

fishery data is evaluated annually to assure that unbiased information is included in stock distribution models. The Council's recommendation for sablefish area apportionments also takes into account the prohibition on the use of trawl gear in the Southeast Outside (SEO) District of the Eastern GOA and makes available 5 percent of the combined Eastern GOA ABCs to trawl gear for use as incidental catch in other directed groundfish fisheries in the West Yakutat District.

The AP and Council recommended that the ABC for Pacific cod in the GOA be apportioned among regulatory areas based on the three most recent NMFS summer trawl surveys. As in previous years, the Plan Team, SSC, and Council recommended that total removals of Pacific cod from the GOA not exceed ABC recommendations. Accordingly, the Council recommended that the TACs be adjusted downward from the ABCs by amounts equal to the 2004 guideline harvest levels (GHL) established for Pacific cod by the State of Alaska (State) for the state managed fisheries in the GOA. The effect of the State's GHL on the Pacific cod TAC is discussed in greater detail below. For 2004, NMFS proposes to establish an A season directed fishing allowance (DFA) for the Pacific cod fisheries in the GOA based on the management area TACs less the recent average A season incidental catch of Pacific cod in each management area before June 10 (*see* § 679.20(d)(1)). The DFA and incidental catch before June 10 will be managed such that harvest in the A season will be no more than 60 percent of the annual TAC. Incidental catch taken after June 10 will continue to be taken from the B season TAC. NMFS believes that this action would better reflect the intention behind management measures analyzed in the 2001 Steller Sea Lion Protection Measures Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to achieve temporal dispersion of the Pacific cod fisheries. NMFS believes that this action would reduce the likelihood of harvest exceeding 60 percent of the annual TAC in the A season (January 1 through June 10). The Council will continue to explore and analyze management alternatives for the Pacific cod fisheries through its Steller Sea Lion Mitigation Committee and in the development of its Gulf Rationalization Plan.

For 2004, the Councils recommended and NMFS proposed the ABCs listed in Table 1. These amounts reflect harvest amounts that are less than the specified overfishing amounts. The sum of 2004 ABCs for all assessed groundfish is

409,690 mt, which is lower than the 2003 ABC total of 416,600 mt.

Specification and Apportionment of TAC Amounts

The Council adopted the AP's proposals for the 2004 GOA TAC amounts. The Council recommended TACs that are equal to ABCs for pollock, deep-water flatfish, rex sole, sablefish, shortraker and rougheye rockfish, northern rockfish, pelagic shelf rockfish, thornyhead rockfish, demersal shelf rockfish, and Atka mackerel. The Council recommended TACs that are less than the ABCs for Pacific cod, flathead sole, shallow-water flatfish, arrowtooth flounder, Pacific ocean perch, and other rockfish.

The apportionment of annual pollock TAC among the Western and Central Regulatory Areas of the GOA reflects the seasonal biomass distribution and is discussed in greater detail below. The annual pollock TAC in the Western and Central Regulatory Areas of the GOA is divided into four equal seasonal apportionments. Twenty-five percent of the annual TAC in the Western and Central Regulatory Areas of the GOA is apportioned to each of the A season (January 20 through February 25), the B season (March 10 through May 31), the C season (August 25 through September 15), and the D season (October 1 through November 1) in Statistical Areas 610, 620, and 630 of the GOA (*see* § 679.23(d)(2)(i) through (iv) and § 679.20(a)(5)(iii)(B)).

The 2004 Pacific cod TAC is affected by the state's developing fishery for Pacific cod in state waters in the Central and Western GOA, as well as in Prince William Sound (PWS). The SSC, AP, and Council recommended that the sum of all state and Federal water Pacific cod removals should not exceed the ABC. Accordingly, the Council recommended that Pacific cod TAC be reduced from ABC levels to account for State GHLs in each regulatory area of the GOA so that the TAC for (1) the Eastern GOA be lower than the ABC by 290 mt, (2) the Central GOA be lower than the ABC by 6,038 mt, and (3) the Western GOA be lower than the ABC by 4,662 mt. These amounts reflect the sum of State's 2004 GHLs in these areas, which are 10 percent, 23 percent, and 25 percent of the Eastern, Central, and Western GOA ABCs, respectively.

NMFS is also establishing seasonal apportionments of the annual Pacific cod TAC in the Western and Central Regulatory Areas at 60 percent of the annual TAC to the A season for hook-and-line, pot or jig gear from January 1 through June 10 and for trawl gear from January 20 through June 10; and at 40

percent of the annual TAC to the B season for hook-and-line, pot or jig gear from September 1 through December 31 and for trawl gear from September 1 through November 1 (*see* §§ 679.23(d)(3) and 679.20(a)(11)). These seasonal apportionments of the annual Pacific cod TAC are discussed in greater detail below.

The FMP specifies that the TAC for the "other species" category is calculated as 5 percent of the combined TAC amounts for target species. The 2004 GOA-wide "other species" TAC is 10,847 mt, which is 5 percent of the sum of the combined TAC amounts (216,950 mt) for the assessed target species. The sum of the TACs for all GOA groundfish is 227,797 mt, which is within the OY range specified by the FMP. The sum of the 2004 TACs is lower than the 2003 TAC sum of 236,440 mt. NMFS finds that the Council's recommendations for proposed OFL, ABC, and TAC amounts are consistent with the biological condition of groundfish stocks as adjusted for other biological and socioeconomic considerations, including maintaining the total TAC within the required OY range of 116,000 to 800,000 mt. The proposed 2004 ABCs, TACs, and OFLs are shown in Table 1.

In October 2003, the Council took final action on Amendment 63 to the GOA FMP. This action, if approved, would remove skates from the "other species" assemblage in the GOA and establish OFL and ABC levels for skates on an annual basis. The EA/RIR/IRFA for Amendment 63 is included in the EA/IRFA for the annual specifications and is available from NMFS (*see* ADDRESSES). The EA for Amendment 63 examines a range of alternatives for the management of skates in the GOA. The alternatives range from a single gulfwide OFL, ABC, and TAC for all skate species in the GOA to multiple OFLs, ABCs, and TACs by management area (the Western, Central, and Eastern GOA) and by skate species targeted in directed fisheries (big skate, longnose skate, and all other skate species). At its October meeting, the Council did not recommend specific amounts for the 2004 OFL, ABC, and TAC levels for skates in the GOA pending an updated skate assessment using the most recent data collected in 2003. The updated skate assessment will be included in the final 2003 SAFE report, which will not be available for the Council's consideration until December 2003. At that time, the Council will make final recommendations for skate OFL, ABC, and TAC amounts in the GOA for the 2004 fishing year. These will be