



# **C5 BSAI Groundfish Proposed Specifications**

October 2019 Council Meeting

## **Action Memo**

- Council Staff: Steve MacLean
- Other Presenters: Dr. Grant Thompson, Dr. Stephani Zador, Dr. Ebett Siddon (all AFSC)
- Action Required:
1. Review Joint Groundfish-Crab, Joint Groundfish, and BSAI Groundfish Plan Team reports
  2. Recommend proposed BSAI groundfish harvest and prohibited species specifications for 2020-2021

### **1. Plan Team Reports**

The BSAI and GOA Groundfish Plan Teams and the BSAI Crab Plan Team met jointly to consider items of joint interest on September 16, 2019, and individually during September 17-20, 2019, to review and recommend, for proposed rulemaking, groundfish and crab harvest specifications for the upcoming 2020 and 2021 fishing years. The teams also reviewed reports from assessment authors to identify items for inclusion in stock assessments that will be presented at the November Groundfish Plan Team meetings. The joint BSAI Groundfish/GOA Groundfish/BSAI Crab Plan report will be presented during this agenda item, along with the Joint BSAI/GOA Groundfish Plan Team Report, and the BSAI Groundfish Plan Team Report. All three reports are attached to the electronic agenda.

Additionally, AFSC staff will provide a short preview of the Ecosystem Status Report that will be prepared for review in December 2019. At the Council, this presentation will occur during Agenda Item B4, the AFSC Report.

### **2. Proposed Harvest Specifications**

At this meeting the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, BSAI groundfish harvest specifications for the upcoming two-year period (2020 and 2021) which will notify the public of expected Council action to set final harvest specifications in December 2019. Existing 2020 harvest specifications were published as a final rule in the Federal Register (84 FR 9000, March 13, 2019) in March 2019 and will be in place for January 2020 when the groundfish fishing year begins. Proposed harvest specifications for the year after next (2021) are typically set equal to the proposed upcoming year (2020) harvest specifications. In addition to harvest specifications, the Council will recommend, for proposed rulemaking, gear and target fishery apportionments of prohibited species catch (PSC) limits for halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, *opilio* crab, and herring. The Council will also recommend updated halibut discard mortality rates. Final harvest specifications will be based on stock assessment reports included in the Groundfish SAFEs for BSAI and GOA that will be released in late November 2019.

#### **Bering Sea /Aleutian Islands Groundfish**

The BSAI Groundfish Plan Team recommendations for proposed 2020 and 2021 BSAI groundfish annual harvest specifications are shown in Table 1 in the Tables attachment to this agenda item. The Team adopted proposed 2020 and 2021 BSAI Overfishing Limits (OFLs), except for Sablefish, and Allowable

Biological Catch limits (ABCs) which rollover the existing final 2020 harvest specifications that were published in the Federal Register in March 2019 (84 FR 9000, March 13, 2019). The Team recommends combining the OFL for BS and AI sablefish and asked that the authors bring forward two alternatives for OFL in November: (1) combine the BS and AI OFL and (2) combine OFL Alaska-wide.

*TAC considerations for State waters Pacific cod fishery*

In setting TACs for 2020 and 2021, the Council accounts for guideline harvest levels (GHLs) for groundfish fisheries in State waters. The Alaska Board of Fisheries took action in 2018 which modified how GHLs in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands are set for Pacific cod. The GHL in the AI will be set at 31% of the AI Pacific cod ABC. The GHL in the BS will be set at 8% of the eastern BS Pacific cod ABC. An additional reduction of 45 t is taken from the remaining eastern BS available maxTAC for the Area O jig fishery.

*Flatfish flexibility ABC reserve*

Under Amendment 105, an ABC reserve is specified for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole. These species are allocated to CDQ groups and Amendment 80 cooperatives using formulas from the annual harvest specifications process. The ABC reserve for each species is specified by the Council by evaluating the difference between the ABC and TAC for each species (i.e., the ABC surplus) and considering whether the amount needs to be reduced by a discretionary buffer based on social, economic, or ecological considerations. The Council then designates some, all, or none of the ABC surplus as the ABC reserve. The Council provides its rationale for setting the ABC reserve at a particular level each year. The 2020 and 2021 CDQ and Amendment 80 ABC reserves have been provided by NMFS staff based on 2019 TAC levels and past Council action to set ABC reserve at the maximum amount.

A report on flatfish exchanges by the Amendment 80 cooperatives will be provided to the Council by NMFS in December. The December report will include information on the number of vessels used to harvest cooperative quota, the number of flatfish exchanges and the dates those exchanges were approved, the types of and amounts of cooperative quota and Amendment 80 ABC reserve utilized, and the dates, types, and amounts of inter-cooperative quota transfers. The report is provided each year in December to help the Council make appropriate adjustments, as needed. The proposed 2020 and 2021 ABC Surplus, ABC Reserves, CDQ ABC Reserves, and Amendment 80 ABC Reserves in the BSAI for flathead sole, rock sole, and yellowfin sole are shown in Table 7 on the Tables attachment to this agenda item.

**BSAI Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Limits**

Final BSAI harvest specifications include PSC limits for halibut, red king crab, Tanner crab, *opilio* crab, and herring and gear type and target fishery apportionments, which are set in Federal regulations. The 2020 and 2021 crab PSC limits have been revised using current biomass estimates and herring PSC limits will be revised when the most current biomass estimates are known. Proposed harvest specifications for these PSC limits and apportionments based on 2019 are shown as Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 on the Tables attachment to this agenda item.

*BSAI Halibut Discard Mortality Rates*

At the September meeting, the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed halibut DMRs for implementation in 2020 in the BSAI and GOIA. The Teams supported the Halibut DMR Working Group's recommendations to maintain current methods to estimate Halibut DMRs and to use the two-year reference period (2017-2018) for producing the 2020 and 2021 DMRs. Proposed 2020 and 2021 Pacific halibut discard mortality rates for the BSAI are shown in Table 12 on the Tables attachment to this agenda item.

*Three-River Index for EBS Pollock Fishery Chinook PSC Threshold*

Under BSAI Groundfish FMP Amendment 110, in addition to other bycatch reduction measures, the Council recommended, and NMFS implemented, a reduction to overall Chinook PSC levels for the EBS pollock fishery sectors in times of low abundance of Western Alaskan Chinook salmon. The PSC limits are reduced when an index of Western Alaskan and Upper Yukon Chinook salmon abundance is below a threshold of 250,000 Chinook salmon. Cap levels are reduced from a performance standard of 47,491 to 33,318 and a PSC limit from 60,000 to 45,000. This reduction in cap levels in times of low abundance is designed to provide increased incentives for the pollock fleet to reduce bycatch to the maximum extent practicable to help in efforts to rebuild critically low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon stocks. Reduced cap levels are enacted in all years when the index is below a designated threshold of 250,000 Western Alaskan Chinook salmon, indicating very poor run sizes. All other provisions of Chinook bycatch management will also be in place in these years.

As established under Amendment 110, historically low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon abundance is assessed annually using a 3-system index of in-river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers, combined. Under the Council's specified process, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) provides post-season abundance estimates to NMFS by October 1 to determine if adult Chinook abundance in the index systems falls at or below the threshold level of 250,000. The performance standard and hard cap applicable to the Bering Sea pollock fishery will be lowered in the year following the year in which the index was  $\leq 250,000$ . A letter from ADFG to NMFS is posted under Agenda Item B5. That letter reports that **the three-system index of in-river adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers is 315,626, which is above the threshold** for lower caps. Therefore, performance standard will increase to 47,491 from 33,318 Chinook salmon and the PSC limit will increase to 60,000 from 45,000 Chinook salmon, as identified at 50 CFR 679.21.