

Gulf of Alaska Plan Team Minutes

The meeting of the Gulf of Alaska groundfish Plan Team convened on September 20th, 2007 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
Nick Sagalkin	ADF&G
Cleo Brylinsky	ADF&G
Tom Pearson	NOAA AKRO
Ken Goldman	ADF&G
Sarah Gaichas	NOAA AFSC REFM
Steve Hare	IPHC

Team member Ward Testa (NMML) was absent. Joint Team members Kathy Kuletz and Theresa Tsou attended the concurrent BSAI meeting. 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. Pollock biomass in Sanak Trough was consistent with estimates from previous years, with the exception of last year where an abnormally high amount of pollock were found north of Sanak Island. Biomass results from the Shumagins, Shelikof Strait, and Chirikof surveys were lower than expected. Results from the Morzhovoi Bay section were also low. This is the 2nd year returning to this region primarily for exploratory purposes. Plans for the 2008 Shelikof/Chirikof survey include expanded coverage along the shelf break south of Kodiak Island. Future survey effort is also planned for the shelf break south of the Shumagins as well as in Pavlof Bay.

For the Shelikof Strait region, the biomass estimate was 100k t lower than from 2006 while this year the biomass found around the Shumagins was 20k t lower. Sum of total biomass from all areas from was about 500k t in 2006 whereas this year the value was close to 300k t. The Team discussed the effect of survey timing on abundance and distribution of pollock. Mike noted that it might be better to arrive at Sanak area earlier in the year based on biological samples from that region. Patterns of fish found in Marmot Bay appear to be mainly immature/young fish despite efforts to look for adults suggesting that fish may be moving through that area.

Julie Bonney (Kodiak) noted that the commercial CPUE was high during this year's winter fishery. The transect spacing (7 miles) allowed the survey to proceed without interacting with the fishery.

This year the MACE group continued to do calibrations designed to compare the RV Miller Freeman with RV Oscar Dyson. This work will be critical to link future surveys using the new vessel.

A variety of research topics related to acoustic sampling for pollock was discussed. In particular, developments on correcting the potential biases with smaller fish were presented. Currently, the target strength-length relationship is to be the same. New methods indicate that it could be separated for different portions of the populations. For example, spawning pollock may be able to be integrated separately from juveniles.

Regarding plans, an extended shelf break survey to the east of Chirikof was announced while Marmot Bay area will be dropped next year due to timing. The Chiniak gully sampling will also be discontinued.

Martin Dorn noted that next week he will be working with Aleutians East Borough on a cooperative research project. This project will operate from a commercial boat based in Sand Point equipped with an echo sounder to evaluate the applicability for using this on this vessel for survey work. Biomass estimated will be attempted as a feasibility study.

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

Martin Dorn provided an overview of the treatment of the PWS component of the annual pollock assessment and the rationale behind the current methodology for its inclusion. The survey does not include PWS thus any contribution to the overall GOA pollock from this region are not assessed by the bottom trawl survey. The methodology for inclusion of PWS in the assessment provides a compromise for how to incorporate dated ADF&G survey data in the assessment. The only survey data that has been made available to the assessment author thus far is from 1999. An expansion factor of 1% is applied to all the NMFS surveys to account for this biomass contribution from PWS. For management purposes, the resulting ABC for central and western GOA is then reduced by the guideline harvest level for PWS. Previous attempts to account for this biomass have been somewhat ad hoc and there has been only limited additional effort by ADF&G to survey this area. Comparisons of ADF&G and NMFS survey gear have indicated that the NMFS net is more effective on similar bottom areas. Thus it is likely that the ADF&G estimate of biomass is biased low. Other considerations are that the PWS fishery has historically been a spawning fishery at the entrance to PWS and it is not clear if the fish being caught are coming from PWS or from other areas of the gulf. Some genetic work has been done exploring the extent to which the spawning populations are distinct between the two regions. Results indicate some evidence of stock structure, but overall results are inconclusive.

The Team discussed the adoption of the expansion measure and noted inconsistency in the adoption of this measure with previous SSC recommendations.

Ken Goldman reviewed current efforts by the State and their plans to better assess pollock in the future. He reviewed the current biennially scheduled bottom trawl survey in the region, noting that it is focused upon estimation of Tanner crab populations and does an admittedly poor job of assessing pollock. The pollock estimate for this year in particular is very poor (the focus was on sampling in fjords given the stated objective for Tanner crab estimation). A pollock GHLL is provided every 2 years. The Tanner crab survey has expanded historical stations which may provide better estimates of pollock in the future. He indicated a plan to roll over the current GHLL in the short term while the State works to address longer term issues with assessing pollock in PWS. One proposed methodology would be to evaluate the relative percentage of the GHLL to the ABC and take the highest percentage that has been taken as a constant ratio to be applied annual

to set the GHL. Julie Bonney questioned why the highest would be selected and not the average. She also requested additional clarification on the necessity of rolling over the GHL rather than immediately moving to a floating method. Ken indicating that timing between now and GHL-setting might preclude the ability to develop a floating method in a suitable time period.

The last survey completed by the State was in 2005 and was utilized to determine the GHL at that time. Martin noted that he was unaware that pollock biomass estimates from additional years were available. Ken will arrange to have biomass estimates and size composition data from 2001, 2003 and 2005 provided to NMFS. Nick also noted that State data from Kodiak regions will be provided for assessment purposes as well.

GOA summer bottom trawl survey update

Mark Wilkins provided the Team with an overview of results from the 2007 summer GOA bottom trawl survey. The survey began May 25 in Dutch Harbor with fishing operations starting around the end of May through to August 4th. Three vessels each ran for 70 days over four legs. There were 820 stations (compared to 825 planned) which is an increase in the number of stations that were allocated for the 2005 survey. The methodology follows 5x5 km grid squares to 1,000m depths with some delineated as untrawlable areas from previous surveys. A discussion of methodology ensued dealing with stations allocations among strata. Stations are randomly selected from available (trawlable) grids within a stratum. As part of the response to the 2006 rockfish CIE review, methods to delineate untrawlable areas using acoustics are underway.

As in past years, arrowtooth flounder was the most abundant species encountered. High total catch percentages of pacific ocean perch, pollock, halibut, flatfish and Pacific cod were also encountered. More pacific hake was found than was anticipated in this survey. Final survey biomass estimates by species are not yet available.

Mark reviewed at the median date of the survey over the past years as a measure of change in the schedule and possible impact on the survey results. He noted that there is difficulty in contracting vessels as the survey competes with their participation in the commercial fishery. Between 1993 and 1996, the survey scheduling was adjusted in order to allow for fishing of pollock in the B season, leading to approximately a one month shift in the median survey date from these years on. In recent years the trend in median date is beginning to move later as vessels are more willing to be flexible about pollock allocations.

Mark indicated that survey results by species including biomass estimate and size composition will be available to stock assessment authors by the end of next week. Chris Lunsford noted that it is becoming progressively more difficult to adhere to assessment deadlines without sufficient time to conduct analyses once survey data are available, and requested if preliminary data could be made available to facilitate the stock assessment and review process. Even an indication of preliminary results or preview of trend could assist in meeting the short stock assessment timing. Mark noted that this might be possible in the future but there is always the risk that preliminary data might need to be revised later in order to address potential problems found in final editing.

The Team wished to commend Mark and all of the survey staff for pulling together a successful survey under extremely limited timing for planning and implementation. The Team understands that Mark and his staff were under the constant threat of budget constraints limiting or eliminating the GOA survey and that upon approval they were able to quickly design, implement and staff the survey under very limited timing. The Team again emphasizes previous comments regarding the absolute necessity of the continuation of this survey in order to acquire the information integral to assessing and managing fish stocks in the GOA.

Proposed specifications:

The Team discussed the proposed specifications for 2008-2009 that are used to establish the proposed rule. This year the Team is recommending a rollover of the actual specification set for 2008 for both 2008 and 2009 for the proposed rule. They noted that the added work of staff timing takes away from critical assessment work. The Team concurred that at this time of year, staff are better off focusing on assessments rather than projections that will be updated in a few months time.

The Team felt that this was an improvement over previous years given that A) the 2008 specifications were based upon stock assessments using the best information at that time combined with B) the necessity of allowing additional staff time to work upon the assessments upon which the actual final rule for specifications will be made.

The Team adopted the rollover 2008/09 ABCs and OFLS for the proposed specifications as listed in the table with the 1mt change noted by Tom Pearson under the total sablefish ABC.

Timing and Considerations for November Plan Team meeting

She commented that the plan for updating this assessment is to incorporate the new survey information for central region (CSEO) which was surveyed this year. Two areas could have been surveyed this year, EYKT or CSEO. CSEO was selected of the two possible regions due to the fact that while both are impacted by the halibut longline fishery, CSEO has additional pressure from the sportcharter fleet. Roughly 60 transects were conducted in this region and she will incorporate the updated biomass estimates for this area into the stock assessment.

The Team discussed the need to ensure authors follow the SAFE guidelines and requested that the organization of the flatfish chapter be changed to match the current management structure. Also, all Team members were urged to work on summaries prior to the next meeting to make efficient use of time during the week.

The team discussed the compressed time schedule for the November meeting due to the federal holiday which has compressed the timing down to 4 days. The Team notes that given that it is a year in which full assessments are being provided in the GOA, that timing will be very constrained. Information will be provided to Team members as soon as possible regarding summary assignments, a template for each summary and a draft agenda for the meeting in order to alleviate some of the workload during the week for compiling summaries of assessments. The Team notes that the meeting will run through the end of the day on Friday November 16th and all Team members should plan their travel accordingly.

The meeting adjourned at 12pm.