



New England Fishery Management Council

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C. M. "Rip" Cunningham, Jr., *Chairman* | Paul J. Howard, *Executive Director*

**To:** Paul J. Howard, Executive Director  
**From:** Scientific and Statistical Committee  
**Date:** December 13, 2012

**Subject: Georges Bank Yellowtail Flounder OFL for FY2013-2015**

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) met on November 19, 2012 to address the following term of reference from the Council:

**Provide the Council with an overfishing limit for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder for their (the SSC's) ABC recommendation #3 (included below) by the December 20 Council meeting.**

The ABC recommendation referenced in the term of reference read as follows:

*3. The catch associated with unintentional bycatch may exceed 500 mt, but total removals should be less than the 2012 ABC (1,150 mt) to account for the recommended removal of a directed fishery. This ABC of 1,150 mt should be considered a backstop measure only. If there is no directed fishery and measures are taken to reduce bycatch as much as possible, then fishing mortality would be expected to be below  $F_{msy}$ . If this low  $F$  results in a catch above 500 mt, it would be de facto evidence that the uncertainty in this stock assessment is greater than described by the sensitivity analyses conducted in the TRAC. Thus, this ABC is appropriate only when management measures are implemented that have a high probability in resulting in low fishing mortality rates. This advice is based on the difficulty of setting quota levels based on highly uncertain stock assessment results.*

**Background Information**

The SSC considered the following the following documents in its deliberations:

1. DRAFT Memo from SSC to Paul Howard re Northeast Multispecies ABCs for FY 2012-2014
2. Sept. 24, 2012 Memo from SSC to Paul Howard re Northeast Multispecies ABCs for FY 2012-2014
3. November 16, 2012 Memo from Council Staff to SSC re GB Yellowtail Flounder Overfishing Limit
4. TRAC Status Report for GB Yellowtail Flounder 2012
5. Stock Assessment of Georges Bank Yellowtail Flounder for 2012, TRAC Ref Doc 2012/02

The SSC concluded that the OFL for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder is **unknown** at present. The SSC reached this conclusion because the ABC recommendation of 1,150mt is not based on the 2012 assessment and instead represents a status quo ABC in the face of an unknown OFL. The TRAC assessment produced a wide range of catch projections using defensible model configurations. These varied widely, lowering confidence in any individual outcome and resulting in the SSC being

unable to agree upon a single OFL value derived from one or a combination (e.g., average) of the approaches used. Furthermore, a retrospective pattern, which was present in the previous TRAC assessment, became stronger in the current assessment, resulting in less confidence among the SSC in the model outcomes.

Although the SSC was not comfortable with the assessment outcomes as a basis for providing catch advice, it should be noted that the range of information provided by the assessment did help the SSC understand the nature of uncertainties in the assessment. Moreover, the SSC noted that having had a Committee member serve as a liaison to the TRAC during the assessment process helped the TRAC provide information that helped the SSC better understand uncertainty. However, in the future it would be helpful for the TRAC to directly estimate OFL if possible, even if it is not needed in the Canadian management arena, to remove ambiguity surrounding its value in the U.S. management process.

Also, the SSC recognized that having its liaison to the TRAC chair the initial deliberation on the ABC for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder compromised his ability to convey insights on the TRAC process. Therefore, those roles should be separated in the future.

The SSC reiterates the advice that there should be no directed fishery and no increase in bycatch of Georges Bank yellowtail flounder in light of the high uncertainty and concern that the stock is at low levels relative to its potential productivity. The SSC advised that an ABC of 1,150 mt should only be considered a backstop measure and, “Thus, this ABC is appropriate **ONLY** (emphasis added) when management measures are implemented that have a high probability in resulting in low fishing mortality rates.”

Finally, the SSC expressed appreciation for the efforts of Groundfish PDT Chair Tom Nies and Groundfish PDT member Fiona Hogan for developing a series of potential OFL options on very short notice. Those options provided extremely valuable starting points for SSC deliberations and accelerated a difficult decision.

**The overfishing limit (OFL) for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder is unknown at present.**