

Minutes of the Gulf of Alaska Sablefish Gear Committee

September 30, 2013

The Sablefish Gear Committee convened at 10 am on Monday, September 30, 2013 in the Council offices and by teleconference (for agency staffs and the public). Dan Hull (Chair), Paul Clampitt, Kurt Cochran, Harley Ethelbah, Steve Fish, Todd Hoppe, and Jeff Stephan attended in person.

Staff included Jane DiCosimo (NPFMC), Rachel Baker and Mary Furuness (NMFS –SF), and Megan Peterson (ADF&G). Dana Hanselman and Chris Lunsford (NMFS AFSC-ABL), and Gregg Williams (IPHC) attended via teleconference. Nick Delaney, Linda Kozak, Jeff Farvour, Buck Laukitis, Jan Standaert, Eric Olsen, and one other member of the public attended.

Agenda The team approved a revised agenda that reordered and combined several agenda topics. The committee also requested an update on the status of the sablefish stocks. Due to a possible Federal furlough, the committee directed questions to the AFSC stock assessment scientists at 1:15 pm so that they could return to their stock assessment duties.

A new item was added to address the possibility of allowing halibut retention in sablefish IFQ pots and the potential effect on the long term productivity of the halibut stock if those fish are not accurately accounted for in the stock assessment. The committee directed questions to IPHC staff on halibut biology issues. The committee also requested a brief report on lessons learned from the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands sablefish IFQ pot fisheries. Jane DiCosimo briefly reported on a proposed action that was recommended by the Council and may be adopted by the International Pacific Halibut Commission in January 2014 that would allow retention of halibut in sablefish IFQ pots only in Area 4A. If the IPHC adopts the proposed action then in 2014 the Council may consider additional regulatory measures that would implement the retention allowance in 2016, at the earliest.

Chair Dan Hull reviewed the action for the committee: to develop implementation strategies to allow the use of pots in the Gulf of Alaska sablefish IFQ fishery to mitigate negative impacts of depredation by killer whales and sperm whales on sablefish and sablefish IFQ fishermen. The committee is being asked to provide information on a variety of topics related to the use of sablefish pot gear in the GOA as listed on the revised agenda to assist Council staff in preparing an expanded discussion paper on this proposed action tentatively scheduled for review at the February 2014 Council meeting. The proposed action originated from the Council's 2009 call for IFQ proposals, and was recommended by the IFQ Implementation Committee for Council consideration. The Council requested that staff prepare a discussion paper after all other proposals approved for consideration had been addressed and this gear committee had been appointed and provided its recommendations. A preliminary discussion paper was prepared in May 2013 to start the Council process on this proposal.

Committee members made some opening comments, observing that conservation of the sablefish resource is the overriding problem in the fishery that the proposed action would address, while also protecting crew jobs.

1) Area management (SE vs GOA)

The committee unanimously recommended that the proposed action be adopted for the entire Gulf of Alaska, as whale depredation of sablefish in the IFQ longline fishery is GOA-wide. The committee also recommended that issues related to the Southeast Outside area sablefish fishery be explored. While Southeast Alaska currently does not have gear conflicts (due to prohibition on the use of trawl and pot gears), it has several vessel size and bottom topography issues that would affect potential usage of pot gear. These issues include different business plans (smaller, owner/operator fleet) and fishery techniques, habitat issues related to rocky bottoms and corals, smaller boats that may not be able to use pots, remaining hook and line operations that may have more depredation if part of the fleet switches to pot gear. A member said that pots are harder on bottom than longline gear and the bottom is harder on pot gear.

2) Gear restrictions

a. single vs pot longlines

The committee unanimously recommended that the proposed action be considered for pot longlines only (continue prohibition on single pots) and recommends neutrally buoyant line floating groundline (less likely to be stuck on bottom) gear. This gear is an automatic choice by the western sablefish pot longline fleet so may not need to be regulated.

The committee noted the benefits of using pot longlines vs single pots to maximize fishing efficiency and exvessel value of the fishery. Single pots are heavy and their deployment results in lost gear and resultant ghost fishing. Use of single pots creates more gear conflict from increased number of buoys, and could result in increased whale interactions with the gear, some of which are protected under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act). Pot longlines are lighter. Longline strings worth \$10-12K can be parted and rejoined if they get wrapped up with other gear. Handling of lighter pot longlines enhance crew safety, particularly for smaller vessels

b. pots retained on grounds for long soaks vs retrieved during deliveries

The committee recommended that the Council adopt a management approach to allow pot longline gear in the GOA sablefish IFQ fishery that minimizes preemption of fishing grounds. Action to require gear removal creates a lot of problems but also has benefits. Issues supporting gear removal include: 1) those that fish the line between areas would otherwise dominate fishing grounds with their gear; 2) gear is expensive so fishermen would want to pack off the grounds at the end of a trip; and 3) it would maximize regulatory efficiency by requiring gear to be removed at end of the trip before delivery.

The committee expressed concern about fairness to smaller vessels regarding their inability to carry as many pot longlines as larger vessels (for safety reasons); it may take them three trips to carry all their gear to the grounds. The committee discussed the possibility of voluntary cooperation for stowing gear on the grounds through the cooperative SeaState program. The committee considered creation of a gear storage corridor to minimize gear conflicts.

The committee recommended that the Council consider removal of pots from fishing grounds at the end of a trip, with some type of enforcement waiver that could be requested to account for weather and safety issues; there was not a consensus on this recommendation.

Overall longline gear is more effective (higher CPUE) due to regular spacing of hooks the v pot “bait bombs” every 50 fathoms. The committee noted that use of pot longline gear has more problems in areas where there is less incentive to use them (in westward areas with lower CPUE and longer soak times than in eastern areas). There are fewer problems with grounds preemption in larger fishing areas (e.g., WGOA).

c. pot storage

Pot storage areas currently are permitted in state waters only. *The committee unanimously recommended that if pot storage is limited to state waters, than vessels might as well bring gear to port. Following guidance from enforcement agencies, pot storage grounds would be delineated by latitude/longitude.*

d. gear configuration requirements

The committee unanimously recommended that the Council not consider regulating pot configurations, but require markings of both ends of sablefish pot longlines, and recommended communication of gear location thru Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), which costs approximately \$500 per unit, as a potential method to identify where gear are deployed.

- e. gear conflicts/ between all gear types

The committee noted that time/area allowances of pot longline gear potentially would reduce gear conflicts. Seasonality of whale depredation occurs May- Aug but there was no support for limiting time or rolling closures. The committee felt that gear conflicts would be minimized by requiring pot longline retrieval from fishing grounds at the end of a fishing trip.

- f. use the 200 fathom depth contour to mark open areas

The committee unanimously recommended not considering the 200 fathom line as part of this action as no benefit could be identified to this approach. Enforcement agencies recommended against this approach, as reported in the June 2013 discussion paper.

- g. pot soak time

The committee recommended no pot soak limits, given its earlier discussion to remove pot longline gear from fishing grounds when not in use, thus automatically limiting soak time by requiring retrieval. Gear removal would eliminate dead loss. The committee noted that smaller vessels could be allowed to leave pots on the grounds in order to be competitive with larger boats. The Committee observed that soak times cannot be enforced.

- h. pre-emption of fishing grounds due to lost gear

The committee addressed this topic by recommending only pot longline gear and requiring gear to be removed from fishing grounds when not being fished. The committee also recommended voluntary reporting of lost gear through a third party, perhaps Sea Grant, despite there being a strong incentive to retrieve expensive gear. The industry generally knows of notorious spots of abandoned longline gear.

- i. pot limits per vessel

The committee noted that vessel capacity would limit the number of pots safely deployed although some large boats would have an unfair advantage. Pot limits could be enforced by observer monitoring. Use of pot longline gear would increase fishing efficiency and allow IFQs to be reached and thereby reduce grounds preemption. Many boats don't have to leave grounds and offload until their hold is full. The committee recommended that the discussion paper examine the use of pot longline gear in the BSAI, west coast, and Canada (examine number of pots, catch per pot, etc.) to identify a fair, equitable, efficient number of pots for all size vessels across the entire GOA (factor in economics (e.g., fuel, etc.)).

The committee discussed a range of 200-400 pots per vessel for the discussion paper. Members also suggested a pot limit per vessel of 6 strings or 2 miles = 12 miles of fishing grounds = 300 max pots, which would be roughly the same grounds as used by a longliner to start discussion.

3) Halibut issues

- a. exacerbation of halibut mortality

The committee briefly discussed this topic. It observed that halibut mortality could be increased due to increased soak times and concluded that the net change in halibut mortality from switching to pot longline gear would be difficult to quantify.

- b. shifting predation to halibut

The committee briefly discussed this topic, concluded that it would be difficult to quantify net changes in increased halibut mortality if whale depredation shifted to the halibut IFQ fishery.

- c. halibut retention in pots

The committee unanimously recommended that the proposed action include adoption of retention of halibut in sablefish pots by IFQ holders in all regulatory areas. It recognized that

consideration of halibut retention in sablefish IFQ pots in all areas was beyond the charge to the committee. *The committee also recommended that information provided in the Area 4A discussion paper be incorporated into the expanded discussion paper.*

4) Dynamic (social/economic) effects

- a. safety issue related to use of pots by small vessels

The committee noted that safety is tied more to the skills of the skipper than the size of the vessel. The committee discussed requirements for stability tests by private insurers when structural changes that affect weight distribution of the vessel are made.

- b. crew employment

The committee noted that no crew jobs would be lost as a result of allowing pot longline gear in the sablefish IFQ fishery. More important to retaining crew jobs is maintaining the current composition of the fleet (i.e., no more consolidation (e.g., changes to the vessel cap). The committee suggested that information on the range of crew sizes in the longline fisheries would be informative. This proposed action could be designed such that pot limits could provide good brakes on consolidation. Generally, the committee observed that maintaining the original objectives of the IFQ program could constrain the potential changes that could result from allowing pot longline gear to harvest sablefish.

- c. QS prices

Sablefish caught in pots are comparable to longline fish, particularly with voluntary bleeding of fish. An expectation is that QS prices will increase as a result of increased sablefish biomass that would result from decreased whale depredation and unaccounted mortality. QS prices are tied to perception of the future.

- d. ongoing acoustic research for avoiding whale depredation

The committee discussed that deployment of deterrence devices are limited under the ESA.

5) Additional topics will be covered by staff in the expanded discussion paper:

- a. Update on whale depredation and interactions
- b. Update on whale deterrent work in progress
- c. Update on Canadian sablefish gear usage and pricing by gear type
- d. Review of current literature on whale predation

6) Sablefish status of stocks

Dr. Dana Hanselman summarized the NMFS sablefish longline survey and stock assessment. The longline survey has a cost recovery design based on ex-vessel value of the harvested fish so has not suffered from government cutbacks, as has the NMFS GOA trawl survey, which has lost deep water stations in past years. But new surveys, field research, or filling vacant positions are on hold.

The 2013 survey covered the GOA and BS. The sablefish survey results for numbers of fish and survey biomass is at its lowest point of the time series. These results match those for sablefish in the NMFS GOA trawl survey, as well as fishery catch per unit effort (CPUE). Whale interactions affect both survey and fishery results, but negative whale depredation effects on the sablefish stock are low compared with environmental effects that results in low recruitment to the population. Previously the stock size has increased at low populations but there has not been a good incoming year class. The population is below a target threshold, which results in a lower ABC and TAC. The quotas will continue to decline until more recruitment into the population from strong year classes occur.

The addition of additional pot gear in the GOA fishery may affect the assessment; if the gear catches bigger fish in the GOA (sablefish in pot and longlines are roughly the same size in the BSA and AI). If both gears are used, it may be more difficult to estimate fishery CPUE. A rough estimate is that

when whales are depredating on a longline survey station (maybe 5% of stations) they take 10% to 30% of the fish. Extrapolating that estimate across all station results in only a 2% loss of sablefish to depredation. The effect in the fishery is generally higher than in the survey. Lost fish could be higher for any single fishing vessel that interacts with whales.

There is little information on marine mammal populations; therefore “potential biological removal” levels cannot be determined. Whale interactions, if they become entangled, could jeopardize the NMFS sablefish longline survey.

The committee recommended that a summary of the status of the sablefish stock, along with efforts to simulate whale depredation effects on the stock be included in the expanded discussion paper.

7) Public comment

- Information learned from a Canadian Sablefish Association representative follows. The quota is 1,800 mt for a fishing area equivalent to the Yakutat fishing area. They typically use conical pots, 60 inch on the largest side and set 1.5 mile long strings, with 65 pots/string and a 4 day soak time limit. They have electronic monitoring. They are required to have 3.5 inch escape rings, although most fishermen use a larger sized ring to retain bigger fish and release smaller fish for market reasons; they soak the pots for 1 – 2 days so smaller fish get out. They may retain halibut if they have the ITQs to cover the harvest, but very few halibut are caught in the pots because of fishing location. The sablefish fishery had been roughly 80% pots/20% longline, but is now at 50% pots/50% longline because TACs are lower and it is not practicable to switch between pot longline and hook-and-line longline at sea. And cost in time and efficiency reconfiguring vessels from one gear to another. For those who fished both gears, they switched back to hook-and-line longline gear in shallower water. They don't yet have the same sperm whale problems as occurs off Alaska. The fishery is naturally separated from pot boats because longliners want to fish combination trips above 250 fathoms, so there are no gear conflicts, as halibut are found shallower and sablefish are found deeper. Many are 80-90 ft vessels; some are 58 ft. The pot longline fishery range is 450-750 pots, with 6-8 strings.
- A freezer vessel representative recommended a vessel limit on the number of pots. About 25% trips end due to weather, which could lead to safety problems if the Council requires gear removal. Marking both ends of pot longline gear would minimize gear conflict by making the strings more visible to other vessels.
- A Deep Sea Fishermen's Union representative commented that its membership has dropped from 400 members when the IFQ program was implemented to 80 current members. Additional costs associated with allowing the use of pot longlines in the GOA will be taken out of crew shares. Switching to pot longlines will negatively affect older crew members. To even the playing field, he recommended allowing the use of C category QS on B category vessels or “fish up.” He recommended vessel based pot limits and suggested that requiring removal of gear from the grounds would have unknown effects. He noted that many crew have purchased QS.
- A small boat fisherman recommended against fish up in the GOA sablefish IFQ fishery. He suggested time/area closures at the start of the allowance to use pot gear to see what works. He expressed concerns about consolidation and fishing hook-and-line longline gear alongside pot longliners.

Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at approximately 4:15 pm.