

**DRAFT ACTION PLAN TO REVISE MANAGEMENT OF OCTOPUS IN THE GROUND FISH FMPs
FOR THE BERING SEA/ALEUTIAN ISLANDS AND GULF OF ALASKA
June 17, 2009**

PROPOSED ACTION The Council initiated action in April 2005 to eliminate the “other species” category and set annual catch limits (ACLs) for skates¹, squids², octopods, sharks, and sculpins (and grenadiers), based on recommendations from its Groundfish Plan Teams, Scientific and Statistical Committee, and Non-Target Species Committee. The Council separated this comprehensive analysis into analyses for each group in February 2008. In June 2008 the Council identified a proposed action to revise management of octopods as its third priority in managing other species. Actions for the other groups are scheduled in 2009 and 2010. Housekeeping amendments³ to revise federal fishery regulations will be prepared separately.

PROBLEM STATEMENT/OBJECTIVE The groundfish fishery management plans (FMPs) require that an ACL be set for the “other species” assemblage. Management of the assemblage, however, may not offer sufficient protection from overfishing of the component groups because its ACL is set equal to the total of the estimated ACLs for all the groups. Therefore, each group (or species within a group) is vulnerable to overfishing because it is managed under an ACL that is set above the level deemed appropriate for that individual group (or species). Current management of octopus also no longer complies with national ACL policy for managing assemblages.

The proposed action is intended to enhance the protection of octopods based on 1) lack of a reliable estimate of biomass (thus its Tier 6 status) and 2) unusual life history. There are at least seven species of octopus present in the BSAI and GOA, and the species composition both of natural communities and commercial harvest is unknown. Octopus life histories of six of the seven species in the North Pacific are largely unknown. Life spans are either 1-2 years or 3-5 years depending on species. It is likely that some species are primarily distributed at greater depths than are commonly fished. Current data are not sufficient for any model-based assessment. The trawl surveys produce estimates of biomass for octopus, but these estimates are highly variable and may not reflect the same species and sizes of octopus caught by industry.

ANALYSIS An EA is required to amend the groundfish FMPs to remove octopods from the other species assemblages or to move octopods to a new ecosystem component category.

RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

- Alternative 1. (The No Action Alternative) Octopods would continue to be managed as a part of the BSAI “other species” category.
- Alternative 2. Move octopods from the “other species” assemblage to the “target species” category in the GOA Groundfish FMP.
- ⁴Alternative 3. Move BSAI and/or GOA octopods to a new ecosystem category.

APPLICABLE LAWS NEPA, MSA

¹ Skates are a separate ACL category in the GOA. An FMP amendment to set separate ACLs for BSAI skates is scheduled for final action in October 2009 and could be in effect by the 2011 fishing year.

² Squids are a separate ACL category in the BSAI.

³ In June 2009 the Council added an alternative to set ACLs for BSAI skates and take no action on the other species maximum retainable allowances (MRA) in the BSAI skate analysis and clarified that it would not revise the MRAs for the remaining groups in the other species assemblage.

⁴ Alternative 3 is included pending the AFSC vulnerability analysis (to be released on August 1, 2009).

STAFF RESOURCES

NPFMC Jane DiCosimo, Jon McCracken
NOAA AKR Melanie Brown, Tom Pearson, Kristin Mabry, Josh Keaton
NOAA AFSC Dr. Olav Ormseth
NOAA Habitat No habitat implications
NOAA PR Kaja Brix
NOAA GCAK Clayton Jernigan
HQ No national policy implications

TIMELINE TO IMPLEMENTATION

August 2006 interagency staff meeting to draft the action plan for this analysis
October 2006 Council, AP, and SSC reviews action plan and analytical outline
November 2006 - AFSC prepares stock assessments for the groups
- Plan Teams recommend 2007-2008 group OFLs and ABCs for analysis
December 2006 SSC recommends 2007-2008 groups OFLs and ABCs for analysis
March 2007 - SF In-Season Management staff prepares discussion paper on:
1) temporal/spatial fishery interactions between groups and directed groundfish fisheries; and
2) effects of proposed group ACLs on groups and directed fisheries
- Non-Target Species Committee, Council, AP, and SSC reviews paper
June 2007 interagency staff meeting to revise the action plan for this analysis
September 2007 Groundfish Plan Teams review AKR staff discussion paper on fishery interactions
October 2007 SSC and AP reviews revised action plan and discussion paper
February 2008 Council reviews action plan and discussion papers and identifies preliminary priorities
April 2008 Non-Target Species Committee recommends priorities for action
June 2008 Council reviews committee recommendations and approves draft action plan
June 2009 Interagency action plan meeting and Council data request to AKRO
August 1, 2009 AFSC vulnerability analysis released
December 2009 Internal Review of draft EA
January 2010 Release of initial review draft EA
February 2010 Initial Review of draft EA
April 2010 Final Action/Selection of Preferred Alternative
May 2010 Submission for NMFS review
September 2010 Plan Team recommends proposed OFLs and ABCs for 2011/2012
October 2010 Council adopts proposed ACLs
November 2010 Plan Team recommends final OFLs and ABCs for 2011/2012
December 2010 Council adopts final ACLs for 2011/2012
Late 2010 Approval by the Secretary; implementation of amendments
January 1 2011 Groundfish fisheries open under 2010/2011 ACLs
February 2011 Final ACLs for 2011/2012 are implemented

MAJOR ISSUES

- Protection of ecosystem components
- Protect octopods from overfishing and to meet ACL requirements
- Would allow ACLs to be set for octopus species
- Difficulty in managing small TACs and area suballocations
- Complex temporal/spatial patterns of how fleets shift effort between directed fisheries
- Geographic hotspots where high levels of incidental catches occur
- Would increase workload on NMFS
- No enforcement or legal issues identified