

Staff Report on Subarea Apportionments

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1. Introduction

In December 2024, the Council requested that SSC and Council leadership communicate with staff regarding possible approaches for subarea apportionments of Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) within the groundfish harvest specifications process and bring back options to the Council and SSC for discussion and decision. Most recently, this topic focused on issues related to the spatial management of rockfish in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA).¹ The Council intends that possible new approach(es) for subarea apportionments of ABC would consider:

- the intended purpose of subarea apportionments of ABC
- the role of Council advisory bodies in recommending those apportionments
- the application of the [spatial management policy](#) (SMP), and
- timing within the process.

This report is intended to assist the SSC/Council with establishing a process for the Council's annual recommendations for stocks and stock complexes managed as target species under the Groundfish FMPs. This includes options for new terminology for subarea apportionments of ABCs, in recognition that apportionments of ABC are not the 'true' ABC of a stock or stock complex. This report is staff's assimilation of staff expertise, discussions within the harvest specifications process at the PT, SSC, and Council, and conversations between staff (Council, AKRO, NOAA GC, and AFSC), SSC members, and Council members. This report is intended to be a starting point for discussion.

2. Current groundfish harvest specifications requirements and process

Currently, the Groundfish FMPs document the process for the PTs and SSC to specify ABCs, which includes application of the ABC control rule. The FMPs do not detail a process for the apportionment of ABC across subareas. Under the FMPs, ABC equals ACL and is set at the spatial extent of the stock or stock complex, but the subarea apportionments of ABC are not the ABC for the stock or stock complex and therefore are not ACLs. As a result, exceeding a subarea ABC does not qualify as an exceedance of an ACL that triggers accountability measures (AMs).² In this way, apportionment of ABC across subareas has limited utility for

¹ See Oct 2024 [GOA Rockfish Spatial Mgmt discussion paper](#)

² The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires FMPs to specify accountability measures, which are measures to prevent catch from exceeding ACLs and for responding to ACL overages if they occur. The Groundfish FMPs set forth the following accountability measures: (1) the North Pacific Observer Program; (2) the catch accounting system; (3) inseason management (described above as management of the fisheries to the specified TAC level); and (4) the harvest specifications process that will account for any TAC overages.

management. However, NMFS Inseason Management does manage fisheries to the (subarea) TAC level, either by closing a fishery to directed fishing, or by placing a species or species group on 'PSC status' if the TAC for a stock will be reached in any regulatory area.³ Beyond the level of specified TACs, NMFS would further restrict and/or shut down fisheries if approaching OFL at the spatial scale of the stock or stock complex (e.g., GOA-wide for many stocks under the GOA Groundfish FMP).

There are no statutory nor regulatory requirements for specification of subarea apportionments of ABC. However, subarea apportionments do have significant utility in the NPFMC harvest specifications process. First, subarea apportionments of ABC are recommended limits, based on the distribution of biomass according to the best scientific information available (BSIA). The apportionments serve as an extra layer of precautionary management voluntarily utilized by the NPFMC to inform TAC-setting. This is particularly true of stocks for which managers have limited information on stock structure or for those known to have some level of stock structure (i.e., spatial patterns in movement, demographics, and/or genetics).⁴ In these cases, spatially distributing catch can help to avoid localized depletion and acknowledges scientific uncertainty. Second, because the Council does need to recommend TACs at the regulatory-area level for many groundfish stocks, subarea apportionments as recommended by the SSC act as a starting point from which the AP/Council recommends TACs at or below. This process minimizes the potential for allocation disputes across regulatory areas during TAC recommendations.

The process, however, would be better informed by clear guidance. Two scenarios, described here, have unfolded during the PT/SSC recommendations on subarea apportionment.

Clear scientific recommendation for specific subarea apportionments: Applies if there is a particular biological concern for a stock or stock complex that necessitates a specified spatial distribution of catch. In these cases, the subarea apportionments function as biologically-based "limits" on catch for each regulatory area (from which the AP/Council recommends TAC at or below). The assessment authors/PT/SSC may also provide input on whether subareas can be combined, or remain separate, for biological reasons. For example, in September 2024, assessment authors noted consistent differences in abundance trajectories, age, and length compositions by area for the GOA rougheye/blackspotted rockfish stock complex. As a result, status quo management remains, with limits on catch at the subarea (regulatory area) level rather than limits at a larger spatial scale (combined regulatory areas). In this case, available scientific information supported a specified subarea apportionment outcome. In such cases, the subarea apportionments recommended by the SSC function as maximums for TAC setting.

The "grey area": On the other hand, there are cases where the purpose of subarea apportionments, beyond an additional layer of precaution, is less clear. Such cases include stocks for which 1) limits on catch at the subarea level are not required to prevent exceeding

³ Further described in the Oct 2024 [GOA Rockfish Spatial Mgmt discussion paper](#)

⁴ See Oct 2024 [GOA Rockfish Spatial Mgmt discussion paper](#)

ABC at the stock level (ACL), and 2) there is not “enough” evidence of stock structure nor other biological concern to warrant a specific recommendation on subarea management.

On occasion, subarea apportionments of ABC as recommended by the SSC have resulted in TACs that could be constraining for fisheries. Per Council guidance from December, **the SSC and PT should continue to recommend apportionments of ABC using the best biological and methodological information available, while socioeconomic information will continue to be incorporated into TAC decisions at the AP and Council.**

When this occurs for a stock in “the grey area”, as occurred for GOA shortraker rockfish in 2024, the SSC and Council have discussed how to weigh apportionments that are supported by limited scientific information, but which could result in likely fishery impacts. It is in these cases that the Council is seeking options to explore additional flexibilities in the current harvest specifications/apportionment process.

The following section includes three methods that have been discussed in some form as potential ways to address this issue. Inclusion in this list does not imply that any of these methods have been endorsed by members of the SSC, Council, nor Agency staff, but rather note some of the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

3. Potential methods for establishing subarea apportionments of ABC

Method A) Fewer stocks with subarea apportionments recommended by SSC

- The SSC currently recommends for certain stocks and stock complexes in both the BSAI and GOA only the true ABC, with no subarea apportionments, and the ABC is the threshold at which AMs are triggered. Under this method, the SSC would expand the number of stocks and stock complexes for which it only recommends ABC and no subarea apportionments. The SSC would therefore recommend ABC at the level of each stock, and the Council would then recommend TACs and area allocations thereof. Based on the Council’s current practice, this would only occur for stocks in the “grey area” where there is not a clear scientific recommendation coming from the SSC on subarea apportionment of ABC, or if the SSC has determined subarea apportionments for the stock are not biologically necessary.
- The SSC could still provide contextual information to the AP/Council regarding the degree to which spatial information is available (e.g., distribution of survey biomass). While not arising to the level of necessitating a constraining, biologically-based subarea apportionment, this information would still be of value to the Council in deciding how to set subarea TAC recommendations. Under this approach, the Council may wish to request other information to be provided during TAC discussions, for example from NMFS Inseason Management, about the degree to which fishery catch is distributed across subareas.

- This method is a departure from current practice in that the SSC would no longer be recommending subarea apportionments for several species for which it has done so in the past.
- Implementing this approach could simplify portions of the harvest specifications process and would be less complicated than the other two methods below.
- If the Council is interested in this approach, the Council would need to explain its reasoning for recommending this change in approach. This change could likely be piloted for certain stocks during the fall 2025 harvest specifications process. Staff would work with AKRO, AFSC, NOAA GC, Plan Teams, SSC and ADF&G as needed to ensure that the Council has the necessary information to recommend TACs.

Method B) Flexibility added to certain SSC-recommended subarea TACs

- As currently occurs, the SSC would provide the “true” ABC in the harvest specifications table, to show the threshold at which AMs are triggered.
- The SSC would maintain the ability to provide recommendations to the Council when BSIA indicates specified maximum subarea apportionments (stocks described above as those which necessitate a “clear scientific recommendation for specific subarea apportionments”). **TACs for each subarea would be recommended at a level less than or equal to the SSC recommendation, with no flexibility added (0%).**
- For stocks in “the grey area,” the SSC Report could note, as it typically does, where information for a scientific recommendation on spatial apportionment is lacking and/or not definitive in one way or another. This would essentially describe why these stocks are in the “grey area”.
 - The SSC could provide the original subarea apportionments (based on the method that the SSC recommends for estimating them). Then, an identified amount of flexibility could be applied to the original apportionments.
 - Amount of flexibility could be recommended by the SSC, expressed as a percentage of the subarea apportionments (e.g., 10%, 20% above the original apportionments or flexibility consistent with survey uncertainty).
 - The resulting quantity would function as a “maximum TAC” or a “maximum recommended subarea TAC” for each subarea, with the same purpose as subarea apportionments of ABC in the current process, and the same purpose as the subarea apportionments for species where flexibility = 0%.
 - **The subarea TACs recommended by the AP/Council could not sum to greater than the true ABC.**
- If the Council is interested in this approach, the Council would need to explain its reasoning for recommending this change in approach. This change could potentially be piloted for certain stocks during the fall 2025 harvest specifications process. Staff would

work with AKRO, AFSC, NOAA GC, Plan Teams, SSC and ADF&G as needed to ensure that the Council has the necessary information to recommend TACs.

Method C) Reserves

- Another idea is to have a reserve for some of the “choke” species, as is currently done for some species per the BSAI and GOA FMPs.⁵ Reserves may be reapportioned to the groundfish fisheries at any time and in any amount by the Regional Administrator.
 - Could be structured similarly to the non-specified reserves in the BSAI or to the reserves in the GOA as described in the FMP. However, these GOA reserves have not been used for years.
 - Reserves of any structure would be a more complex option and would likely require regulatory changes to the Central GOA Rockfish Program to consider cooperative quota impacts for primary and secondary rockfish species. This method would also require an FMP amendment.

4. Next Steps and Questions

- **New terminology:** The Council has previously spoken to the need for new terminology to replace “subarea apportionments of ABC”.
 - Staff ideas include: **Subarea Estimated Apportionments (SEA), Biologically Accountable Subarea Apportionments (BASA).**
 - Unless the Council recommends otherwise, staff will direct authors, PT, and SSC to use the new term starting this specifications cycle. Staff would ask AFSC to include revisions as an update to stock assessment guidelines for 2025.
 - As appropriate to the method the Council supports, staff would make revisions to the groundfish harvest specifications tables in the Plan Team report, Council outputs, and in the tables published in the Federal Register.
- The Council could note whether its intent is that TACs are not meant to go above subarea apportionments recommended by the SSC (unless they have been afforded this additional flexibility under Method B, in which case the intent would be that the TACs do not exceed the amounts that account for additional flexibility (a “maximum TAC”). This is current practice, but it is unwritten and not clear that this is a Council policy choice. The use of a new term to distinguish apportionments when they do not represent a “true ABC” should also help to clarify public perceptions about this practice.
- If the Council would like to move ahead with Method B, several questions remain that would require additional time to answer:

⁵ BSAI Groundfish Reserve: 15% of the TAC for each target species (except Al Pacific ocean perch, Atka mackerel, flathead sole, Pacific cod, rock sole, yellowfin sole, pollock and fixedgear sablefish), is set aside to form the reserve, used for correcting operational problems of the fleets, adjusting species TACs for conservation, or apportionments. The reserve is not designated by species or species groups. GOA Groundfish Reserve: 20% of the TAC for pollock, Pacific cod, flatfish, sculpins, octopus, sharks, and squid is set aside to form the reserve.

- Which stocks should have added flexibility and what is the reasoning for flexibility to be given to these stocks and not others?
- Upon what data/metrics are the percentages for flexibility based? Are they the same for all stocks that are afforded this flexibility?
 - Less flexibility (10% vs 30%) could make TAC recommendations easier at AP/Council, as it is most similar to current process (0% flexibility)
 - Limited flexibility could continue to result in situations where fisheries are constrained for stocks “in the grey area”. What is intended to happen if this occurs?
- Whichever method the Council endorses, staff will provide guidance to authors, PTs, SSC, and Council for the fall 2025 specifications process. The Council could also consider a phased-in approach, and pilot this method on a specified stock this fall to work out implementation details.

The harvest specifications process would benefit from more clarification on when the Spatial Management Policy is triggered.

- The policy established a process for determining spatial management (i.e., subarea allocations of annual harvest specifications (OFL, ABC, and/or TAC) of stocks and stock assemblages for groundfish, crabs, and scallops.
 - *As soon as preliminary scientific information indicates that further stock structure separation or other spatial management measures may be considered, the stock assessment authors, plan teams (groundfish, crab, scallop), and SSC should advise the Council of their findings and any associated conservation concerns and reasonable timeframes to address the concern.*
- Does the Council intend this first step of the policy to apply in instances when current spatial management measures are not changing, but the resulting subarea apportionments could constrain fisheries?
 - If yes, this could be interpreted as conflicting with December 2024 guidance that the SSC should only consider biological and methodological information in subarea apportionment recommendations.
 - If yes, what information other than public testimony should the SSC consider to determine whether fisheries could be restricted?
 - If no, then SMP has been unnecessarily triggered in the past, and subarea apportionments for stocks (such as GOA shortraker) would continue to be set by the SSC based on biological and methodological information only.

Ideally, the Council would be able to provide clarity on these questions and adopt a revised approach for the apportionment process prior to the September 2025 Groundfish Plan Team meetings to provide relevant guidance to the Plan Teams and SSC prior to the upcoming harvest specifications cycle. Depending on the recommended method, further communications between staff, Council, and SSC leadership may be needed over the summer.