



C4 GOA Groundfish Harvest Specifications

December 2020 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Council Staff: Sara Cleaver

Other Presenters: Dr. James Ianelli (NMFS AFSC, GOA Plan Team co-chair)
Dr. Bridget Ferriss (NMFS AFSC REFM – presenting ESR)

Action Required:

1. Review the 2020 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 2021 and 2022, 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 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 2021 and 2022 GOA groundfish fisheries. Upon publication in the Federal Register, the 2021/2022 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications implemented in March 2020 for the 2021 fisheries ([85 FR 13802](#)).

GOA SAFE Report and Ecosystem Status Report

The GOA Groundfish Plan Team met virtually over Adobe Connect on November 16-20, 2020 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 2020 [GOA 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 2020 with the following exceptions: partial assessments were produced for rougheye/blackspotted rockfish, arrowtooth flounder, shallow-water flatfish, northern and southern rock sole, demersal shelf rockfish, and flathead sole, and no assessments were produced for rex sole, deepwater flatfish, shortraker rockfish, other rockfish, atka mackerel, skates, or octopus. For these

exceptions, specifications were rolled over from the previous assessment for that stock. Reports were provided for forage fish and grenadiers.

Sculpin have been reclassified (GOA Groundfish FMP Amendment 110, BSAI Amendment 121) in the FMP as an Ecosystem Component species. Amendment 110 prohibits directed fishing for squids and establishes a Maximum Retainable Amount (MRA) of 20% for sculpins for all basis species in both the GOA and BSAI, while maintaining recordkeeping and reporting requirements for squid. Amendments 110/121 and their implementing regulations were approved by the Secretary of Commerce, effective August 2020, and harvest specifications (OFL, ABC, and TAC) for sculpin are no longer necessary. The catch of sculpins will be reported on the NMFS weekly report for squid, forage fish and grenadiers.

OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team’s recommendations for final harvest specifications for 2021 and 2022 are in the SAFE report introduction and attached as [Table 1 GOA Plan Team Recommendations](#). In October 2020, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications for OFL and ABC for 2021 and 2022 which were based on last year’s stock assessments. In this 2020 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 2021 and 2022 are compared below to the 2019 and 2020 Council-adopted ABCs.

2019	2020	2021	2022
509,507 t	465,956 t	456,274 t	452,656 t

The reductions are driven by a decrease in the recommended shark ABC (a 54% reduction), a 62% increase from the 2020 Pacific cod ABC of 14,621 t, a 16% increase from the 2020 Pacific ocean perch ABC of 31,238 t, a 93% increase in the recommended dusky rockfish ABC, and the removal of sculpins from harvest specifications. The Plan Team has recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks, except for sablefish in 2021 and 2022. As illustrated in Figure 2 of the GOA SAFE report introduction, other than Pacific cod, all stocks are above B_{MSY} or the B_{MSY} proxy ($B_{35\%}$). The total biomass estimate for GOA groundfish in 2021 (5,005,961) represents a 3.7% increase from 2020 (4,828,726 t).

TAC considerations for State waters fisheries

State waters Pacific cod fishery

Established area apportionments for 2021 and 2022 adjust the amount of Pacific cod ABC available for the Federal TAC in each area; the adjustments are attached under the GOA Groundfish Specs 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 2021 and 2022 PSC limits are attached under the GOA Groundfish Specs 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 2021 and 2022. 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 2020 Council meeting. GOA Groundfish Specs Table 17 provides DMRs by gear and operation type for final specifications in 2021 and 2022.

¹ The required information includes 1) estimated change in halibut biomass and stock condition; 2) potential impacts on halibut stocks and fisheries; 3) potential impacts on groundfish fisheries; 4) estimated PSC during prior years; 5) expected halibut PSC; 6) methods available to reduce halibut PSC; 7) the cost of reducing halibut PSC; and 8) other biological and socioeconomic factors that affect the appropriateness of a specific PSC limit in terms of FMP objectives.