



C4 GOA Groundfish Harvest Specifications

December 2021 Council Meeting

Action Memo

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Action Required:

1. Review the 2021 Ecosystem Status Report for the Gulf of Alaska
2. Approve the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report.
3. Recommend final GOA Groundfish harvest specifications for 2022 and 2023, including:
 - Overfishing level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks. **[SSC]**
 - Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for all stocks, taking into account the State waters Pacific cod and pollock fisheries.
 - Pacific halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits and seasonal apportionments.
 - Pacific halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs)

BACKGROUND

At this meeting, the Council will review the Ecosystem Status Report for the Gulf of Alaska, adopt the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) Groundfish SAFE Report, and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits, and halibut DMRs to manage the 2022 and 2023 GOA groundfish fisheries. Upon publication in the Federal Register, the 2022/2023 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications adopted last year for the start of the 2022 fisheries.

GOA SAFE Report and Ecosystem Status Report

The GOA Groundfish Plan Team met virtually over Adobe Connect on November 15-19, 2021 to prepare the GOA Groundfish SAFE report. The SAFE report forms the basis for the GOA groundfish harvest specifications for the next two fishing years. The [SAFE report introduction](#) summarizes the Plan Team recommendations for each stock/complex. Hyperlinks to the full report, and the Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem Status Report (previously referred to as the Ecosystem Considerations Report, and which was reviewed by the Plan Team in November) are posted. The Council will review and adopt the full SAFE report at this meeting.

The November 2021 [GOA Groundfish Plan Team Minutes](#) and [Joint Groundfish Plan Team Minutes](#) are included under Agenda Item C4.

Based on consideration of stock prioritization including assessment methods and data availability, some stocks are assessed on an annual basis while others are assessed less frequently. Full assessments were produced for all stocks in the GOA in 2021 with the following exceptions: partial assessments were produced for deepwater flatfish, flathead sole, northern rockfish, and dusky rockfish, and no assessments

were produced for thornyheads or sharks. For these exceptions, specifications were rolled over from the previous assessment for that stock.

OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team’s recommendations for final harvest specifications for 2022 and 2023 are in the SAFE report introduction and attached as [Table 1 GOA Plan Team Recommendations](#). In October 2021, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications for OFL and ABC for 2022 and 2023 which were based on last year’s stock assessments. In this 2021 SAFE report, the Plan Team has revised those projections due to collection of new catch, survey, age composition, or size composition data; or use of new methodology for recommending OFLs and ABCs. The SSC and AP recommendations will be provided to the Council during the meeting.

The sum of the Plan Team’s recommended ABCs for 2022 and 2023 are compared to the 2020 and 2021 ABCs, below. These sums include the GOA sablefish ABC, not the Alaska-wide sablefish ABC.

2020	2021	2022	2023
465,956 t	476,037 t	499,446 t	497,269 t

The increase from 2021 to 2022 is driven by a 26% increase in the pollock ABC. Note that sculpins were removed from harvest specifications after 2020. The Plan Team has recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks in 2022 and 2023, except for sablefish, demersal shelf rockfish, and dusky rockfish. As illustrated in Figure 2 of the GOA SAFE introduction, other than Pacific cod, all stocks are above B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy ($B_{35\%}$).

TAC considerations for State waters fisheries

State waters Pacific cod fishery

Established area apportionments for 2022 and 2023 adjust the amount of Pacific cod ABC available for the Federal TAC in each area; the adjustments are attached under the [GOA Groundfish Tables](#) (Table 2).

State waters pollock fishery

The ABC available for area-specific Federal GOA pollock TACs is first reduced by 2.5% to provide for the Prince William Sound (PWS) State GHL. The ABC/TAC/GHL reflect this accommodation.

Prohibited Species Catch Limits

In the GOA, PSC limits for halibut are specified annually by fishery, gear, and season. The 2022 and 2023 PSC limits are attached under the [GOA Groundfish Tables](#) (Tables 14-16).

PSC limits by gear type

The Pacific halibut PSC limits apply only to trawl vessels and vessels fishing with hook-and-line gear for species other than IFQ sablefish. The FMP authorizes the Council to exempt specific gear from the halibut PSC limits. Pot gear, jig gear, and the sablefish IFQ hook-and-line gear fishery categories have been exempted from the halibut PSC limit since 1995. The Council recommended the exemptions because: 1. Pot gear fisheries have low halibut bycatch mortality; 2. NMFS estimates negligible halibut mortality for the jig gear fisheries; and 3. IFQ regulations prohibit halibut discards if any halibut IFQ permit holder on board a catcher vessel holds unused halibut IFQ (§ 679.7(f)(11)).

CV-CP Hook-and-line split

The hook-and-line halibut PSC limit is divided between the catcher vessel (CV) and catcher processor (CP) sectors according to the “GOA Pacific cod split formula” that is prescribed in regulation. Based on this formula, the hook-and-line CV sector would fish under a 144 mt halibut PSC limit and the hook-and-line CP sector PSC limit would fish under a 113 mt PSC limit in 2022 and 2023. The demersal shelf rockfish fishery halibut PSC limit would be 9 mt.

Procedure for changing Pacific halibut PSC limit apportionments

The GOA Groundfish FMP (Section 3.6.2.1) sets out the procedure for modifying halibut PSC limits during the annual harvest specifications process. To adjust the PSC limit, the Council and NMFS must consider biological and socioeconomic factors about the halibut stock and groundfish fisheries that intercept halibut as bycatch.¹ 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.

Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

Halibut DMRs were reviewed by the SSC and Council at the October 2021 Council meeting. Table 17 in the [GOA Groundfish Tables attachment](#) on the eAgenda provides DMRs by gear and operation type for final specifications in 2022 and 2023.

¹ Types of information the Council will consider relevant to seasonal allocation of PSC limits include: a) Seasonal distribution of prohibited species; b) Seasonal distribution of target groundfish species relative to prohibited species distribution; c) Expected prohibited species bycatch needs on a seasonal basis relevant to change in prohibited species biomass and expected catches of target groundfish species; d) Expected variations in bycatch rates throughout the fishing year; e) Expected changes in directed groundfish fishing seasons; f) expected start of fishing efforts; and g) Economic effects of establishing seasonal prohibited species apportionments on segments of the target groundfish industry.