



D1 Small Sablefish Release Update

June 2023 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Council Staff: Sara Cleaver
Other Presenters: Dr. Dan Goethel (AFSC)
Action Required: 1. Review staff update paper
2. Provide direction on prioritizing next iteration of analysis

BACKGROUND

The Council will receive a staff update paper intended to assist the Council in evaluating how to prioritize preparation of a second initial review analysis of the Council's proposed action for small sablefish release. The action under consideration was initiated in December 2019 following a series of three discussion papers on the issue. Starting in April 2018, IFQ sablefish fishermen provided testimony to the Council that they were seeing a sudden influx of very small and unmarketable sablefish in their catch. These fish were becoming an economic burden to fishermen because regulations prohibit them from being discarded. Fishery encounters with large numbers of small sablefish have become more frequent because recent year classes of sablefish are more abundant than any previously recorded.

The Council's draft purpose and need and alternatives for this action are included below. An initial review draft was provided to the Council in February 2021 (the February 2021 analysis is included on the eAgenda). At initial review, the SSC recommended not releasing the document for final action, as specific analyses should be conducted prior to any final action by the Council on this issue. The SSC concluded that there are two unresolved questions central to understanding the effects of the proposed action:

1. What is the impact on the age structure and overall productivity of the stock under different rates of discard mortality and for different gear and discard selectivity profiles?
2. What is the impact on the uncertainties in the stock assessment, and the required buffers in setting ABC, arising from knowledge gaps introduced by not knowing gear selectivity or discard selectivity and mortality in a mostly unobserved fishery?

As such, a second initial review of this analysis is required.

In June 2022, the Council reiterated interest in accelerating the timeline for the next initial review of the proposed action to allow small sablefish release, as Council agenda time and staff resources at the Council, NMFS Regional Office, and AFSC allow. This paper evaluates the workload involved with responding to SSC requests, as well as other management tradeoffs and potential changes to the alternatives that could mitigate them. Descriptions of the relative implications for workload, timeline, sablefish stock conservation, reprioritized monitoring needs, and potential implications for the fishery are provided.

Current purpose and need and alternatives for this action:

PURPOSE AND NEED

Large year classes of sablefish result in significant catches of small sablefish in the IFQ fixed gear fisheries. Small sablefish have low commercial value and current regulations require IFQ holders to retain all sablefish. Available data suggest that survival rates for carefully released sablefish are high. operational flexibility to carefully release sablefish may increase the value of the commercial harvest and allow small fish to contribute to the overall biomass.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1, No Action

Under the No Action alternative, all regulations and FMP language related to a prohibition on discarding sablefish would remain intact. Those regulations include 50 CFR 679.7(d)(4)(ii) and 50 CFR 679.7(f)(11). Additionally, discarding is prohibited in both the BSAI and GOA Groundfish FMPs in the fourth provision under General Provisions section 3.7.1.7, prohibiting discarding of sablefish.

Alternative 2, Allow Voluntary Release of Sablefish in the IFQ Fishery

This alternative would eliminate the regulatory restrictions that prohibit release of sablefish caught by sablefish IFQ vessels as well as the FMP provision prohibiting discarding.

Element 1: DMRs

Apply a DMR to discarded sablefish of:

1. 5%
2. 12%
3. 16%
4. 20%

Sub-option: Select different DMRs for pot gear and hook and line gear

Element 2: Catch Accounting

Option 1: Sablefish discards will be estimated using observer and EM data with a DMR applied annually as part of the specifications process.

Option 2: Sablefish discards will be estimated pre-season based on AFSC longline survey encounter rates of sub-three pound sablefish with the DMR applied annually as part of the specifications process.

Element 3: Discard Mortality Accounting

Sablefish discard mortality associated with the IFQ fishery will be accounted for in the stock assessment. The analysis should describe the potential implications of voluntary discards on the sablefish stock assessment and specifications process.

Element 4: Monitoring and Enforcement

The analysis should describe potential monitoring and enforcement provisions that could improve estimates of voluntary and regulatory discards.