Plan Team Report
Joint Meeting of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands
and Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Plan Teams
November 15th -19th, 2004
AFSC, Seattle, WA

The meeting of the Joint BSAI and GOA groundfish Plan Teams convened November 15-19th, 2004 at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, WA.

Members of the teams that were present were the following:

Gulf of Alaska	**Bering Sea Aleutian Islands**
Jim Ianelli (NMFSAFSC) co-chair	Loh-lee Low (NMFS AFSC) Chair
Diana Stram (NPFMC) co-chair	Mike Sigler (NMFS AFSC/AB) Vice-Chair
Sandra Lowe (NMFS AFSC)	Jane DiCosimo (NPFMC)
Bill Bechtol (ADF&G)	Lowell Fritz (NMFS AFSC MML)
Jeff Fujioka (NMFS AFSC/AB)	Brenda Norcross (UAF)
Jon Heifetz (NMFS AFSC/AB)	Andy Smoker (NMFS)
Nick Sagalkin (ADF&G)	Grant Thompson (NMFS AFSC)
Tory O'Connell (ADF&G)	Ivan Vining (ADF&G)
Tom Pearson (NMFS)	Kerim Aydin (NMFS AFSC)
Beth Sinclair (NMFS AFSC MML)	David Carlile (ADF&G)
Bill Clark (IPHC)	Bill Clark (IPHC)
Sarah Gaichas (NMFS AFSC)	
Bob Foy (UAF)	

Kathy Kuletz (USF&W) was absent. Approximately 30 members of the public as well as state and agency staff also attended.

Aleutian Island Discussion Paper:

Jane DiCosimo briefed the teams on a draft discussion paper, which will be presented to the Council at the December meeting. This paper was initiated at the Council's request and discusses the rationale and potential options for area-specific management in the Aleutian Islands area. The Joint Teams were requested to give any input or ideas that staff might include in this paper. Beth Sinclair noted a PMEL NMML special volume of Fisheries Oceanography that dealt specifically with the Aleutian Islands region. Sarah Gaichas noted that because many species complexes are different between the AI and BS, an initiative to separate these areas for management purposes may streamline these assessments while allowing for the application of different management strategies to BS and AI.

Questions from the Team included: Why the focus upon the AI, and is there an intent in the future to then evaluate other areas of GOA or North Pacific? What are the Aleutians, how is this area defined (ecologically, geographically)? What is the area involved in defining the AI and does it differ by species? Members of the Teams noted that species composition changes both along the Aleutian Island chain and between the AI and BS. The Teams were informed that many of these questions are being addressed in the forthcoming paper, and/or represent interesting issues (e.g., how to define the area) that will need to be addressed by the Council should any management initiative result from this discussion paper.

Additional issues from the Teams involved the analysis might come from this, the relative impact on staffing needs, and the impact on the AFSC and/or the Plan Teams. It was noted that one option under discussion could create a new FMP for the AI and a subsequently new Plan Team specifically for the AI

assessments. While all of these questions are relevant, the discussion paper is only the first step in possible subsequent analysis and, thus, the relative impact is unknown. Council staff will continue to update the Teams following the Council meeting as this initiative moves forward.

Andy Smoker handed out a letter and discussion paper regarding a problem the Regional Office has had dealing with species splits, and the related complications involved in catch accounting for management purposes when creating these splits from species complexes. It was noted that given the time lag for management purposes, any recommendations for species splits in November (Plan Team) and December (Council) will not become effective for management purposes until the following year's specifications.

Non-Target Species Committee meeting update:

Jane DiCosimo updated the Team on the Non-Target Species Committee meeting that morning. She gave the Teams an overview of the ad hoc work group and Council Committee work to date and noted that it will be the committee's role to address policy components, and to develop problems statement for overall non-target versus target species management. The committee recommended a problem statement for review by the Council as well as a draft suite of alternatives from the work group. It was the committee's recommendation that the Council initiate an analysis (for Initial review in April, Final action 2005) to modify the current formula for setting GOA other species TAC (currently 5% of the sum of the target species TACs).

The Plan Teams also recommend that the Council initiate an FMP amendment to remove the fixed 5% calculation, replacing the language such that GOA other species TAC may be calculated as "less than or equal to 5% of the sum of the target species TAC." It is the Teams' understanding that this amendment would serve as an interim measure prior to longer term and more comprehensive plans to revise non-target species management. Further discussion of this was left for the individual teams to discuss.

Management Strategy Evaluation Report:

Grant Thompson gave an overview of an MSE workgroup report and related progress to date on several AFSC initiatives. The report was presented to the SSC in October, so this was an informational update to the Teams. A list of non-prioritized suggestions and considerations for future work are included in the report.
Also, it was noted that as a consideration under the MSC certification for Pollock, it will be necessary to look at the effect of Russian catches and regime change impacts and work is progressing to examine these.

The MSE work group will meet again in an open forum following completion of the stock assessment cycle; plan team members and stock assessment authors are welcome to participate.

MSE strategy for GOA POP:

Dana Hanselman (AFSC-ABL) presented some on-going work using projection modeling to apply alternative means of estimating future stocks sizes and catches for GOA Pacific ocean perch. This work was included as Appendix 7C in the POP Assessment.

The Teams noted that this work is useful for evaluating how model behavior may be impacted by the addition of new data, and also shows the variability inherent in model projections of stock trends.

The Teams discussed the role of MSEs in stock assessments, and how on-going work might be utilized to improve current stock assessments. It was noted that management strategy evaluations such as these are often used in other countries to establish transparent rules for operationally setting quota. Here, our purpose is instead to streamline assessments such that their performance can be compared against more

complicated examples. Questions were posed regarding how often control rules established via MSE would need to be re-evaluated. There was no determinate time length, but examples were noted of reevaluation every 5 years for Southern bluefin tuna. The importance of incorporating transparency in the process of setting control rules and conducting evaluations was noted, although this is not necessarily a problem in Alaska where managers tend to consider scientific advice.

Sharks:

Sarah Gaichas gave an overview of the Shark Chapter compiled by Dean Courtney. A draft chapter summary was presented in September; the revised chapter will be included as an appendix to the "other species" Chapter in the BSAI SAFE report. The primary goal of the chapter is to compile all available information on sharks from the previous assessments into one document. The revised chapter incorporated halibut commission survey information. There are no management recommendations in this year's chapter.

The Teams approved addition of the Shark chapter to the SAFE (as an appendix this year), and commended the author on compiling the existing information. The Teams recommended that the chapter be continued and updated in the future, possibly on a biennial schedule in conjunction with between-year assessments for the GOA SAFE Report. The Teams recommended that additional survey information (such as the NMFS longline survey) be included in future assessments.

There was a general discussion of the problems with reliable estimates of catch and the difficulty with assigning sharks to a tier, since the existing catch data is not considered. The Team questioned how to manage these species due to the lack of data. There was a suggestion for the non-target species committee to include sharks while working on similar issues. One problem with the shark data is the lack of landings information. Given the lack of catch and biomass data, team members questioned the chapter statement that there is no indication of overfishing.

The Teams would like to see management recommendations (OFL and ABC) included in the Shark chapter in the future, particularly in light of some interest in developing directed fishing for sharks in state waters. Based on the current lack of data, it seemed premature to begin developing guidelines for sustainable directed shark fisheries. Because survey variation in dogfish biomass estimates does not appear to be supported by life history parameters, it is inappropriate to establish a harvest rate on available biomass estimates.

Jane DiCosimo discussed some proposals before the BOF regarding directed shark fishing for spiny dogfish in state waters of Cook Inlet and requested Plan Team input for the Joint BOF-Council meeting on these proposals. Team members questioned the potential motivation for this fishery in State waters when directed fishing for sharks in Federal waters is relatively unrestricted. It was noted that the intent may be more reflective of nuisance control in order to reduce bycatch in salmon and nearshore longline fisheries, such as cod and halibut. The Teams expressed concern regarding the lack of guidelines for developing directed shark fishing in both State and Federal fisheries, particularly given the limitations and variability inherent in existing data.

Catch Estimation:

Dave Ackley (AKRO) gave an overview of changes to the NMFS catch accounting system and where it differs from and improves upon the old "blend" data system which was used through 2002. The Teams discussed some of the assumptions used in catch accounting (3-week moving average etc), and the possibility for Plan Team input on these. The problems with the accounting for other species was discussed, as currently retained catch is available but there is an inherent difficulty with discards because

they are still reported at an aggregated level. It would be benenficial to have discard data at a more disaggregated level.

Dave Ackley explained that the region intends to make separate estimates for each species in the other species category. He will also attempt to make the code more user-friendly, such that it could be used independently by AFSC scientists.

Questions were posed regarding grenadiers and whether catch records for these (and for other non-specified species) are collected. Annual estimates of grenadiers (and other non-specified) species could be calculated as it has been proposed for inclusion under quota management uder the target/non-target species initiative.
Team members expressed an interest in a common process for disaggregating data and the need for better coordination with NMFS in-season management staff in order to expand the observer data. Next year, the problems with other species will be rectified, and there should not be any more independent analyses of catch estimation, thus everyone should be using the same approach. The Teams encourage the region to fix current problems encountered with catch accounting for other species.

Questions were raised regarding the estimation process for discards and PSC. Specifically, why not blend the WPR with observer information for smaller boats? It was clarified that currently 60% is unobserved therefore WPR seems to be the most consistent data set. Concerns were raised that this seems to be ignoring observer data from boats where coverage exists. Effectively, this is true, as observer data is only being utilized for PSC and at-sea discards. This could be reexamined and in-season management staff is amenable to suggestions for improving this process noting that it is a complicated issue.

Sablefish:

Mike Sigler (AFSC-ABL) presented the joint stock assessment for sablefish. Because the GOA is surveyed annually, GOA survey results are used to weight the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands in years when the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands areas are not surveyed. The survey time series in the GOA is showing a decline in the Western Gulf only whereas the trend in the Eastern and Central Gulf appears to have flattened in recent years (though the Southeast Outside subarea of the Eastern Gulf continues to decline).

Chris Lunsford (AFSC-ABL) presented an overview of fishery catch rates, and noted a decline in the 2003 fishery catch rates in the BS and AI areas with no noticeable change in effort patterns. Therefore, given indications that the survey and the fishery are co-located, these observed low catch rates may indicate a decline in abundance.

Area-specific catch rates are aggregated in the model. Questions were raised regarding why the fishery and survey CPUE are different. It was explained that these differences are inconsistent among areas and although effort was standardized, there was no obvious reasons for differences in CPUE. Hook spacing is notably different between the fishery and survey, but should be consistent among areas. Sample sizes in some areas are very low.

This year's model is the same as the previous year with two notable changes:

1) The model is now fully Bayesian
2) The prior probability distribution for natural mortality is concentrated at M=0.1.

The previous model did not estimate natural mortality well, but the survey catchability-natural mortality grid was too coarse to allow detection of this problem. In this year's assessment, a prior probability distribution is applied for natural mortality with the distribution concentrated at M = 0.1. Because this was similar to estimated values in previous years, the effect on prior ABC recommendations is minor.

Public comments indicated that sampling bias in observer coverage, which only occurs on >60-ft boats, could skew results because fishing patterns differ for larger vessels. Larger boats typically fish northern portions of SEO where catch rates are higher than southern portions, then move to WYAK. The last two years of logbook data are not yet available, and recent logbook data may help resolve recent differences between observer and survey data (especially in EYAK/SEO). It was anticipated that these logbook issues will be resolved for the next year

Questions were raised regarding potential fishery/survey interactions, but it was clarified that a localized fishery effect on survey station catch has not been observed since IFQ implementation.

The assessment author discussed the relative strength of the 1997 and 1998 year classes; 1997 is still considered a strong year class. The 1998 year class was initially thought to be strong, but is now more likely to be average. The 2000 year class is not fullt recruited to the fishery, but it is being caught in the survey, suggesting a potentially strong year class.

The Plan Teams discussed the choice of reference points used in the Assessment. The reference points chosen (B_{20}, B_{30}) were utilized in this year's assessment based on scientific literature. This is in contrast to the use of the "historic low" in previous assessments as a benchmark for stock status. The Plan Teams approved the new benchmarks for this assessment.

The assessment author indicated that the population is expected to decline (the extent of the decline will depend on the relative strength of the 2000 year class). The population is projected to be at 37% of unfished biomass in 2005. The maximum allowable yield has declined from last year and is projected to decline further in 2006, even if the 2000 year class is relatively strong. Discussion focused on reasons for this projected decline: that the 1997 year class peaked in 2004, and the 2000 year class, which would peak in 2006/07, is moderating the slope of this decline.

Members of the public asked about the difference between actual fishery catch and the quota, particularly with respect to which is used in projecting future population trends; catch has historically been about 10-20% less than the quota. The model catch is based on actual catch (not ABC), so population fluctuation is based on actual fishery extraction. However the projection is based on the full ABC and not the actual catch.

The public further questioned the statement in the assessment (page 47) that trawl fishery discards are a concern with respect to fishery effects on the ecosystem. Although this statement is presumably attributed to poor observer coverage in the fleet, members of the public asserted that in the CGOA for example, 50% of the quota is taken by catcher-processors that are 100% observed, and there is 30% coverage on catcher-vessels. The assessment author agreed that this statement was attributed to poor data coverage, but if CPs are in fact obtaining that percentage of the catch, then it may not be appropriate to attribute problems to poor coverage. However, sablefish size data are lacking from this fishery component. Therefore, it's possible that there is a problem with the observer protocol. Plants obersvers do not appear to be sampling sablefish, as they are instead sampling other higher volume species. Observer protocol is to sample high volume and not necessarily high value species. Julie Bonney (Alaska Groundfish Databank) described the upcoming pilot observer project, planned in conjunction with the pilot rockfish trawl program, and suggested that the observer program could be requested to increase sampling.

There was a general discussion of the September ABC projection and the need to explicitly state upon what information projections are based in September in order to best inform the public. There should be

some mention in the SAFE reports of any noted difference between proposed and final specifications from September to November.

The Plan Teams approved of the use of the current model and noted that it is consistent with requests made regarding the assessment in previous years.

Recommendations to the authors include:

- Have table of estimated numbers at age included in document
- If possible, break out numbers at age for GOA for western and central GOA (rather than just Alaska wide). Author noted that this is not available within the current model (estimates are for Alaska-wide). An area-specific model incorporating tag data and estimating movement rates would be the best way to estimate numbers at age by area.
- Suggestion for sablefish as a possible candidate for Management Strategy Evaluation, with modeling movement of sablefish, and testing the impacts on apportionments (i.e., sensitivity of harvest strategy to movement). The author stated that an evaluation of area apportionment by Jon Heifetz and Jeff Fujioka in the early 1990's found that strategies were sensitive to assumptions about area specific sources of recruitment.

The Plan Teams accepted the author's recommendations for ABC and OFL for 2005 and 2006. The 2005 ABC for the combined areas (BS, AI and GOA) was 21,000 mt and the 2005 OFL (combined areas) was 25,400 mt. A problem noted for the draft assessment OFL (for 2005) was that it assumed that OFL was caught in 2004. This specifically highlights a problem for next year in that there is a need to readjust the projection methodology, as well as needs for standardized tables for consistent location of all numbers used in projections and for establishment of a standard way to project 2 years ahead.

The Plan Team established a projection subcommittee to work on establishing standardized and formal projection methodology. The membership of this committee will consist of Jim Ianelli, Grant Thompson, and Dana Hanselman. The committee will work closely with in-season management personnel and will report to the Plan Teams as well as to assessment authors.

Area apportionments:

The Plan Teams expressed concerns with changing the apportionment strategy this year because effort estimates for the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands appear too high. The most recent year accounts for 50% of the effort. One concern is that a change in strategy would be merited if logbook data (which will be available next year) indicates a true change in relative effort. Other Plan Team members expressed that this apportionment is actually more reflective of commentary from public on what has already been observed in the fishery, as there has been general concerns from the industry that the apportionment to the BS and AI has not declined in previous years even though industry has observed lower catch rates.

The Plan Team approved the current apportionment scheme for next year, noting that a change will be warranted in the subsequent year following the combination of recent logbook data with observer fishery data to determine apportionments.

Ecosystem Chapter:

Jennifer Boldt (AFSC) presented updated information on the Ecosystem Considerations chapter of the SAFE Report. She noted that model progress and results are being provided to stock assessment authors. Some notable updates from the September draft of the report include updates on the time series of environmental variability in the BSAI and GOA, updates to the habitat research section, updated seabird bycatch and marine mammal information, more information on herring, flatfish, status of crab stocks,

jellyfish, and grenadiers. It was particularly noteworthy that grenadiers in the GOA showed the highest catch weight for all GOA non-target species. Specific recommendations are included with respect to research and management of grenadiers. Questions were raised regarding the prioritization of grenadier identification in the observer program. It was noted that this is being added to the observer training and the Teams encourage this process acknowledging the particular vulnerability of this species.

The Teams were informed of changes to the timing in the preparation of the Ecosystem Chapter. Beginning in 2005, the chapter will be updated in January/February and produced and presented at the April Council meeting. This timing should allow for more timely incorporation of ecosystem information into assessments and allow for greater application by the Council. The Ecosystem Chapter will still be presented in September to the Plan Teams and depending upon availability of information may be additionally updated in the Fall. Previously the Teams had discussed competing arguments for both a larger and more concise document. The Teams felt that the new timing with completion of document in the spring may help alleviate these issues next year as authors can give feedback on the document to ecosystem authors prior to September. This should allow the authors to focus their presentation and commentary to the Teams in September on what the most pressing issues are and what should be highlighted up front in the document. Thus changing the timing of the document production alone may help both assessment authors and Plan Team members.

Kerim Aydin and Jennifer Boldt also discussed plans to work with individual stock assessment authors to assist in incorporation of relevant information into the stock assessment. The Teams endorsed both the change in the timing of the document production as well as the intention of the Ecosystem authors to assist stock assessment authors in the dissemination and incorporation of ecosystem information into their assessments.

The Teams discussed the overall goals of the Ecosystem Chapter and the different ways to view ecosystem considerations, i.e from the interaction of ecosystem considerations upon a single species stock assessment, as well as in a more aggregated form to look at the impact of the aggregated catch on the ecosystem as a whole. The latter is acknowledged to be the far more difficult task, but potentially greatly beneficial as an overall objective. The Teams encourage the Ecosystem Chapter authors to include a discussion of this type of backwards look at the previous year and how the TACs established for the previous year are evaluated as an aggregated impact on the ecosystem.
The Teams felt that the September meeting would be a good time for a retrospective discussion of these indicators.

The Teams thanked the authors of the Ecosystem Chapter for their hard work and noted that this year in particular the dissemination of information was particularly successful, and authors were better able to incorporate predator/prey information into many of the assessments.

Economic SAFE Report:

Ron Felthoven (AFSC) presented an overview of information contained within the Economic SAFE Report. Contents of the chapter include 2003 groundfish catch breakdown, gear statistics, relative catch by catcher vessels and catcher processors, and overview of discard rates by gear type and fishery. The Team commends the work involved in the compilation of the Economic SAFE chapter and additionally commends staff on their enormous effort this year in working with stock assessment authors to make this information available. The Teams also gratefully acknowledge the increased coordination between the economists and in-season management/catch accounting.

Ron reported on plans to have economic staff appointed to at least one Plan Team in 2005.

Community Profiles:

Jennifer Sepez (AFSC) presented an overview of on-going work characterizing fishing community profiles in the Alaska region. Specific information is being compiled on the community level, in some cases for the first time ever, as previously available information was often at the borough or larger scale level. Under the MSA, the level of detail for profiling needs to be specific to actual communities. Current work has established indicators and threshold criteria for the designation of communities, while future work intends to use more sophisticated modeling to characterize communities. The actual MSA list of communities will be more extensive then the ones which will be profiled in detail. There will be both short form and long form profiles of communities. The resulting community profiles will be available for use in many academic and NEPA-related documents and will be of immense utility for Council-related work. The Teams were very interested in the on-going effort and impressed by the progress to date as well as at the widespread utility of the work presented.

Team meetings and scheduling issues:

The Teams discussed the agenda of September and November Plan Team meetings. The Teams reiterated that September meetings should focus upon information with more long-term focus, such as ecosystem and economic issues, as well as presentations of on-going work and stock assessment methodology of interest to both joint and individual teams. The November meeting should retain its focus solely on stock assessment and review. There was interest expressed for additional allotted time for the review of SAFE summary sections as a group. Both Teams felt that it was necessary to allocate the last day of the meeting to prepare the introductory chapter of the report.

With respect to the Ecosystem considerations focus at the November team meeting, the Teams felt that it would be good to highlight where the ecosystem information has been incorporated, how it is being applied to individual assessments and how improvements could be made upon incorporating information into assessments. Discussion could possibly be organized by assigning specific team members to be responsible for a summary of the ecosystem information as utilized by individual assessments. A summary overview by assessment could then be presented for the Joint Teams.

The Teams discussed the Joint Assessment ideas for the September plan team meeting (listed in the September Joint meeting minutes). The Teams agreed that the next joint assessment presentation should focus upon rockfish assessments, covering possibly both target and non-target species as well as the problems with stocks on the periphery of their range.

The Teams tentatively identified the week of September 6th, 2005 in which to schedule their September Plan Team meeting.

Other Species recommendations:

The BSAI Team recommended, in their team meeting, that an analysis for an FMP amendment be initiated to break out the “other species”category in BSAI. The GOA Team also initiated an FMP amendment (reflected in the GOA Team minutes) to recommend that an amendment be initiated to change the other species TAC calculation such that it would read “less than or equal to 5% of the sum of the target species TACs” rather that “as equal to % of the sum of the target species TACs”. The GOA Team concurs with non-target committee that this amendment would be a useful first step to fixing any potential problems that could come up in the time period that a more complicated amendment package for breaking out and establishing ABCs and OFLs for other species in the GOA.

The meeting of the Joint Plan Teams adjourned at 10:15am Friday.