



C2 GOA Groundfish Harvest Specifications

December 2024 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Council Staff: Sara Cleaver
Other Presenters: Dr. James Ianelli (NMFS AFSC, GOA Plan Team co-chair)
Chris Lunsford (NMFS AFSC, GOA Plan Team co-chair)
Dr. Bridget Ferriss (NMFS AFSC REFM) - ESR

Action Required:

1. Review the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) and GOA Groundfish Plan Team reports.
2. Approve the 2024 GOA Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report.
3. Recommend final GOA Groundfish harvest specifications for 2025 and 2026, including:
 - Overfishing level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks.
 - 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 apportionments.
 - Pacific halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs)

BACKGROUND

At this meeting, the Council will review the Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) for the Gulf of Alaska (GOA), adopt the GOA Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report, and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits, and halibut DMRs to manage the 2025 and 2026 GOA groundfish fisheries. Upon publication in the Federal Register, the 2025/2026 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications adopted earlier this year for the start of the 2025 fisheries ([89 FR 15484](#)).

GOA SAFE Report and Ecosystem Status Report

The GOA Groundfish Plan Team met in a hybrid format over Zoom and at the Alaska Fishery Science Center on November 12-15, 2024, to prepare the GOA Groundfish SAFE Report. The SAFE Report forms the basis for GOA groundfish harvest specifications for the next two fishing years. The [SAFE Report Introduction](#) summarizes Plan Team recommendations for each stock/complex. Hyperlinks to the full [GOA Groundfish Plan Team Report](#) and links to the SAFE chapters reviewed by the Plan Team are posted on the eAgenda. The Joint Groundfish Plan Team Report is posted with the BSAI Plan Team Report under Agenda Item C1. The Council will review and adopt the full SAFE reports at this meeting.

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. Operational full or update assessments were produced for the following GOA stocks: pollock, Pacific cod, northern rockfish, dusky

rockfish, DSR, and thornyhead rockfish, and other rockfish. Harvest projections, which were reviewed by the Plan Teams and SSC in September/October, were produced for: Pacific ocean perch, rougheye and blackspotted rockfish, deepwater flatfish, shallow-water flatfish, northern and southern rock sole, rex sole, arrowtooth flounder, and flathead sole. Catch reports were produced for shorttraker rockfish, Atka mackerel, sharks, skates, and octopus. For these stocks, specifications were rolled over from the previous assessment for that stock. Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profile (ESP) report cards for GOA pollock and Pacific cod (and sablefish, see Agenda Item C1) were developed this year and reviewed by the Plan Team. ESP report cards provide data updates to the most recent year available of the indicator suite created in the initial full ESP.

The Plan Team also reviewed the GOA ESR, which provides information on ecosystem status and trends and context for acceptable biological catch (ABC) and overfishing limit (OFL) recommendations. Some of this ecosystem information is integrated into annual harvest recommendations through inclusion in stock assessment-specific risk tables. The SSC, AP, and Council will receive a presentation on the GOA ESR under C1, and the Council may use this information in recommending final total allowable catch (TAC) for groundfish.

All of the SAFE report documents for SSC/AP/Council review can be found on the [Council's SAFE Report webpage](#).

OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team's recommendations for final harvest specifications for 2025 and 2026 are in the SAFE report introduction and attached as [C2 Table 1 GOA Specs PT Recs 2025 26](#). In October 2024, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications for OFL and ABC for 2025 and 2026 which were based on last year's stock assessments. In the 2024 SAFE report, the Plan Team has revised those projections due to collection of new catch, survey, age composition, or size composition data; or based on updated 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 2025 and 2026 are compared to the final 2023 and 2024 ABCs, below. These sums include the Alaska-wide sablefish ABC.

| 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 539,072 mt | 599,784 mt | 593,268 mt | 541,769 mt |

The decrease from the 2024 specifications to the 2025 recommendations is primarily driven by a ~5% decrease in the Western GOA/Central GOA/Western Yakutat pollock ABC. The GOA Groundfish Plan Team has recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks in 2025 and 2026 with the exception of rougheye/blackspotted rockfish. As illustrated in (revised) Figure 2 of the GOA SAFE introduction, other than Pacific cod, all stocks are above B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy ($B_{35\%}$).

Social and Economic Information to Inform Groundfish TAC-setting

Attached to the eAgenda is a [description](#) of the existing products that provide economic and social information that are available and relevant to harvest specifications. These products include the Groundfish Economic Status Report (Groundfish Econ SAFE), Annual Community Engagement and Participation Overview (ACEPO), Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profile (ESP) and inseason management reports. This document is provided as background information in response to the SSC recommendations in December 2023 for improved integration of economic, social, and community information into the management process. There will not be a staff presentation at this meeting. A future

agenda item will be scheduled in 2025 to discuss opportunities to improve the communication and use of available economic and social information in the management process.

TAC considerations for State waters fisheries

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 Guideline Harvest Level (GHL). The ABC, TAC, and GHL in Table 1 reflect this accommodation.

State waters Pacific cod fishery

Established area apportionments for 2025 and 2026 adjust the amount of Pacific cod ABC available for the Federal TAC in each area; the adjustments are listed in Table 2 attached under the [C2 Additional Tables GOA Groundfish 2025 and 2026](#) document.

Prohibited Species Catch Limits

In the GOA, PSC limits for halibut are specified annually by fishery, gear, and season. The 2025 and 2026 PSC limits are listed in Tables 3-5 attached under the [C2 Additional Tables GOA Groundfish 2025 and 2026](#) document..

Halibut PSC limits by gear type- Table 3

The Pacific halibut PSC limits apply only to trawl vessels and vessels fishing with hook-and-line gear for species other than Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) sablefish. The GOA Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (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)).

Halibut PSC Trawl Apportionments- Table 4

Trawl halibut PSC (from Table 3) is further apportioned among shallow-water and deep-water species complex fisheries. The shallow-water species fishery is composed of pollock, Pacific cod, shallow-water flatfish, flathead sole, Atka mackerel, and “other species” (sharks and octopuses). The deep-water species fishery is composed of sablefish, rockfish, deep-water flatfish, rex sole, and arrowtooth flounder. The purpose of these apportionments is to maintain groundfish harvest while minimizing halibut bycatch in the trawl fisheries. Regulations at 679.21(d)(3) describe the apportionment of trawl halibut PSC limits to the shallow-water and deep-water fishery categories.

Halibut PSC limit CV-CP hook-and-line split- Table 5

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 at § 679.21(d)(2). Based on this formula (and if TAC were set equal to the Plan Team’s ABC recommendation,) the hook-and-line CV sector would fish under a 149 mt halibut PSC limit and the hook-and-line CP sector PSC limit would fish under a 107 mt PSC limit in 2025 and 2026. 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 2024 Council meeting for adoption into the 2025 and 2026 proposed specifications. There are no changes to these halibut DMRs since October 2024. Table 6 in the [C2 Additional Tables for GOA Groundfish](#) Final Harvest Specifications provides the DMRs by gear and operation type for final specifications in 2025 and 2026.

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.