

Gulf of Maine (GOM) Cod Working Group Summary

Preliminary Results of the GOM Cod Assessment

Dr. Chris Legault (NEFSC) summarized the GOM cod assessment which is still being reviewed. The preliminary results of the assessment indicate the stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring. The stock cannot rebuild by the end of its rebuilding period (2014) even in the absence of all fishing mortality. This is a change in the perception of the stock's status from the last assessment in 2008, which determined the stock was not overfished, and projected the stock would rebuild before 2014.

Management Default

Tom Nies (NEFMC staff) presented preliminary fishing year (FY) 2012 catch limits that would be specified in FW 47 if the assessment is accepted and no other management action is taken. The GOM cod acceptable biological catch (ABC) would be 1,001 mt, which is based on fishing at the NEFMC's default control rule (75% of F_{MSY}). This assumes that the rebuilding period for this stock would be extended beyond 2014. Overall, this catch limit is approximately a 90 percent reduction from recent catch limits. The amount allocated to the commercial and recreational groundfish fishery would depend on the expected catch of GOM cod in state waters in FY 2012. Quota available to the commercial fishery in FY 2012 under this management option would be approximately 90 percent lower than the FY 2010 commercial catch. Due to the low recreational allocation under this management option, additional measures would have to be taken to reduce recreational fishing mortality. Analysis of the economic impacts on the commercial groundfish fishery indicates that fleet groundfish revenues would be 25 percent lower relative to FY 2010. By homeport state, New Hampshire groundfish revenues would be reduced by 91 percent, Maine groundfish revenues would be reduced by 54 percent, and Massachusetts groundfish revenues would be reduced by 21 percent. The 30-50 ft vessel size class would be most affected under this management option. Impacts on the recreational groundfish fishery are similar. Over 60 percent of party/charter vessels in the GOM earn nearly all of their revenue from groundfish trips, and cod is a major portion of their catches.

Management Alternatives Requested Be Explored

A summary of the potential management responses raised by participants at the working group meeting are below. The first suggestion is the Council's default management option. NOAA and the Council are investigating the feasibility of implementing any of the following suggestions to provide higher catch limits for the 2012 fishing years. In order to be implementable, management alternatives must be consistent with applicable law. While some of these responses could allow larger catches than the default management option, they are unlikely to allow catches at FY 2010 levels.

- *Default Management Option*—Set the ABC based on the Council's default control rule of fishing at 75% F_{MSY} (see summary above). The overfishing level would be set at F_{MSY} or

1,313 mt. The commercial and recreational catches would then be derived from this limit for the 2012 fishing year.

- *MSA Flexibility §304(e) and/or Re-start/Extend Rebuilding Timeline* -- This option would explore the feasibility of extending the Gulf of Maine cod stock rebuilding timeframe beyond the 2014 deadline to provide for higher catches in 2012.
- *F_{MSY} ABC*—Set the ABC equal to the annual catch limit at the catch level associated with F_{MSY}.
- *“Stop-Gap” ABC*—Temporarily set the ABC at a level that would maintain stock size. Stakeholders felt this option would allow time to investigate all of the scientific information available.
- *Constant Harvest Strategy*—Set the ABC based on a constant harvest strategy to avoid wide swings in annual specifications.
- *“Break-Even” ABC*—Set the ABC at a level where the number of vessels breaking-even does not decrease.
- *No Action*—Implement the ABC previously specified in FW 44 for FY 2012 (9,018 mt).
- *Fishery Disaster*—Close the GOM broad stock area to all groundfish fishing and declare a fishery disaster.
- *Increased sector carryover allowance*—Allows sectors to carryover up to 100 percent of their unused quota to help offset low allocations of GOM cod.