

Groundfish Final Harvest Specifications Process in December 2025

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At the December meeting, the SSC, AP, and Council will review information to support 2026-2027 final groundfish harvest specifications and make recommendations on groundfish harvest specifications, PSC limits, and halibut DMRs to manage the 2026 and 2027 BSAI and GOA groundfish fisheries. The lapse in Federal appropriations from October 1 - November 12, 2025, has impacted the information available for the Council’s typical process, in that Federal stock assessment authors did not have the time to complete new groundfish assessments as planned, and the Council’s Groundfish Plan Teams did not convene to review stock assessments and provide their recommendations on harvest specifications. As a result, Council staff have worked with SSC and Council leadership to identify what information is available this year, and how it will be applied consistently and transparently across groundfish stocks for final 2026-2027 specifications. Staff have also worked to ensure this year’s process remains consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), including National Standard 2, as well as the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) and other federal requirements. This document outlines this year’s adaptations and accompanying rationale.

Framework for Groundfish Stock Status Determinations and Catch Specifications, and the Use of the Best Scientific Information Available

Section 301(a)(2) of the MSA specifies that fishery conservation and management measures shall be based upon the best scientific information available (BSIA; National Standard 2). The North Pacific Stock Assessment Review process is consistent with widely accepted peer review standards and the National Standard 2 guidelines, including requirements for public transparency¹. In 2022, the agency published a detailed description of how best scientific information available is considered at each step of the North Pacific review and the approval process for stock status determinations and catch specifications following input from the SSC and Council.² While the document lists typical timelines, it also notes that these are occasionally revised as needed.

The process identifies that all groundfish stock assessments are prepared by AFSC authors, with the exception of GOA Demersal Shelf Rockfish, and that a schedule of groundfish assessment review (stock prioritization) has been developed by the AFSC working with the Council, SSC, and Groundfish Plan Teams. The schedule takes into account factors such as when new survey information will become available for each stock, and the life history of the species. These schedules are summarized annually in the [GOA SAFE Introduction](#) and the [BSAI SAFE Introduction](#) but are subject to change prior to the Fall specifications cycle. As a result, not all groundfish stocks are assessed and reviewed to the same degree every year; assessment documents of varying complexity and detail (operational (full or update)

¹ Federal Register notice of regional peer review processes, August 16, 2016, [81 FR 54561](#)

² North Pacific Regional Best Scientific Information Available framework, April 2022.

<https://media.fisheries.noaa.gov/2022-06/Alaska-best-scientific-information-available-final.pdf>

assessments, harvest projections, or catch reports)³ are prepared for Plan Team and SSC peer review based on the stock prioritization schedule.

For stocks in Tiers 1-3, harvest projections are prepared in years between operational assessments. For these stocks, the model is updated with recent catch data and, depending on timing and availability, the most recent survey abundance index estimates, and projections of ABC and OFL are provided for that stock or stock complex for the next two years. For stocks in Tier 4-6, catch reports are produced in years when operational assessments are not produced. Catch reports identify the amount of catch that has occurred in recent years relative to TAC, ABC, and OFL levels. These reports are prepared by staff at the request of the Plan Teams and the SSC, to ensure that sudden changes in the fishery or the stock are not missed during years when more substantive stock assessment products (full or update operational stock assessments, or harvest projections) are not available.

The peer-reviewed Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Reports are compiled by the Groundfish Plan Teams and include the groundfish assessment products as well as Ecosystem Status Reports (ESRs), Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profiles (ESPs), and Plan Team recommendations. These reports are the basis for the best scientific information available to determine stock status and inform SSC recommendations of overfishing limit (OFLs) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) for each stock or stock complex. The SSC provides a review of this information and certifies that the SSC's OFL and ABC recommendations are made based on scientific information that meets National Standard 2 guidelines. In approving and publishing the final harvest specifications, the agency certifies that such recommendations are consistent with the MSA including National Standard 2.

The groundfish harvest control rules are inherently precautionary, and include built-in mechanisms to account for scientific uncertainty. The OFL control rule builds in automatic rebuilding below B_{40} . The default recommendation for a stock's ABC is the maximum permissible ABC (maxABC) resulting from the application of the ABC control rule as defined in the Groundfish FMPs. However, assessment authors, Plan Teams, and the SSC also consider whether any reduction from the maxABC is warranted for a stock based on information included in risk tables, which document concerns related to the assessment, stock population dynamics, the ecosystem/environment, or fishery performance. This is primarily discussed at the November Plan Team during assessment reviews. The September Plan Team meeting also provides an opportunity for the Plan Teams to flag if there are any indicators, e.g., preliminary results from the most recent surveys or ecosystem status report information, suggesting that a conservation concern may have arisen for any stocks.

Once the SSC has recommended OFLs and ABCs, the Council, with input from the Advisory Panel, recommends total allowable catch, or TACs, that cannot exceed the ABC recommended by the SSC.

Public transparency, a requirement of National Standard 2 guidelines, is assured as the information in support of harvest specifications is made available to the public in advance of meetings at which they will be reviewed, and the public has an opportunity to provide written and/or oral comment during all Council-hosted meetings (Plan Teams, SSC, Advisory Panel, Council).

Harvest Specifications Process⁴

The Council developed this unique “annual 2-year” harvest specifications process to balance their ability to use the most recent stock assessments to recommend harvest specifications, with the APA's procedural requirements for public notice and comment, so that NMFS can open applicable groundfish fisheries each January. This annual 2-year process is necessary for opening these fisheries on January 1 with the APA's

³ Revised Groundfish Stock Assessment Definitions, March 2025.

<https://files.npfmc.org/SAFE/GroundfishStockAssessmentDefinitions.pdf>

⁴ Described in more detail at: <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/20073>

requirements for notice and comment, and the Federal process of review and approval for publication in the Federal Register. To comply with the APA, NMFS annually publishes the 2-year proposed harvest specifications recommended by the Council in October in the Federal Register, usually before the December Council meeting. NMFS accepts public comments on the proposed harvest specifications, and the most recent SAFE reports are available for public review as well during the comment period for the proposed harvest specifications. Once the Council recommends final 2-year harvest specifications in December, NMFS reviews the Council's recommendations and public comments and then implements the final specifications through publication of a final rule, usually by mid-March.

Each year, NMFS opens the applicable groundfish fisheries in January as authorized by the final harvest specifications published the previous March. The fisheries that start in January include Pacific cod and pollock in the GOA, and Pacific cod, pollock, and Atka mackerel in the BSAI. From January to March, NMFS uses inseason adjustment authority to adjust TACs and allocation limits for the species that are likely to be constrained by the Council's most recent recommended final TAC and allocation limits. Inseason adjustments ensure the TACs are correct and appropriate based on the best scientific information available for the applicable fishery, consistent with the goals and objectives of the FMP.

Without this annual 2-year process, it would not be possible to have final harvest specifications recommended by the Council in December in place to open fisheries in January. This current process was implemented by BSAI and GOA Amendments 48/48⁵ in 2004 and is described in section 3.2 of the Alaska Groundfish Harvest Specifications Environmental Impact Statement.⁶

Adaptations for 2026-2027 Groundfish Harvest Specifications Based on Available Information

Due to the lapse in Congressional appropriations and resulting furlough of Federal workers during October-November 2025, there was insufficient time for new groundfish operational assessments or harvest projections to be developed and reviewed as planned. As a result, the Council's most recent and complete peer review process for groundfish assessments occurred in September-December 2024. The assessment products coming out of that process are documented in the 2024 Groundfish SAFE Reports⁷, and the reports include harvest projections for modeled stocks for 2025 and 2026.

The process that the Council undertook in October 2025 to recommend proposed harvest specifications followed the typical process. As the best available source of scientific information for the status of stocks, these December 2024 peer-reviewed SAFE reports were the basis for the October 2025 SSC and Council recommendations for proposed harvest specifications for 2026 and 2027.⁸ The SSC and Council took action in October 2025 to recommend proposed specifications for 2027 that mirror the 2026 recommendations for OFL, ABC, and TAC. Note, however, that due to the lapse in appropriations, at the time this document was posted, NMFS had not yet published the proposed harvest specifications in the Federal Register.

For December 2025, however, the Council does not have available the new operational assessments or harvest projections that would typically be reviewed in November-December to update the 2026-2027 proposed harvest specifications. As a result, the SSC and Council are in the same position as in October 2025, with the December 2024 SAFE reports as the basis for evaluating status of stocks, using 2026

⁵<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/amendment-48-fmp-groundfish-bering-sea-and-aleutian-islands-management-area>

⁶ <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/20073>

⁷ see <https://www.npfmc.org/library/safe-reports/>

⁸ [GOA Groundfish Proposed Specifications Motion, Oct 2025](#), [BSAI Groundfish Proposed Specifications Motion, Oct 2025](#)

harvest projections and mirroring them for 2027⁹ in order to start the 2027 fisheries. The following sections describe available information in addition to the December 2024 SAFE reports that may be relevant to SSC and Council considerations for final specifications, and a process for how that discussion could be facilitated.

The final specifications that the Council recommends in December 2025 will identify values for both 2026 and 2027 due to the “annual 2-year” process and in order to start the 2027 fisheries in January as described above. The SSC and Council will again have the opportunity in September-December of 2026 to consider new information, including delayed and scheduled operational assessments and harvest projections, to recommend 2027 (and 2028) specifications that in March of 2027, will supercede the 2027 values recommended at this December 2025 meeting.

Information available to inform 2026-2027 groundfish harvest specifications

The following documents are posted to the [December 2025 eAgenda](#) or linked below.

- GOA and BSAI [December 2024 SAFE reports](#)
- GOA and BSAI catch reports for each stock (except GOA deepwater flatfish), which include recent catch data and TACs for each stock compared to ABC/OFL. Per the AFSC’s stock assessment schedule, a harvest projection was completed for GOA deepwater flatfish this year, which was reviewed and approved at the October 2025 SSC meeting.
- GOA and BSAI summary tables of groundfish stock information, which have been compiled for ease of accessibility. These summaries include: the tier of each stock or stock complex, the type of assessment product previously expected for each stock in 2025 (e.g., operational assessment, harvest projection, catch report), the frequency of each assessment (number of years between each operational assessment), links to the most recent operational assessment and any additional documents of relevance (e.g., 2024 harvest projections, ESPs), the expected date of the next operational assessment,¹⁰ whether the 2025/2026 ABC was set at maxABC, survey trends relative to prior survey if available, and whether the stock biomass was below $B_{35\%}$. For stocks for which assessments had been planned in 2025, tables with additional metrics are also provided.
- [Ecosystem Status Report \(ESR\) preview](#) presented to SSC in October (and [longer version](#) prepared for September Groundfish Plan Teams), which provides highlights for GOA, AI, and EBS (slides 1-12), and the [October Plan Teams presentation](#) provided summaries from the BS and GOA Ecosystem Surveys (slides 21-24)
- Limited 2025 survey information, as available at the September Plan Team and October SSC meetings: GOA bottom trawl survey biomass and abundance estimates and [EBS Bottom Trawl survey and abundance estimates](#). Some of this information was presented in the October [Plan Team presentation](#) to the SSC (GOA slides 5-7, EBS slide 56), and also trends in relative population numbers (RPN) from the GOA longline survey (slide 25).
 - Note that while biomass and abundance estimates are available, the SSC and Council do not have the benefit of receiving an analysis and interpretation of new survey data within the context of survey trends and model fit to the data for each stock or stock complex in individual assessments. As a result, it is not possible to consider these data in a quantitative way, although they may offer some utility for qualitative considerations. National Standard 2 does describe that results of monitoring programs may be considered

⁹ Except for GOA deepwater flatfish.

¹⁰ Noting that the schedule for groundfish assessments may be revised as a result of 2025 assessments not being produced and reviewed.

for use before they are fully complete and that interim results may be better than no results to help inform a management decision (50 CFR 600.315(a)(6)(v)).

- In [April 2025, the SSC](#) received a presentation on survey modernization, including a spreadsheet identifying a summary of surveys used in each assessment, the proportion of TAC:ABC in 2023 and 2024 and which stocks had elevated risk table scores in 2023 or 2024 and for which categories.

Process for facilitation SSC review of stocks in 2026-2027

The graphic below offers a process for facilitating SSC review of stocks to assist with recommendation of groundfish harvest specifications for 2026-2027. As discussed above, the 2024 SAFE reports provide status of stocks information from which OFL and maxABC is derived for all stocks, however the SSC also considers whether any reduction from the maxABC is warranted for a stock.

First, the most recent Groundfish SAFE Reports concluded that at the time they were produced that no groundfish stocks were overfished, experiencing overfishing, nor approaching an overfished status. Therefore, no stocks were flagged at this time for in-depth review due to an OFL-level concern.

Based on the limited new data available with which to recommend harvest specifications that differ from the proposed specifications, staff anticipate SSC review can be focused on few stocks or stock complexes, as shown in the graphic.

Many stocks, based on the stock prioritization schedule, were not scheduled for operational assessments this year. All but one of those stocks were scheduled for catch reports, which were still produced as expected. Catch reports do not incorporate updated survey information, and for stocks with catch reports, harvest specifications are typically rolled over from prior years, because limited new data are available that would warrant a change in OFLs and ABCs. For stocks with projection models, the 2024 operational assessments or the 2024 harvest projection documents include projections for 2026. The October 2025 recommendations for proposed harvest specifications reflected these rollover quantities. As shown in the graphic, the one stock with an updated harvest projection (GOA deepwater flatfish) was reviewed in October, and at that time the SSC recommended ABC and OFL for 2026 and 2027 consistent with those provided in the document.

Two other criteria shown in the graphic identify whether the stock is a Tier 6 stock, and whether the stock was already on a 4-year prioritization cycle, but was scheduled for an operational assessment this year. Tier 6 stocks do not rely on survey data, so there is no new information to inform these assessments this year. For the stocks that are on a 4-year cycle, it seems appropriate to delay detailed SSC review until next year when a new assessment will be prepared. Per the [Stock Prioritization process](#) discussed in February 2023, stocks which are on a 4-year cycle generally have low recruitment variability, are underutilized (e.g., many of the flatfish stocks), and have lower economic value; the timing of the assessment is intended to align with biennial survey timing.

For the selected stocks remaining (on the right side of the graphic), which were intended to have new assessments this year, staff have provided some summary metrics to assist with recommending OFLs and ABCs for 2026 and 2027. For additional information on the rationale for and historical scores for risk table categories for all stocks, see the [Groundfish Risk Table Report: 2024 Update](#) which was provided under the SSC's December 2024 eAgenda.

