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2026 Groundfish Stock Assessment Priorities

This report responds to the lack of 2025 groundfish stock assessments due to the federal furlough and December SSC requests, detailed below, by prioritizing and recommending 2026 groundfish stock assessments. SSC comments and feedback on this agenda item will be provided to the Council during B reports at the February 2026 meeting.

Background

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) December harvest specification process did not have new operational assessments for groundfish stocks due to the 2025 government shutdown (October to November). During December 2025 the Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended forming a working group consisting of SSC members, AFSC staff, and Council coordinators to prioritize and recommend stocks to be assessed during the fall 2026 stock assessment process. The December 2025 SSC minutes provided the following guidance:

“The proposed specific recommendations include: 1) stock assessments with a one-year cycle will be completed as normal; 2) shifting all stock assessments with a four-year cycle forward by one year (regardless of when they were scheduled), leaving only the two-year cycle stocks; and finally, 3) prioritize those two-year stocks from 2025 and 2026. “

“the SSC requests the internal agency workgroup prioritize the following stocks for assessment in 2026: AI Pacific Cod, BSAI Yellowfin Sole, GOA RE/BS, GOA Shortraker, BSAI Other Rockfish, BSAI Skates, and GOA POP, and assessments normally on an annual cycle (e.g., Pollock and Pacific Cod). “

The lack of 2025 stock assessments for Tier 1-3 stocks results in uncertainty regarding how to ensure that ABC and OFL projections are available for all stocks for 2027/2028, given that not all previously planned two-year operational (full or update) stock assessments scheduled for 2025 and 2026 can be completed during 2026. The December SSC minutes noted: *“However, there was a clear expectation that many of these stocks would be assessed in 2026 and thus updated 2027 OFL and ABC projections would be made in the fall of 2026 and available for the 2027/2028 specification cycle. If any of these stock assessments are not updated in 2026, the SSC signals its intent to re-evaluate the potential for additional reductions from outdated maximum ABCs due to an additional year of uncertainty in these specifications.”*

2026 Stock Assessment Recommendations

The 2026 groundfish stock assessment recommendations by the SSC/AFSC/Council working group are in Table 1. Stocks are shown by region/FMP area and are in no particular order within each region.

In response to the need for ABC and OFL projections for all stocks, which are used to obtain 2027/2028 specifications, **harvest projections will be completed for all Tier 1-3 stocks that are not scheduled for an operational stock assessment (full or update) during 2026**. For 2026, this recommendation supersedes previous

SSC stock prioritization recommendations to produce catch reports for Tier 1-3 stocks during years without an operational (full or update) stock assessment for stocks on a two-year assessment cycle and during the second year of the four-year assessment cycle. **The 2026 harvest projections will be brought forward during the September Plan Team and October SSC meetings, and catch reports will be provided for the December SSC meeting, as is typical.**

One-year cycle stocks will be completed as usual except for GOA Pacific cod, which is being assessed out of cycle during January/February 2026. No new survey data will be available for GOA Pacific cod during the fall 2026 assessment cycle, therefore, a harvest projection is planned for GOA Pacific cod in September 2026.

The 2025 schedule for stocks on the four-year stock assessment cycle will be completed during 2026 with the exception of the GOA shallow water flatfish complex (SWF), which was scheduled for a full assessment in 2025. Higher priority stock assessments, high 2026 review demands, and the very low catch/ABC ratio for GOA SWF (0.04) that indicates low fishery risk to the stock are the basis for the recommendation that a harvest projection be provided for GOA SWF harvest in 2026. In addition, Tier 6 stocks scheduled for an operational assessment in 2026 were given a lower priority and catch reports are recommended for those stocks.

Stock assessment prioritization of stocks on the two-year stock assessment cycle is based on multiple criteria:

1. SSC prioritization during December 2025 (column F)
2. Operational full stock assessments planned for 2025 with the intention for operational full assessments to be presented and reviewed during November/December 2025. These stock assessments underwent preliminary GPT/SSC reviews during September/October 2025.
3. The availability of new survey data from 2025 or expected in 2026 that will inform the assessment.
4. The stock's catch/ABC ratio, with lower priority assigned to stocks with low ratios.

Finally, Table 1 identifies stocks that **could** be reviewed during September/October 2026 (column I) **rather** than November/December 2026 as these stocks will not have additional 2026 survey data and the models have already been reviewed by the SSC (noted in column G). Distributing final review efforts across both September/October and November/December timeframes may help distribute review workload of Council advisory bodies. **It is important to note that the SSC should consider review timing and SSC capacity amongst other agenda items scheduled for October and December; if the SSC does not have adequate time to review all stocks marked in columns I and J at the respective October/December meetings, feedback from the SSC prioritizing these stocks will be particularly helpful.** Based on Table 1, (not considering SSC review timing) 9 operational assessments could be available for review in October; 16 could be available for review in December.

Table 1. Recommended groundfish stock assessment schedule for 2026. Full is an operational full assessment, Update is an operational update assessment, HP is harvest projection, CR is catch report, and NA is no product due in 2026.

A	B	C	D	E	F	H	G	I	J
Stock	Region	Tier	Frequency	2026 Assessment Type	SSC Priority Dec. 2025	Catch/ABC Ratio	Proposed Full Reviewed Sept/Oct 2025	Operational assessments that could be completed for Sept/Oct 2026 Review	Operational assessments for Nov/Dec 2026 Review
Yellowfin sole	EBS/AI	1	1	Full	x	0.34	x		x
Pacific cod	AI	3	1	Full	x	0.57			x
Pacific cod	EBS	3	1	Full		0.34			x
Pollock	EBS	3	1	Full		0.85	x		x
Pollock	Bogoslof	5	2	Update		0		x	
Northern rock sole	EBS/AI	1	2	HP		0.24			
Pollock	AI	3	2	HP		0.12			
Atka mackerel	EBS/AI	3	2	Update		0.98			x
Greenland turbot	EBS/AI	3	2	Full		0.1	x		x
Kamchatka flounder	EBS/AI	3	2	HP		0.68			
Northern rockfish	EBS/AI	3	2	HP		0.46	x		
Pacific ocean perch	EBS/AI	3	2	Update		0.9			x
Rougheye & blackspotted rockfish	EBS/AI	3	2	Update		1.12			x
Skates	EBS/AI	3, 5	2	Full	x	0.71	x		x
Alaska plaice	EBS/AI	3	4	HP		0.29			
Arrowtooth flounder	EBS/AI	3	4	HP		0.12			
Flathead sole	EBS/AI	3	4	HP		0.19			
Other rockfish	EBS/AI	5	2	Update	x	1.1			x
Shortraker rockfish	EBS/AI	5	2	Update		0.34			x
Other flatfish	EBS/AI	5	4	CR		0.18			
Octopus	EBS/AI	6	4	CR		0.05			
Sharks	EBS/AI	6	4	CR		0.46			
								Update done early 2026	
Pacific cod	GOA	3	1	HP		0.59			
Pollock	GOA	3	1	Full		0.68	x		x
Dusky rockfish	GOA	3	2	HP		0.29			
Northern rockfish	GOA	3	2	Update		0.24		x	
Pacific ocean perch	GOA	3	2	Full	x	0.6	x	x	
Rougheye & blackspotted rockfish	GOA	3	2	Full	x	0.25	x	x	
Other rockfish	GOA	4, 5, 6	2	Update		0.14		x	
Shortraker rockfish	GOA	5	2	Full	x	0.54			x
Skates	GOA	5	2	Update		0.5		x	
Thornyheads	GOA	5	2	Update		NA		x	
Demersal shelf rockfish	GOA	5, 6	2	Full		NA			x
Arrowtooth flounder	GOA	3	4	Full		0.15	x	x	
Flathead sole	GOA	3	4	HP		0.03			
Rex sole	GOA	3	4	Full		0.03	x, 2025 CIE	x	
Shallow water flatfish (includ. N/S rock sole)	GOA	3, 5	4	HP		0.04	x		
Deep water flatfish (includ. Dover sole)	GOA	3, 6	4	HP		0.01			
Sharks	GOA	5, 6	4	CR		0.38			
Atka mackerel	GOA	6	4	CR		0.08			
Octopus	GOA	6	4	CR		0.2			
Sablefish	EBS/AI/GOA	3	1	Full		0.5	x		x
Grenadiers	EBS/AI/GOA	Report	4	NA		NA			
Sculpins	EBS/AI/GOA	Report	4	NA		NA			
Forage species (including Squid)	BSAI/GOA	Eco Report	2	Report					x