

Gulf of Alaska Plan Team Minutes

The meeting of the Gulf of Alaska groundfish Plan Team convened on September 24th, 2008 at 9am at the Alaska Fishery Science Center, Seattle, WA.

Members of the GOA plan Team in attendance included:

Jim Ianelli	NOAA/AFSC REFM (GOA co-chair)
Diana Stram	NPFMC (GOA co-chair)
Sandra Lowe	NOAA AFSC REFM
Jeff Fujioka	NOAA AFSC ABL
Jon Heifetz	NOAA AFSC ABL
Robert Foy	NOAA AFSC RACE
Cleo Brylinsky	ADF&G
Tom Pearson	NOAA AKRO
Ken Goldman	ADF&G
Steve Hare	IPHC
Leslie Slater	USFWS

Team members Sarah Gaichas (NOAA AFSC), Nick Sagalkin (ADF&G) and Leslie Slater (USFWS) were absent. Approximately 10 state and agency staff and members of the public also attended. Names of attendees are included in the Joint Plan Team minutes.

The revised agenda for the meeting is included in the Joint Plan Team minutes.

Echo Integration Trawl (EIT) Survey

Mike Guttormsen provided the Team with an overview of the winter EIT surveys in the Gulf of Alaska. The February survey was conducted aboard the R/V *Miller Freeman*. Results showed mostly age-one and age-three fish in Shumagin Trough and mostly age-three fish mixed with age-two and adult fish off Renshaw Point. The ability to ensure that the survey occurs prior to peak spawning, when abundance is believed to be at its highest, has been difficult in the Shumagin Islands region in the past, but since 2006 survey timing been appropriate and shows a consistently low percentage of spawning/spent maturity stage fish.

The March survey was conducted aboard the R/V *Oscar Dyson* in Shelikof Strait and along the shelf break from near Chirikof Island to Middleton Island. Pollock densities were low in the northern part of the Strait where the highest abundances were found in the 1980s and 1990s. The highest densities in 2008 were located south of the Strait proper. Fish consisted of a mixture of age-one, age-two, age-three, and older fish, except south of Chirikof Island, which were mostly age-one fish. Julie Bonney commented that the fishery this year was unusually concentrated in certain regions and this seemed to confirm observed changes in the fish distributions. This was the first year that the shelf break was surveyed between Barnabas Trough and Middleton Island. Few pollock were detected in this area.

The Shelikof Strait biomass estimate was 208,000. However, vessel comparison results with the *Miller Freeman* indicate that this value would require a downward adjustment to be consistent with the time series from the RV *Miller Freeman*. Compared to last year, the biomass estimate increased in the Shumagins and declined in Chirikof and Sanak, which had the lowest observed historical estimates for those regions. For the four survey areas combined (and without adjusting for vessel differences) the total pollock biomass was estimated at 281,000 t, which is 17,000 t less than last year and significantly below the 2005 and 2006 estimates.

Size composition data by area indicated a strong year class of age-one fish in both the Shumagins and Shelikof. Most adult fish were from the 1999 and 2000 year classes. Research plans for the MACE group were presented and included potential refinements to target strength estimates using a lowered transducer, evaluation of size-selective properties of their nets, day-night differences in surveys, and the potential to estimate the abundance of Pacific ocean perch.

Results for Pacific ocean perch was shown this year, indicating their distribution concentrated north of Portlock Bank in Amatuli Gulley. Very little sign was indicated elsewhere. Team members expressed support for this utilization of the hydroacoustic survey to provide further information to assess rockfish.

The Team discussed the possibility that current estimates of adults may be affected by the selective processes of the trawl gear used by the research group. Chris Wilson commented that there are currently no definitive results from this work, which was just started. However, much field work has and will continue to be directed at this project, which forms the basis of a MACE Program member's dissertation research at the UW. Chris anticipated that potential corrections to the acoustic-based abundance estimates that may result from this research are some way off.

The Team asked the stock assessment author what last year's model expected from this year's survey and also on what plans are being made to evaluate the relative impact different survey vessel adjustment factor. Martin Dorn noted that last year's assessment predicted an increase but with survey numbers declining there will be a conflict in the model. He summarized some approaches he might take in evaluating the impact of the vessel comparison indications: rescale the survey relative to the other for a consistent time-series or alternatively configure the model with a new survey time-series based on the new vessel. Confidence bounds on the ratio of the vessel results comparison in Shelikof Strait were small indicating that the difference detected was significant. However, he noted that additional vessel comparison may be warranted since a single vessel comparison can not assess the full range of uncertainty. Noise levels on the Dyson also appear to be increasing, however Chris commented that results for a repeated comparative study in the Bering Sea were consistent, thus possibility that noise degradation on Dyson may not be impacting survey biomass estimates.

Julie Bonney asked if eulachon and capelin are being surveyed using EIT methodology. Capelin abundance was only estimated for a portion of the Central GOA in summer 2003. Mike indicated that because eulachon lack a swimbladder, abundance estimation is difficult. He did indicate, however, that the proportion of eulachon trawl catch has increased dramatically in recent years. Julie said that from the fleet's perspective it has been difficult at times to remain under the MRA for eulachon in recent years.

Chris Wilson provided an overview of some proposed work and plans for the future to address species composition and sampling issues for the EIT survey. He described a new device that was being developed to make *in situ* target strength measurements of pollock and other species under conditions that have not suitable for sampling with traditional shipboard-mounted echosounders. A stereo camera system as well as the Didson sonar are being used on a project to provide insight into the net selectivity of the MACE Program's midwater trawl to different species and fish sizes. Although the Didson isn't particularly useful for species identification, it is particularly well suited to examine fish behavior in the net, whereas the camera system can provide species identification and fish size information, but the artificial light that is needed for the cameras may disrupt the normal behaviors of the fish. The MACE Program is submitting a proposal for funds to upgrade the stereo camera system with very high resolution cameras. The proposed camera

device can be attached to a modified trawl to create a unique non-lethal sampler (by leaving the codend open) that can sample fish at finer spatial scales than possible with a standard trawl.

The Team requested that the pollock assessment author work with the forage fish assessment author in evaluating increased bycatch of eulachon in the pollock fishery.

The Team reiterates concerns about survey plans and the possibility that the trawl survey in the GOA will not occur this year. More information on this issue is contained in the Joint Plan Team report.

Prince William Sound (PWS) component of GOA pollock assessment:

Ken Goldman discussed the PWS survey overview for last year. He noted that last year trawl effort was concentrated in bays for Tanner crab and thus survey effort was not focused on pollock. This year the GHL for PWS will be a rollover from last year in the absence of additional data. Ken indicated that he will work with Martin over the winter to provide the past three years of missing data from the state.

Martin requested additional information on the approach last year in regards to selecting the highest historical estimate from the survey data and then base biomass estimates for GHL on this amount. Ken clarified that PWS biomass estimates are notably poor thus the State had discussed an approach of using the highest GHL historically but decided against it. Instead the GHL for this year will be rolled over from the previous year.

Julie Bonney asked if the performance of the commercial fishery in PWS has been evaluated. Ken replied that they do consider this but management decisions are not based on fishery performance. State data on the shelf survey is already made available to the assessment author. The Team encouraged collaboration between the State PWS scientists and the GOA pollock assessment authors.

PWS skate fishery

Ken provided an overview of new interest in a developing skate fishery in the PWS. No survey abundance estimates for skates are available, thus, under state regulations the absence of any stock status information precludes the ability to prosecute a fishery. Following this determination from the State, \$50,000 was then allocated to the State budget to allow for research as necessary to open the fishery. It appears that directed fishing for skate would occur in conjunction with the halibut IFQ fishery. It would be a longline fishery only. Meetings have occurred with the Cordova fisherman's group to obtain additional information on how the fishery would occur. The fishery would be prosecuted under a Commissioner's permit. The current thinking amongst ADF&G staff is that the allocated money would be used to place observers on the vessels and at the processing plant. If Big skates are targeted then halibut bycatch should be low. ADF&G staff assume there would be three types of fishing: IFQ for halibut topping off on skates, directed fishing for skates with topping off for halibut and directed fishing for skates only. No information is available to determine a GHL for skates.

Julie Bonney commented that opening a directed longline fishery in PWS for skates could set a precedent for other areas where similar interest in longline fishing occurs. The team noted that the price for skates increased dramatically in recent years.

Ken requested comments from the plan team on concerns for any development of a skate fishery in PWS. Many issues were discussed relative to possible management measures and availability of information. Questions were raised whether the catch would come off the federal TAC, if the fishery would occur year-round, and how to coordinate the State stock assessment with the GOA skate assessments. Tom Pearson noted that current ABC considerations include PWS pollock but for all other groundfish we do not include the contribution in state waters.

Ken summarized the data he would need in order to estimate skate biomass if a fishery is prosecuted (fishery-dependant data). Jon Heifetz suggested that one approach might be to evaluate what information is available currently for a density estimate (possible survey information) to which an appropriately low exploitation rate could be applied. Ken indicated that some trawl survey data is available which might allow for a preliminary estimate of biomass.

The Plan Team expressed concern regarding the prosecution of a state waters skate fishery in the absence of any information on the stock. Skates may be vulnerable to over-fishing and if bycatch rates are high in the halibut fishery, added conservation measures may be warranted. This was based on the experience of recent skate management actions in federal waters where high bycatch levels in the halibut fishery precluded the prosecution of a directed fishery in federal waters.

If a directed fishery develops, the Team would like to investigate to what extent this catch should come off the federal TAC. This should be a consideration in the assessment of this stock particularly to what extent it is a single stock in comparison to the GOA stocks including species by species analysis. An index of abundance is necessary for any indication of appropriate harvest thresholds for this stock. The Team expressed concern about the amount of effort that could possibly be involved in this fishery based on current effort in the PWS halibut fishery and the inability of the state to limit entry to this fishery using a commissioner's permit.

Proposed specifications:

The Team reviewed the proposed specifications for 2009-2010 that are used to establish the proposed rule. Consistent with last year's approach, the Team is recommending a rollover of the actual specification set for 2009 for both 2009 and 2010 for the proposed rule.

Timing and Considerations for November Plan Team meeting

The Team chose to modify review assignments for November. Under a new system, a subset of Plan Team members will be assigned to specific assessments to ensure that a thorough review of each assessment is accomplished. Team members are still expected to review all assessments prior to the meeting but a particular focus should be made on the subset to which they are assigned in order to facilitate discussion and comments during the meeting. Team members will still be assigned to write the summary for one stock as previously for the introductory section of the SAFE report. Team members noted that it would be useful to change the responsibilities for each summary so that different team members have an opportunity to work on a different summary from the previous year. Summary and review assignments will be emailed by the chairs to the Team following this meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 12pm.