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January Council Meeting

The Council finally got to hold its January meeting, which started out with a joint meeting with the Alaska Board of Fisheries and a teleconference with Alaska Senator Ted Stevens on Magnuson Act issues. Bering Sea crab fishery management and crab bycatch reduction issues highlighted the agenda for this meeting. The Council will next meet the week of April 15-22 in Anchorage. A tentative draft agenda for April is attached, as well as a four-meeting outlook for Council activities.

Advisory Panel & Scientific and Statistical Committee Elections & New Plan Team Member

John Bruce was re-elected as Chair and Stephanie Madsen was elected as Vice-Chair for the

1996 term. John Bruce is the Executive Director of the Deep Sea Fishermen's Union of the Pacific in Seattle, Washington, and has been a member of the AP since 1991. Stephanie, a 16-year resident of Unalaska, is the Executive Director of the Aleutian Seafood Processors Association in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, and has been a member of the AP since 1993.

The SSC elected Dr. Keith Criddle to his first term as Chair after having served as Vice-Chair in 1995. Dr. Criddle is a Professor of Economics with the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and has been on the SSC since January 1993. Dr. Jack Tagart, a member of the SSC since December 1988, was elected to his first term as Vice-Chair. Dr. Tagart is a Research Scientist for the Marine Resources Division in the Fish Management Program of the Department of Fish and Wildlife in Olympia, Washington.

Dr. Michael Sigler, of the NMFS Auke Bay Lab in Juneau, has been appointed to the BSAI groundfish plan team. Dr. Sigler will bring additional population dynamics, statistics, and age structure modeling expertise to the team.

Council/Board of Fisheries Consultation Group Meeting

The Council and the Alaska State Board of Fisheries met jointly on January 30 to review recent management actions and exchange information and ideas on issues of mutual concern. The meeting focused on the current status of Bering Sea crab stocks, as well as crab bycatch in trawl fisheries. Staff provided a review of the 1995-96 crab fisheries and an overview of recent management actions taken to address the situation of low crab abundance. Reports were also provided by the Crab Plan Team and the Pacific Northwest Crab Industry Advisory Committee. The Board of Fisheries expressed serious conservation concerns for Bristol Bay red king crab and urged the Council to close the Red King Crab Savings Area to trawling on a year-round basis. Senator Ted Stevens, speaking by teleconference, reported on the progress of Magnuson Act reauthorization. He noted that he is supporting a moratorium on new IFQ programs, and that some type of moratorium would likely be adopted as an amendment to the Act. An amendment to give States limited authority to manage fisheries (e.g., Alaska scallop fishery) in the EEZ also was pending. Council and Board members expressed interest in future joint meetings to provide continued information exchange and cooperation in fisheries management. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Bristol Bay Red King Crab Closure Area

The Council requested that National Marine Fisheries Service take emergency action to extend

the Bristol Bay Red King Crab Savings Area trawl closure to June 15. Last September, the Council adopted a January 1 to March 31 closure to trawling in this area as part of Amendment 37. However, recent information suggested that the red king crab stock remains in poor condition and the Council was concerned about potential impacts of trawling on red king crab during the molting and mating period. For 1996, NMFS had planned to close the area (162 to 164 W longitude, 56 to 57 N latitude) to all trawling through March 31 by inseason management authority. Because Regulatory Area 516 (162 to 163 W longitude) closes from March 15 to June 15 under existing regulations, the emergency rule will affect only the western portion (163 to 164 W longitude, 56 to 57 N latitude) of the Red King Crab Savings Area. Longer term, proposed changes to the Bristol Bay Red King Crab Savings area include a 3-month, 6-month, or year-round closure to non-pelagic trawling. Other management measures being considered include: modifying existing crab bycatch limits for trawl fisheries, adopting snow crab (*C. opilio*) bycatch limits for Bering Sea trawl fisheries, and establishing a trawl closure area in nearshore waters of Bristol Bay. The Council has also requested that NMFS provide crab bycatch data from Gulf of Alaska fisheries to assess whether bycatch management measures for that area may be necessary. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Tanner Crab PSC Flexibility

In June 1995, the Council initiated analysis of an industry proposal for a BSAI groundfish plan amendment that would allow greater flexibility in management of Tanner crab bycatch limits established for Zones 1 and 2. Currently, the FMP establishes *C. bairdi* PSC bycatch limits for trawl fisheries at 1 million crab for Zone 1 and 3 million crab for Zone 2. Last week, based on recommendations from its advisory committees and testimony from the public, the Council decided not to pursue this proposal any further. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Salmon Research Foundation

The Salmon Research Foundation, a non-profit corporation, funds research on salmon taken as bycatch in Bering Sea trawl fisheries, including genetic stock identification. Analysis of the 1994 pollock 'B' season salmon bycatch indicated that about half the chums taken during that fishery were non-Alaskan in origin. In 1995, the Foundation funded additional observers for the 1995 'B' season to collect approximately 1,500 samples for electrophoretic analysis. These samples represented about 10% of the total chum salmon bycatch, and are expected to provide strong conclusions regarding origin of these fish. A report on current foundation activities is available from the Council office. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Sablefish and Halibut IFQ Program

At the January meeting, the Council approved the "Buydown" amendment that allows catcher vessel quota share (QS) to be used on vessels of the same size class or smaller. This amendment would allow the use of larger vessel category (Category B and C) quota share (QS) on smaller category vessels (Category C and D respectively), except that in halibut area 2C and sablefish southeast area, buydown of B category QS would be allowed only for blocks that are less than 5,000 lbs (based on '96 quotas). If approved by the Secretary, this program may be implemented as early as June or July 1996.

The Council also approved for public review a plan amendment to increase the 1994 sweep-up levels of 1,000 lbs for halibut and 3,000 lbs for sablefish. Options in the analysis include 3,000 and 5,000 lbs for halibut, and 5,000 and 7,000 lbs for sablefish. The analysis is available from the Council office. The Council will take final action in April 1996. If approved, implementation of these changes would not occur until the 1997 IFQ fishing season.

The Council also initiated analyses for two additional IFQ amendments for initial review at the April meeting. One amendment will analyze increasing halibut Bering Sea quota share ownership caps. Options will range from ½ percent (status quo) to 2 percent of the total amount of halibut QS for regulatory areas 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E, combined. The second regulatory amendment would authorize the use of longline pots for sablefish only in the Bering Sea; sablefish longline pots are currently allowed in the Aleutian Islands. Final action on these two amendments is scheduled for June 1996. Implementation of these changes would not occur until the 1997 IFQ fishing season.

In their discussion of the numerous industry proposals for halibut and sablefish IFQ amendments, the Council decided to institute a formal schedule for initiation of new amendments similar to the Council's groundfish amendment cycle. The Council will call for IFQ proposals over the summer. In September, the proposals will be forwarded to the IFQ Industry Implementation Team. In October, the Team will review the proposals, assess staff workload and availability, and rank the need and importance of proposed amendments. In December, the Team will report their findings to the Council. NMFS Restricted Access Management Division will also provide a preliminary report on the conclusion of the IFQ season. The Council will review the Implementation Team recommendations on IFQ plan and regulatory amendments and direct staff to initiate particular analyses in light of other staff assignments and other proposed groundfish amendments. No action on halibut and sablefish IFQ issues will be scheduled for the early February meeting. In April, the Council will schedule

initial review for amendments and final action in June. Under this schedule, IFQ changes would be implemented for the following fishing season. Notification for the call for IFQ proposals will be in the June newsletter. Staff contact is Jane DiCosimo.

BSAI Pollock IFQs

The Council reviewed a discussion paper prepared by the staff which focused on some of the systemic decisions which will need to be made when structuring an IFQ program for the BSAI pollock fisheries. The paper focused on the harvester portion of an IFQ program, and did not delve into issues surrounding processor considerations in the IFQ system. Specifically, the paper examined: (1) the nature and strength of the IFQ right, (2) the use of pelagic and non-pelagic trawls in mid-water and bottom pollock target fisheries, including catch and bycatch, (3) the treatment of 'A' and 'B' (roe and non-roe) pollock seasons, (4) implications of systemic decisions on initial allocation, and (5) some initial considerations with regard to the issue of transferability. The paper is available from the Council office and may provide some useful insights into the proposed pollock IFQ program. The Council may be making decisions on some of these issues prior to formal, quantitative analyses of the program.

After hearing a presentation of the paper, the Council asked staff to further develop the discussion of transferability and non-transferability. The Council also voted to notify the public that they intend to consider the addition of the BSAI king and Tanner crab fisheries into the study of IFQs the next time IFQs are on their agenda, which will be the June 1996 Council meeting in Portland, Oregon. At that time, it is hoped that the Magnuson Act Reauthorization will be completed and uncertainties regarding the Congressional position on the IFQ issue will be clarified. If at that time the Council proceeds with development of the BSAI pollock IFQ study, they may be making initial decisions on some of the issues identified above, and finalizing the specific alternatives, elements, and options for inclusion in the formal study. Staff contact is Marcus Hartley or Chris Oliver.

VBA/IBQs

Also part of the Council's overall Comprehensive Rationalization initiative, the issue of Vessel Bycatch Accounts (VBAs), also known as Individual Bycatch Quotas (IBQs), was on the Council agenda at this meeting. The Council heard a staff report from NMFS analysts working on this program. They then decided to postpone further discussions and development until the June 1996 meeting in Portland, Oregon. The Council specifically requested a report from the NMFS at that time addressing monitoring and enforcement aspects of this proposed program.

Though an analytical outline and some preliminary analyses have been developed, further work between now and June will likely be very limited. At the June meeting, the Council will address the specific alternatives, elements, and options to be included for further analysis. A full analysis could be available for Council review in September, with a final decision in December of 1996. Implementation of this program would be possible for 1998. Council contact person is Chris Oliver. The lead analyst for this program is Dr. Joe Terry of the NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle.

Improved Retention and Utilization

As is outlined in the Council's December 1995 newsletter, the Improved Retention and Utilization program is moving forward, with specific fisheries identified for analysis. The BSAI pollock, Pacific cod, rock sole, and yellowfin sole fisheries will be the subject of this initiative, with an overall analysis due in June and possible final action by the Council at the September 1996 meeting in Sitka, Alaska. The Council has identified a committee of industry representatives to act as a sounding board for the analysts on this project, with the primary focus of working through any implementation hurdles which may arise. The committee will meet on February 27 and 28 in Seattle (call for details), and again in late March, and provide a report to the Council at the April meeting in Anchorage. The Council may then adjust particular elements and options of that program and provide further direction to the analysts prior to completion of the study. Dr. Lew Queirolo of the NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center is the lead analyst for this project. Staff contact is Chris Oliver or Clarence Pautzke.

Pacific Cod Allocation

The Council developed a problem statement that will guide the analysis of the BSAI Pacific cod allocation between gear types. That problem statement is provided below:

The Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Pacific cod fishery continues to manifest many of the problems that led the NPFMC to adopt Amendment 24 in 1993. These problems include compressed fishing seasons, periods of high bycatch, waste of resource, and new entrants competing for the resource due to crossovers allowed under the NPFMC's Moratorium Program. Since the apportionment of BSAI cod TAC between fixed gear, jig, and trawl gear was implemented on January 1, 1994, when Amendment 24 went into effect, the trawl, jig, and fixed gear components have harvested the TAC with demonstrably differing levels of PSC mortality, discards, and bycatch of non-target species. Management measures are needed to ensure that the cod TAC is harvested in a

manner which reduces discards in the target fisheries, reduces PSC mortality, reduces non-target bycatch of cod and other groundfish species, takes into account the social and economic aspects of variable allocations and addresses impacts of the fishery on habitat. In addition, the amendment will continue to promote stability in the fishery as the NPFMC continues on the path towards comprehensive rationalization.

After developing their problem statement, the Council approved the staff's analytical outline for studying the BSAI Pacific cod allocation. The analysis will focus on the Council's alternatives for allocating Pacific cod among trawl, fixed, and jig gear, as well as between catcher vessels and catcher processors within the trawl fleet. This will allow the Council to select among any of 19 alternatives when making their final decision. It should be noted that during the December meeting, the analysis of the CV/CP split within trawl gear was placed on its own track and would not have been completed by April. However, with help provided by NMFS economists, the analysis for both the gear split and the CV/CP split will be completed by April.

Table 1 below lists each of the 19 alternatives currently being considered by the Council. The percentages listed are the percentages of the TAC that each sector would receive under each alternative. Table 1

Alternative	Trawl		Fixed Jig	
	Catcher Vessels	Catcher Processors		
1 No Action				
2a (Current)		54%	44%	2%
2b (cv=40/cp=60)	21.6%	32.4%	44%	2%
2c (60/40)	32.4%	21.6%	44%	2%
3a (Reciprocal)		44%	54%	2%
3b (40/60)	17.6%	26.4%	54%	2%
3c (60/40)	26.4	17.6%	54%	2%
4a		69%	29%	2%
4b (40/60)	27.6%	41.4%	29%	2%
4c (60/40)	41.4%	27.6%	29%	2%
5a		59%	39%	2%
5b (40/60)	23.6%	35.4%	39%	2%
5c (60/40)	35.4%	23.6%	39%	2%

6a		39%	59%	2%
6b (40/60)	15.6%	23.4%	59%	2%
6c (60/40)	23.4%	15.6%	59%	2%

In a related issue, the Council stated that they wanted to resurrect a proposal to ban night trawling in the Pacific cod target fishery. A report will be presented to the Council in April on work that had been completed when this issue was considered in the past, though the Council will not take final action on this issue in April. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Pollock 'B' Season Delay

The BSAI pollock 'B' season (non-roe season) currently opens on August 15 of each year. It was delayed three years ago from its previous June 1 opening date to allow for additional salmon processing opportunities by catcher/processor vessels, and to move the pollock season to a time when yield and flesh quality are higher and increase the benefits from the pollock fishery. The Council will be deciding at the April meeting in Anchorage whether to delay the opening of the 'B' season another two weeks, until September 1, to create additional salmon processing opportunities. The amendment could include a mandatory fishery closure on November 30, and the delay might only be applied to the offshore fleet. The original analysis for the 'B' season delay was performed by the University of Alaska's Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), and included specific alternatives of July 1, August 1, and September 1. Based on that analysis, and on industry testimony, the Council chose an intermediate opening date of August 15. That analysis, though now a few years old, is considered still relevant to the current proposal to delay the opening until September 1, and will be the primary analytical document for the Council's decision this April. That document is available from the Council office upon request. Prior to the April meeting additional analyses will be performed to supplement the existing document and will focus on: salmon bycatch implications, including impacts to the 5-block chum salmon closure area implemented by the Council last year; potential impacts to marine mammals; and, interactions with other directed groundfish fisheries, particularly the yellowfin sole fisheries.

Halibut Sport/Charter Boat Management

Last year, the Council identified alternatives for managing the sport and/or guided sport (charter boat) fisheries for halibut. An analysis of these alternatives has not yet been developed pending other fisheries management priorities and a lack of funding for outside contract

assistance on the analysis. Due to the federal budget crisis, funding for such a study is still uncertain, but may be resolved by mid-March. If funding becomes available, the Council will expedite development of this analysis. Council staff is in the process of drafting a Request for Proposals (RFP) to perform the analyses and, if funding becomes available, a likely scenario is as follows: (1) Review of the RFP by the SSC, AP, and Council at the April meeting in Anchorage. (2) Solicit bids in May and early June, review of bids by SSC and Council at the June meeting, with a contract award in late June. (3) Review of analyses by the Council in February 1997. (4) Final decision by Council in April 1997. (5) Potential implementation of management measures beginning in 1998. At this time, the only action scheduled for the upcoming April meeting will be SSC and Council review of the draft RFP prepared by staff. The Council will send a mailing in late March to charter boat industry contacts if any other actions are contemplated for the April meeting. Staff contact is Chris Oliver.

Other Groundfish Amendment Actions

Gulf of Alaska pollock seasonal allocations. The Council approved Amendment 45 to the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish FMP to framework greater flexibility in setting seasonal allowances of the pollock TAC. The Council approved combining the third and fourth quarterly allowances into a single release of 50 percent of the TAC. The first and second quarter allowances of 25 percent of the pollock TAC in the Western/Central Regulatory Area would remain unchanged. The third trimester release of quota for the Central Gulf (Areas 620 and 630) would occur on September 1 and for the Western Gulf (Area 610) on October 1. The Council will consider a return to quarterly releases for Western/Central Gulf pollock seasons using an appropriate trigger mechanism, possibly based on the size of the pollock TAC, as a separate regulatory amendment. Staff contact is Jane DiCosimo.

Halibut Grid-Sorting. The Council did not approve a regulatory amendment to require the use of a grid to sort fish in the non-pelagic trawl groundfish fisheries. The International Pacific Halibut Commission withdrew its support of the industry proposal because the magnitude of projected savings in halibut discard mortality was not sufficient to overcome complications in estimating bycatch, and because of conflicts with the Vessel Incentive Program (VIP). The Council expressed strong interest in resolving the data quality issues that prevented implementation of this effort to decrease halibut bycatch mortality. The Council also clarified that grid-sorting of halibut is currently legal, and may be done voluntarily, both on unobserved vessels and during unobserved tows on observed vessels. NMFS is scheduled to provide a report on the VIP and data quality issues to the Council in June. Staff contact is Jane DiCosimo.

Pacific Cod 'C' Season. Last December, the Council requested development of a regulatory amendment to provide that any 'C' season for the fixed gear cod fishery begin on December 1, or contiguous to their fall fishery. This additional fishery could potentially occur through either a re-calculation of PSC bycatch figures, or through a reapportionment of unused quota from the trawl gear allocation of Pacific cod. NMFS is currently developing this change for implementation later this year.

Forage Fish Prohibition. The NMFS Regional Office is preparing a plan amendment, for both the GOA and the BSAI, which will prohibit directed fisheries for capelin and other forage fish. This is expected to be available for review in June, with final action in September. Staff contact is David Witherell.

Overfishing definitions. At the request of the Council's SSC, an amendment analysis is being prepared to evaluate changes to the overfishing definitions for North Pacific groundfish species. Dr. Grant Thompson of the NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center is preparing this analysis for SSC and Council review at the April meeting, with possible final action in June.