



## New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492 | FAX 978 465 3116

Ernest F. Stockwell III, *Acting Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

**To:** Tom Nies, Executive Director  
**From:** Scientific and Statistical Committee  
**Date:** September 3, 2013

**Subject:** Overfishing levels (OFLs) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations for white hake.

The SSC met on August 20, 2013 to address the following terms of reference (TORs):

Review the assessment and work of the Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT) and provide an OFL and an ABC for each year for FY 2014-2016 that will prevent overfishing and is consistent with the default control rule.

The SSC considered the following documents in its deliberations:

1. Memo from PDT to SSC re ABCs (August 2013)
2. SARC 56 Assessment Summary for white hake (August 2013)
3. 56th Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Workshop (56th SAW) Assessment Report (use this link to download - <http://nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd1310/> )
4. SAW SARC 56 Panelist Reports (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/saw/saw56/index.html>)

A new benchmark assessment for white hake conducted earlier this year concluded that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The Groundfish PDT provided a range of ABC alternatives to the SSC, including one based on the default control rule, two that adopt constant catch strategies, and two based on sustainable harvest levels estimated from long-term projections. The four alternative approaches to the default control rule developed by the PDT were in response to two SSC concerns during deliberations on other groundfish stocks.

The first SSC concern is the poor performance often observed in projections when later evaluated against actual biomass trajectories estimated in later stock assessments. Often, the projections proved in hindsight to be optimistic, with the magnitude of the deviation generally increasing further from the terminal year of the assessment. This has led to riskier catch levels than intended. A constant catch strategy is one means of increasing the ABC buffer as the magnitude of uncertainty increases in later years of the projection, as was the approach adopted by the SSC earlier this year for Gulf of Maine cod.

The second SSC concern is that some stocks may have entered a low productivity regime (e.g., driven by changes in the marine ecosystem), and therefore that recruitments trends observed over the assessment time series might not be maintained going forward. Projections that assume lower recruitment scenarios can safeguard against this possibility. The SSC adopted an approach along these lines earlier this year for South New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder.

The SSC expressed gratitude for the PDT's consideration of these lessons learned from other stocks, and supports the PDT's initiative and forethought in offering a range of ABC alternatives in

response. However, the SSC chose to adopt the PDT's first ABC alternative based on the default control rule as the basis for advice. This results in ABCs of 4,642mt for 2014, 4,713mt for 2015, and 4,645mt for 2016. Associated OFLs are 6,082mt for 2014, 6,237 for 2015, and 6,314 for 2016.

This decision was made not because the concerns discussed above have diminished, but rather because, unlike GOM cod and SNE/MA winter flounder, that status of white hake is good. Therefore, the consequences of either concern are less in the near-term. The Council should not lose sight of these issues, however, and might choose to adopt catch strategies that are more risk-averse than the default control rule for white hake should its status change. The process to develop more explicit risk policies as a means for re-evaluating ABC control rules should inform those decisions.

#### Summary of recommendations

- 1. Acceptable biological catches (ABCs) for white hake are 4,642mt for 2014, 4,713mt for 2015, and 4,645mt for 2016.**
- 2. Overfishing limits (OFLs) are 6,082mt for 2014, 6,237 for 2015, and 6,314 for 2016.**