

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
2020 HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS FOR COWCOD AND SHORTBELLY ROCKFISH

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) was briefed by Mr. John DeVore on 2020 Harvest Specifications for cowcod south of 40°10' N lat. and shortbelly rockfish. The GAP is recommending an analysis of the following alternatives.

Cowcod Alternatives

Affected trawl participants south of 40°10' N. lat. requested a higher annual vessel limit of cowcod in 2020 given the difficulty avoiding incidental bycatch as the stock rebuilds. They expressed concern the fishery will be disrupted if the annual vessel limit is attained prematurely.

No Action:

Maintain the 6 mt cowcod annual catch target (ACT) for 2020. The cowcod annual vessel limit is 843 lbs.

GAP Alternative 1:

Eliminate the 6 mt cowcod ACT for 2020 and manage fisheries to stay within the 10 mt annual catch limit (ACL). Cowcod annual vessel limits range from 1,124 to 1,320 lbs depending on whether the 2020 research set-aside is retained at:

- a. 2 mt,
- b. reduced to 1 mt, or
- c. reduced to 0.6 mt.

The GAP recommends GAP Alternative 1.c, with a research set-aside of 0.6 mt of cowcod as their preliminary preferred alternative. This results in an annual vessel limit 1,320 lbs, and allows an additional 477 lbs, a 57 percent increase.

Shortbelly Rockfish Alternatives

In June, representatives of harvesters and processors in the Pacific whiting trawl fishery north of 40°10' N lat. requested relief in 2020 by increasing the 500 mt ACL specified for shortbelly rockfish to avoid fishery disruption due to an unprecedented high bycatch in the last few years. To address this issue, the GAP recommends the following alternatives for analysis.

Proposed GAP alternatives for the shortbelly rockfish action are:

No Action: Maintain the 500 mt shortbelly rockfish ACL for 2020.

GAP Alternative 1: Increase the 2020 shortbelly rockfish ACL to 3,000 mt.

GAP Alternative 2: Increase the 2020 shortbelly rockfish ACL to equal the 2021 and 2022 acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 4,184 mt.

The GAP recommends GAP Alternative 1 – Increase the 2020 shortbelly rockfish ACL to 3,000 mt.

The shortbelly rockfish ACL was set significantly lower than the ABC at a level that was never intended to constrain the fishery, in recognition of its ecological importance. However, recent shifts in distribution of shortbelly rockfish north of Cape Mendocino have resulted in an unprecedented bycatch of this species. It appears likely the current ACL may constrain the extremely valuable midwater trawl fisheries targeting Pacific whiting and pelagic rockfish in 2020. If the ACL is set too low and exceeded, groundfish fisheries that incidentally catch shortbelly could prematurely close. The GAP does not envision the development of a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish as they are difficult on deck and of very low value in market. Shortbelly rockfish will continue to be avoided.

As we heard at the June meeting, the whiting sectors took extreme measures to avoid shortbelly when it became a problem this spring. But an unnecessarily low ACL may impact the fleet's ability to avoid bycatch of other species with greater conservation concern.

Because there is not a conservation concern for this species, and shortbelly appears to be in a boom cycle, the GAP recommends setting the ACL at 3,000 mt to ensure there is reduced risk of closing the groundfish fisheries while still leaving an amount remaining under the expected ABC in recognition of its ecological importance. Additionally, because there are so many shortbelly on the grounds, it appears there will be plenty available for forage.

The GAP recommends updating the ACL of 5,789 mt in "Strawman" Alternative 2 in Agenda Item H.6, Attachment 1 to 4,184 mt, which is the proposed 2021 and 2022 shortbelly ABC under the Scientific and Statistical Committee designated category 3 sigma.

PFMC
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