

Draft SSC Report December 2025



SSC Administrative Discussion

- The SSC **requests** receiving a version of AFSC Director Foy's postponed AFSC presentation at an upcoming meeting
- The SSC **thanks** outgoing members Mike Downs and Pat Sullivan for their service on the SSC.

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- Recent furloughs require a different process for 2025
 - AFSC stock assessment authors were unable to complete 2025 groundfish operational assessments
 - Groundfish Plan Teams (GPTs) did not convene in November to develop any recommendations regarding harvest specifications
- The SSC **thanks** Council staff for preparing a *Groundfish Specifications Process Document* to help the SSC navigate this unprecedented situation and gathering information to facilitate SSC review in the absence of new assessments
- The SSC **thanks** Regional Office staff for clarifying the Council’s “annual two-year” specification process

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- The SSC developed a framework to evaluate whether individual stocks warrant consideration of additional conservation measures (e.g. new or larger reductions below maxABC), or whether preliminary specifications based on the 2024 SAFE reports remain the best available scientific advice.
- The starting point under this framework was the October preliminary OFL and ABC for 2026
- In response to public comment, the SSC discussed whether to set higher OFLs and ABCs above maximum permissible. However, the specification process does not allow the ABC to exceed the maximum permissible ABC specified in the assessment

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- In the absence of a quantitative framework for assessing and accounting for increased uncertainty associated with the lack of scheduled assessments, the SSC applied the established risk table framework for reviewing stocks with potential concerns
 - This approach is consistent with past practices for incorporating information that can not or has not yet been quantitatively integrated into an assessment.
 - This approach is also consistent with past practices for applying a “high bar” for reducing from the maxABC resulting from the most recently accepted model under the Council’s established Tier system and harvest control rules and peer review process

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- The SSC *highlights* that the lack of new assessments in 2025 clearly results in increased uncertainty and elevated risk for all stocks, but this risk is not easily quantifiable
- Stocks prioritized for review:
 - all stocks scheduled for operational assessments in 2025
 - three stocks that were scheduled for catch reports in 2025 and were highlighted as having added concern by the SSC in December 2024

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- The SSC used the following information sources in its review
 - 2024 SAFE reports or last available assessment
 - GOA and BSAI catch reports (catches relative to ABC/OFL)
 - 2025 survey information (cautiously interpreted)
 - Preliminary ESR & ESP information
- Use of survey and preliminary information is consistent with NS 2, which allows use of interim monitoring results but cautions that incomplete analyses should not be treated as substitutes for fully reviewed assessments

C4/C5 Process for Setting Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- The SSC developed a set of metrics related to
 - Assessment context (tier level, assessment frequency, risk table)
 - Stock status and exploitation (biomass trends relative to reference points, recruitment patterns, catch/ABC)
 - New survey and ESR/ESP information
 - Projections (catch assumptions, consistency with expected trends)
- The SSC summarized these metrics for all reviewed stocks ([see SSC report](#))
- The SSC assessed metrics qualitatively for evidence of elevated risk (justifying reduction from maxABC) or indications that the preliminary OFL and ABC are sufficiently precautionary
- Where multiple metrics suggested concerns, the SSC considered an a reduction from maxABC

C4/C5 Example of species-by-species review

EBS Pollock

- The SSC **notes** continuing concerns over the strength of the 2018 year class, which strongly impacts SSB projections
 - However, the 2024 assessment suggests that uncertainty in the SSB projection for 2026 is not elevated relative to 2024/2025
- The SSC **notes** the 30% decrease in the survey estimated biomass in the EBS in 2025. However,
 - increases in other indices suggest a possible redistribution of biomass (mid-water, NBS),
 - changes in all abundance indices are well within the range of survey variability
 - Drop is consistent with projected decrease & lower OFL/ABC₉
- The SSC **recommends** no reduction from preliminary specifications

C4/C5 Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- SSC **highlights** the final specification recommendations for the GOA deepwater flatfish complex (the only harvest projection brought forward this year) from October 2025
- For all remaining stocks,
 - SSC **did not identify** additional risk factors for any groundfish stock that would warrant a reduction from preliminary 2026 ABC
 - Therefore, the SSC **recommends** using the preliminary 2026 OFLs and ABCs for final specifications for all stocks
 - The SSC **recommends** no change in area apportionments from preliminary 2026 specs (the SSC will consider Biologically-informed Recommended Distributions (BRD) during the 2026 assessment cycle)

C4/C5 Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2026

- No stocks were experiencing overfishing in 2024.
- No stocks with reliable biomass estimates were overfished or approaching overfished as of December 2024, and
- Due to a lack of updated assessments, overfished status cannot be assessed for 2025

C4/C5 Groundfish Harvest Specifications for 2027

- The 2027 OFL, ABC and apportionment for GOA deepwater flatfish was recommended by the SSC in October (harvest projection)
- For all other stocks, the SSC discussed a number of options for setting the 2027 specifications
- With the lack of additional survey or environmental information available to inform potential changes to 2027 specifications at this time and no available stock projections for 2027, the SSC **recommends** that the 2027 OFLs, ABCs, and apportionments for all other GOA and BSAI stocks be a simple rollover of the 2026 specifications.
- For stocks whose 2027 projections are not updated during the 2026 assessment cycle, the SSC will reconsider whether reductions from maxABC are necessary

C4/C5 Recommendations for 2026 Assessment Cycle

- Dr. Foy (AFSC) shared potential plans for the 2026 assessment cycle, recognizing there are not existing resources to complete all potential assessments
 - Complete all annual assessments,
 - prioritize all biennial assessments from 2025 and 2026, and
 - shifting four-year stock assessments ahead by one-year, regardless of when scheduled
- The SSC **recommends** forming an internal agency workgroup consisting of SSC members, AFSC stock assessment authors, and Council staff coordinators to prioritize 2026 stock assessments
- The SSC **recommends** the workgroup develop a report on stock assessment priority for full SSC review/public comment at the February 2026 SSC mtg

C4/C5 Recommendations for 2026 Assessment Cycle

- The SSC **requests** that the workgroup consider the following stocks when prioritizing 2026 assessments: AI Pacific Cod, BSAI Yellowfin Sole, BSAI Other Rockfish, BSAI Skates, GOA RE/BS, GOA Shortraker, and GOA POP in addition to all annual stock assessments

C4/C5 Concluding General Comments for Future Assessment Cycles

- The SSC *recommends* consideration of timing adjustments to the existing groundfish review process with the aim of completing additional stocks within a single cycle (e.g. adjusting annual cycle to review some preliminary model runs in June, moving catch reports to October)
- The SSC *recommends* an agency/plan team research initiative to improve assessment projections for OFL and ABC setting
 - improve documentation of projection methods,
 - consider developing guidelines for good practice and options for standardization,
 - consider making OFL and ABC projections for more than two years
 - evaluate projection uncertainty

C6 BSAI Crab

Norton Sound Red King Crab - Harvest Specifications

- Second year for final specifications in December
- The SSC *recommends* Model 25.0a2 in agreement with the CPT and the assessment authors.
- Results from this model place NSRKC in Tier 4b
- SSC *recommends* a 30% ABC buffer in agreement with the CPT (same as last year).
- NSRKC was not subject to overfishing and is not overfished

C6 BSAI Crab

Norton Sound Red King Crab - Harvest Specifications

- The SSC *recommends*
 - further exploration of a model-based index of abundance standardization
 - aligning the footprint of the NBS bottom trawl survey abundance index and the length compositions

C6 BSAI Crab

Aleutian Islands Golden King Crab – Model Runs

- AIGKC is a Tier 3 stock with a single OFL and ABC
- Models are run separately for EAG and WAG and ADF&G manages the fishery on a two-area basis
- The SSC *recommends* Models 23.1c, 26.0, 26.0a, and 26.1 for setting specifications in May 2026, in agreement with the CPT.
- The SSC *recommends* the CPT explore methods to obtain an overall OFL and ABC while accounting for diverging population trends in the EAG and WAG (e.g. area-specific ABCs summed for an overall ABC).