such as developing fileting technology for stocks currently shipped abroad for processing) and whether there is information to help evaluate the impact of Council actions on preventing excessive harvesting share. The presenter noted that this is difficult to answer and cannot be answered at this meeting.

The Teams asked if data are available on the carbon footprint of different fisheries sectors. Climate change is likely the cause of multiple stock disturbances in Alaska fisheries, and the release of carbon and potential mitigation measures may become important in analyses of Council actions. The presenter noted that work on this issue is underway through the Inflation Reduction Act. The presenter hopes this will produce answers in the coming years.

The public asked what kinds of tools are available to explain current challenging economic conditions in Alaska's fisheries and what tools will be available in the future. The presenter stated that staff are continually working to develop analytical tools. With staff turnover, it has been difficult to reach out to stakeholders, get input, and produce more useful and informative information.

The public asked if we can compare pollock with hake, tilapia, and other whitefish substitutes, not just cod and pollock. The presenter noted that we should create better indices for market conditions and comparisons.

## Sablefish ESP Report Card

Kalei Shotwell presented the report card for the sablefish ESP, which included physical, lower and upper trophic ecosystem indicators. Information from the ESP is included in the risk table write-up in the sablefish assessment.

The Teams discussed the need for additional socioeconomic indicators, such as those included in the preceding economic report (e.g., size grade data) to be fine-tuned and broken out by sector for the sablefish ESP. The Teams noted that the drastic changes in the sablefish fishery (i.e., gear changes, increase in production in BSAI, recruitment events) need to be further evaluated from a socioeconomic standpoint. The Teams were also interested in the impact of small sablefish and historical use in coastal communities. Kalei indicated that they are hoping to integrate more of this type of information in the

future, as the SSC has commented on this several times, but it will require more resources from those with socioeconomic expertise.

There was a question about whether sablefish are showing up similarly in the EBS bottom trawl survey as they are in the fishery, but those involved in the survey noted that typically they are not, as the depth for the fishery is different from that of the survey BTS data. This could also be an issue of timing.

## **Sablefish Assessment (update)**

Dan Goethel presented the operational update assessment for Alaska Sablefish in 2023. Several appendices were included to the SAFE assessment chapter that present valuable details on additional analyses conducted in support of this assessment and ongoing improvements (other than the ESP, the appendices were omitted from the presentations). In addition to updating the usual data inputs for 2023, the authors made minor updates to model structure for 2023. A total of six new model runs for 2023 were presented:

### Model

- 21.12: Continuity model matching the 2022 SAFE model but with data updated for 2023
- 23.1: Removes 1984 and 1987 trawl survey biomass index and length composition data
- 23.2: Incorporated all sources of non-commercial catch in federal waters in the total catch
- 23.3: Revised the stock-recruit bias correction, updated selectivity parameter sharing, and removed unnecessarily estimated fishing mortality parameters
- 23.4 Implemented a standardized CPUE index that combined data from both the hook-and-line and pot gear types
- 23.5: Integrated all updates noted in Models 23.1-23.4; this is the author recommended model version

The Teams asked about the improvements and fixes to the stock-recruit bias correction algorithm and appreciated the author's response and improvements to the code. Some unknowns about the method remain including how the bias-correction is applied across years with more or less information, how the bias-correction is applied during MCMC, and if estimating sigmaR is reasonable for this assessment especially during MLE. It was noted that the bias correction is unnecessary from posterior samples (MCMC evaluations) and that the NPFMC Tier 3 estimates use proxy values for spawning biomass reference points instead of the stock-recruitment relationship and estimates of theoretical unfished biomass.

The Teams agreed that the stock is in Tier 3a. Survey indices for the stock appear to be stabilizing but model estimates show the stock continuing to increase. The spawning biomass is estimated at 52% of "unfished" in 2023 and projected to be 62% by 2024. The author noted that these estimates may be conservative given a pattern of underestimating the 2016 year class over time. However, conflicting signals between the trawl and longline surveys on recent year class strength indicate additional uncertainty. The Teams noted that as spawning biomass appears to be increasing rapidly as recent year classes mature, precaution may be warranted due to the limited number of age classes making up the spawning biomass.

For 2023, the author recommended maximum ABC was a 16% increase from last year's value. Utilization of the stock has hovered around 70% in recent years. Area apportionments are based on 5-year average survey biomass proportions by area, following the methods adopted by the SSC in 2020. The stair-step adjustments applied to area ABCs in 2022 and 2023 are no longer required for 2024 and 2025.

The recommended ABC is also adjusted for whale depredation in the fixed gear fishery; these values were not updated for 2023 (i.e., held constant at 2022 values) and are assumed to be a conservative estimate due to the recent rapid transition to pot gear (>80% of fixed gear catch), which are assumed to experience zero whale depredation mortality. These rapid gear transitions, as well as market conditions and underutilization of the stock, were identified as a ‘Major Concern’ in the Fishery Performance category of the risk table (all other categories identified as Level 1). The authors noted that capped management procedures could be considered to help protract the age structure of the stock, along with alternative SSB metrics (e.g., ABIMSY; Griffiths et al., 2023) to help avoid age truncation. An additional management consideration is that a maximum catch strategy will likely maintain a long-term downward trend if recruitment reverts to average conditions.

The 2023 assessment recommends large increases in ABC in the AI and in the BS. It was noted that there have been past concerns with adequate monitoring of the sablefish fishery in these areas. The Teams benefited from the inclusion of [Appendix F: Observer Coverage and Sampling of the Sablefish Stock](#) in this year's assessment, and appreciate the work on that front. To that end, the Teams **recommended continued collaboration between assessment scientists and the FMA Division of the AFSC to further expand on these issues to ensure quality data for this and other assessments.**

**The Teams agreed with the author’s recommended model, Model 23.5, with no reduction from maxABC.**