North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Partial Coverage Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee

REPORT

September 16, 2020: 8:30am-4pm, AKDT

Committee: *Nicole Kimball (Chair), Julie Bonney, Tom Evich, Dan Falvey, Luke Szymanski, Abigail Turner Franke, Kathy Hansen, Caitlin Yaeger, Julie Kavanaugh*

Members Absent: Bob Alverson

Agency Staff: *Kate Haapala (NPFMC), Diana Evans (NPFMC), Sarah Labelle (NPFMC), Shannon Gleason (NPFMC), Angela Moran (NPFMC), Jennifer Mondragon (NMFS), Maggie Chan (NMFS), Phil Ganz (NMFS), Cathy Tide (NMFS), Josh Keaton (NMFS), Jennifer Ferdinand (NMFS), Craig Faunce (NMFS), Gwynne Schnaittacher (NMFS), Lisa Thompson (NMFS), Mike Vetcher (NMFS), Geoff Mayhew (PSMFC), Jennifer Callahan (PSMFC)*

Other Attendees: Craig Cross (Council member), Tom Meyer (OLE), Tyler Jackson

1. Introduction

The chair of the Partial Coverage Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee (PCFMAC) opened the meeting and gave an overview of the agenda. The chair also explained the purpose of the PCFMAC meeting, specifically that the committee would receive a status update on the 2020 Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) and could make recommendations on the Draft 2021 ADP.

2. Status Update on 2020 ADP

The PCFMAC received an update from Jennifer Ferdinand (FMA) on the agency's response to COVID-19 related to the full and partial coverage observer programs.[1]

Starting in July 2020, the agency has utilized a port-based approach for partial coverage observer deployment. **This deployment approach is responsive to the Council's June 2020 recommendation for reintroducing partial coverage observers during COVID-19 after a blanket waiver was discontinued.** The agency has deployed observers from 14 ports (Akutan, Dutch Harbor/Unalaska, False Pass, Homer, Juneau, Ketchikan, King Cove, Kodiak, Nome, Petersburg, Sand Point, Seward, Sitka, and Yakutat). Under this port-based approach, observers undergo a port-specific 14-day quarantine period and deploy onto vessels that embark and disembark in the same port. In addition, shoreside observers are being deployed to ensure COVID-19 protocols can be followed (e.g., vessel-based observers are no longer following deliveries into the plant for sorting and sampling) and minimize data gaps.

Committee discussion highlighted that the port-based deployment approach can limit the agency's ability to deploy partial coverage observers on a state-wide basis. The agency can sample a smaller portion of the partial coverage fleet than it usually has access to in order to achieve the targeted 15% baseline coverage rate by gear type specified in the 2020 ADP. This approach means that vessels embarking outside of the

[1] The Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee's May 2020 report contains extensive detail on how COVID-19 has impacted monitoring in the full and partial coverage observer programs and the agency's response.

14 selected ports have zero probability of being selected for observer coverage. Sampling access has been further constrained in Akutan where additional restrictions put in place to protect the community have limited the agency's ability to stage and quarantine observers in that port. As a result, the agency must select a greater proportion of trips from the remaining ports to achieve the same coverage amounts across the entire gear type. This issue primarily affects the pot fleet out of Akutan.

In terms of the 2020 observer data set, the agency's presentation highlighted that approximately 90% of the 2020 observer data set will be informed by full coverage data. Recall that partial coverage fisheries, except for vessels operating out of Kodiak, were not required to have observer coverage (operating under a waiver due to COVID-19 from March 26 to June 28, 2020). Even after partial coverage was reinstated in July, waivers were allowed on a case-by-case basis. The data losses associated with the use of observer waivers will impact the partial coverage fleet data set for 2020, although the fixed gear and pelagic trawl EM EFP helped to mitigate some data losses. The agency expects that completion of the 2020 observer data set will be delayed for 2021 stock assessment purposes, and that fewer biological data samples will be available due to COVID-19 related trip releases and observer workload associated with the trawl EM EFP. Finally, the data set will contain species composition gaps in the partial coverage sector data, especially on sablefish and Pacific halibut targets.

3. Draft 2021 ADP

Dr. Craig Faunce and Geoff Mayhew presented the Draft 2021 ADP. The PCFMAC appreciates the work of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center and the Alaska Region on preparing an executive summary of the Draft 2021 ADP and understands the full document will be available for the October 2020 Council meeting, and the final draft completed in December. There was considerable PCFMAC discussion, and no public comment.

The PCFMAC endorses NMFS' recommendations for 2021 observer deployment, as represented on pages 40, 41, and 42 of the Draft 2021 ADP Presentation. The committee also had discussion about components of the draft ADP and had the following comments and recommendations.

a. Electronic Monitoring (EM):

Fixed-gear EM trip-selection pool: **NMFS has set a budget to achieve a fiscally solvent partial coverage program for the remainder of the Federal contract period (four years), while also maintaining the current fixed gear EM pool of 169 vessels in 2021.** The PCFMAC is aware that funding may be insufficient to accommodate all new vessels that request to participate in the fixed gear EM selection pool. **The committee supports NMFS recommendation to prioritize placement as follows**: 1) vessels that are already equipped with EM systems; 2) vessels that are cost effective for EM and unlikely to introduce large data gaps; and 3) vessels which are 40-57.5 ft. LOA where carrying an observer is problematic due to bunk space or life raft limitations. PCFMAC discussion highlighted that, while many smaller vessels falling under the third priority were initially included in the fixed gear EM program, the partial coverage fleet is not static. **Committee members emphasized the priority of re-evaluating the zero selection pool for cost efficiencies** because there may be bunk space limited vessels that are new entrants to the fisheries or that have never been randomly selected for observer coverage and would like to participate in the fixed gear EM program in the future.

The deadline to opt in (or out) of the EM selection pool for 2021 is November 1, 2020. New this year, NMFS is adding a step to the Vessel Monitoring Plan (VMP) approval process to increase compliance

and address data quality issues, given that there are a handful of vessels for which this is a consistent problem. NMFS will be working with operators to inform them of their adherence to their VMP. Vessels that do not adhere to their VMPs may not be eligible to participate in the fixed gear EM program the following year (2022). Some committee members expressed concern that vessels may change operators, opt into different gear types, and some may want to opt back into the EM pool in the future if they are removed from the EM pool for failing to meet their VMP. The agency clarified they will take a flexible and conservative approach to notify a vessel operator and provide them time to address the specified issues.

Trawl EM trip-selection pool: **The PCFMAC supports NMFS recommendation to continue to dedicate staff resources to the pelagic trawl EM EFP, and to increase shore-based observer coverage to fill in data gaps where possible.** Some of the primary lessons learned from 2020 were that additional shoreside observers are necessary to carry out the EFP, and there were additional challenges posed by COVID-19 and plant protocols to meet the State of Alaska mandates. Currently the pelagic trawl EM EFP includes 42 catcher vessels, 8 tender vessels, and 9 shoreside processors. Additional funding is being sought to expand the EFP participation by 27 vessels in 2021. The committee also supports developing a common cost reporting structure for fixed gear EM and the potential future trawl EM program. The committee recognizes the Trawl EM Committee has been tasked with this, and members of the fixed gear EM program will work with that body to develop consistent cost metrics. This is important to be able to address cost efficiencies in the overall monitoring program, maintain a time series of EM program costs, optimize the use of EM, and develop target observer coverage rates that take EM data and rates into account.

b. Observer coverage:

Port-based approach: **The PCFMAC supports NMFS' recommendation to continue to utilize a port-based approach for deploying partial coverage observers**. Note that a committee member expressed concern that the analysis shows the port-based deployment approach disproportionately affects pot fisheries (pg. 28 of the Draft 2021 ADP presentation) because of the agency's inability to currently quarantine and deploy observers out of Akutan. **The committee also recommends NMFS use this opportunity of the port-based approach to gather information on costs to enable evaluation of port-based deployment in the (non-COVID-19) future.** In particular, the committee discussed looking at potential cost reductions by limiting observer travel and reducing observer down days. The committee discussed that the port-based approach could influence some vessel's fishing strategies and potentially create opportunities to avoid observer coverage.

Observer selection pool: **The PCFMAC supports NMFS' recommendation to deploy observers into three strata defined by gear type (HAL vessels greater than or equal to 40 ft. LOA, Pot vessels greater than or equal to 40 ft. LOA, and trawl vessels).** The PCFMAC is aware that estimated coverage rates in the Draft ADP will change between now and the Final ADP. Major factors that will influence final coverage rates include whether new funding allows additional vessels to opt into the pelagic trawl EM EFP, the size of the fixed gear EM pool, projected fishing effort for 2021, and the overall budget. Nonetheless, some committee members are concerned that the Draft 2021 ADP coverage rates are below 20%, except for the 30% fixed gear EM rate and the 100% pelagic trawl EM rate for vessels fishing under the EFP. The committee also discussed the previously assigned task to re-evaluate the six metrics used to identify data bias and the potential utility of these results in identifying minimum coverage rates.

Allocation strategy: While the PCFMAC continues to support the allocation strategy of 15% plus optimization for the 2021 ADP, **the committee recommends that the 15% hurdle be reevaluated for fixed gear to consider EM data. The committee continues to recommend that NMFS evaluate how to better integrate EM data with observer data, as it will have a direct effect on the appropriate baseline observer coverage rate for fixed gear.**

Waivers: **The PCFMAC supports NMFS continuing to use waivers for observer coverage to provide flexibility to participants in the partial coverage observer program**. Currently, NMFS may release trips from observer coverage on a case-by-case basis for vessels in the partial coverage category. The committee is aware that NMFS may modify the list of ports with available observers in the future in response to transportation availability and/or changes in COVID-19 public health mandates. The committee also noted support for continuing to program ODDS such that, if a vessel is randomly selected to carry an observer three trips in a row, the next subsequent selected trip is released (status quo).

c. Future Analysis

Fixed gear EM optimization: NMFS presented a new break even analysis to optimize fixed gear EM and try to respond to the Council's objectives for cost efficiency. Under Scenario 3, vessels were determined EM cost effective based on whether they fished more than 30 days in the year and did not introduce large data gaps. (methods are described on page 17 of the Draft 2021 ADP Presentation). This analysis is intended to help evaluate an optimized EM pool for future ADPs. The committee appreciates this analysis but continues to emphasize that it is highly dependent on accurate cost data, and cost data used from the 2018 Observer Annual Report had noted problems (not full data review) and is not reflective of actual EM costs. The committee also noted that Scenario 3 was not a realistic option for the near future and NMFS currently has no way to require vessels fitting the optimum profile to carry EM systems under a voluntary program.

The results show that full EM optimization (Scenario 3) similarity scores (i.e., gap analysis) are only slightly improved from status quo EM (Scenario 2). However, EM optimization shifts coverage to the BSAI and results in cost savings. NMFS estimates that an 'optimized' EM pool of 89 vessels (58 which are in current EM pool and 31 new vessels) would save $128,000 per year in equipment costs resulting in 147 more observer days per year and lowering the total observer program cost per day by $41. The committee understands that Scenario 3 is hypothetical, but it expressed several concerns. The current fixed gear EM program is voluntary and removing some vessels from the EM selection pool without optimizing zero selection could place a greater burden on some smaller vessels who are not determined to be cost efficient based on the 30 fishing days criteria but are also ill-suited for carrying a partial coverage observer. In addition, the committee felt a vessel's total catch was a better metric than the 30 fishing days benchmark. **The committee recommended that future analyses incorporate improved cost data, continue to recognize the need to accommodate bunk space limited vessels, and focus on cost efficiencies gained through a re-evaluation of the zero selection pool.**

Stock assessment evaluations: NMFS presented a new analysis in the ADP on stock assessment evaluations using a single otolith pair per time/area metric to evaluate the sufficiency of biological data collection for stock assessments. The results show that the under current monitoring approach, combined with declining fishing effort and current limitations on where the agency can deploy observers, it is increasingly difficult to meet biological data benchmarks (other metrics could be used, such as a 3-year average of the number of aged otoliths from prior years). The committee appreciates this analysis, but some members felt it was not consistent with the Council's recommendation to evaluate other sources of

data, such as surveys, to provide biological data for stock assessments, as opposed to relying on human observer coverage to meet this need in all fisheries. The committee further noted the ADP results continue to demonstrate a need for supplementing observer data collection of biological samples and/or reevaluating the current monitoring approach.

NMFS noted that during the summer of 2019, members of the Fishery Monitoring Science Committee asked stock assessment scientists at the AFSC and Auke Bay Laboratories to provide information on how they were using (time, space, gear, etc.) fishery data in their stock assessments, and that further work was needed to understand how multiple sources of biological information (e.g. observers, surveys, dockside sampling) can be integrated to meet data needs and incorporated into the gap analysis. The committee noted this continued work is a necessity for improving cost efficiencies and optimizing EM for fixed gear and trawl, and suggests that the Council determine who can best evaluate the integration of multiple sources of information to meet biological data needs (e.g., SSC, Plan Teams).

4. Future scheduling

The PCFMAC is aware the next regular full FMAC meeting usually occurs in May of the following year (2021). At the annual May meeting, the FMAC typically reviews the prior year's Observer Annual Report. **The PCFMAC recommends the agency complete the 2019 Observer Annual Report as planned but only produce an abbreviated 2020 Observer Annual Report**. The committee thought this was appropriate given that the primary purpose of the annual report is to determine whether NMFS implemented the deployment plan and met its monitoring objectives, and to guide future ADPs. The annual report from 2020 will not be especially helpful in that regard and there is little expectation that the spatial and temporal deployment objectives were met. Doing an abbreviated report would provide NMFS the opportunity to highlight lessons learned in 2020 but primarily dedicate resources to furthering the EM integration, zero selection, bias metrics re-evaluation, and cost efficiencies analyses already tasked for the partial coverage program.