



# C4 GOA Groundfish Harvest Specifications

December 2023 Council Meeting

## Action Memo

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### Action Required:

1. Review the 2023 Gulf of Alaska (GOA) Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) and GOA Groundfish Plan Team reports.
2. Approve the GOA Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report.
3. Recommend final GOA Groundfish harvest specifications for 2024 and 2025, 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 GOA Groundfish SAFE Report, and make final recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits, and halibut DMRs to manage the 2024 and 2025 GOA groundfish fisheries. Upon publication in the Federal Register, the 2024/2025 final harvest specifications will replace harvest specifications adopted earlier this year for the start of the 2024 fisheries ([88 FR 13238](#)).

## 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 13-17, 2023, 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 SAFE chapters reviewed by the Plan Team are posted on the eAgenda. The Joint Groundfish Plan Team Report is posted with the BSAI Report under Agenda Item C5. 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, other rockfish, POP, shortraker rockfish, rougheye and blackspotted rockfish, deepwater flatfish, and skates. Harvest projections (formerly known as ‘partial’ assessments) were produced for shallow-water flatfish, northern and southern rock sole, rex sole, arrowtooth flounder, flathead sole, northern rockfish, and dusky rockfish.

Catch reports were produced for Atka mackerel, thornyhead rockfish, SEO demersal shelf rockfish (DSR), sharks, and octopus. For these stocks, specifications were rolled over from the previous assessment for that stock.

## OFLs, ABCs, TACs, and Apportionments

The Plan Team’s recommendations for final harvest specifications for 2024 and 2025 are in the SAFE report introduction and attached as [C4 GOA PT 2024-2025 Recommended ABC-OFLs \(Table 1\)](#). In October 2023, the Council adopted proposed harvest specifications for OFL and ABC for 2024 and 2025 which were based on last year’s stock assessments. In the 2023 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 2024 and 2025 are compared to the 2022 and 2023 ABCs, below. These sums include the sum of GOA subarea ABCs for sablefish, not the Alaska-wide sablefish ABC.

2022	2023	2024	2025
508,311 t	521,771 t	617,037 t	537,569 t

The increase from 2023 to 2024 is primarily driven by an 56% increase in the Western GOA/Central GOA/Western Yakutat pollock ABC and a 31% increase in the GOA-wide Pacific cod ABC. The GOA Groundfish Plan Team has recommended maximum permissible ABCs for all stocks in 2024 and 2025 with the exception of rougheye/blackspotted rockfish. As illustrated in Figure 2 of the GOA SAFE introduction, other than Pacific cod, all stocks are above  $B_{MSY}$  or the  $B_{MSY}$  proxy ( $B_{35\%}$ ).

## TAC considerations for State waters fisheries

### State waters Pacific cod fishery

Established area apportionments for 2024 and 2025 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 [C4 Additional Tables for GOA Groundfish Final Harvest Specifications](#) document.

### 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/GHL reflect this accommodation.

## Prohibited Species Catch Limits

In the GOA, PSC limits for halibut are specified annually by fishery, gear, and season. The 2024 and 2025 PSC limits are listed in Tables 3-5 attached under the [C4 Additional Tables for GOA Groundfish Final Harvest Specifications](#) document.

### 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 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)).

#### 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 149 mt halibut PSC limit and the hook-and-line CP sector PSC limit would fish under a 107 mt PSC limit in 2024 and 2025. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 2023 Council meeting. Table 6 in the GOA Groundfish PSC and DMR Tables attachment on the eAgenda provides the DMRs by gear and operation type for final specifications in 2024 and 2025, as recommended by the Plan Team and adopted by the Council for proposed specifications.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.