



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
GREATER ATLANTIC REGIONAL FISHERIES OFFICE
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930-2276

MAR 05 2020

Dr. John F. Quinn, Chairman
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street, Mill 2
Newburyport, MA 01950

Dear John:

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center prepared a prepublication report for the 2019 stock assessment updates for 14 groundfish stocks in January 2020. Georges Bank yellowtail was assessed separately in 2019 by the Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee (TRAC). Based on the results of these assessments, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) updated the stock status for a number of stocks. The enclosed table summarizes the current stock status for all 20 Northeast multispecies stocks.

White hake is now considered overfished. Based on the 2019 assessment, the spawning stock biomass dropped to 49.9 percent of the biomass target (B_{MSY}). While this is only 23 mt below the threshold for overfished, this stock was in a rebuilding plan that ended in 2014, and the stock has not yet rebuilt. The Council must, therefore, implement a new rebuilding plan for this stock within 2 years of this notification, consistent with section 304(e)(3) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. We intend to work with the Council through the Plan Development Team to develop this rebuilding plan.

Additionally, the following stock statuses also changed as a result of the 2019 stock assessments.

- American plaice was in a rebuilding plan. The spawning stock biomass is now over the biomass target; therefore, the stock is rebuilt.
- Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder is no longer subject to overfishing, but is still overfished. This stock is in a rebuilding plan that was implemented in 2019 by Framework 58, with a target end date of 2029.
- Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine yellowtail flounder is no longer overfished or subject to overfishing. The stock is not yet rebuilt and is in a rebuilding plan implemented in 2004 by Amendment 13, with a target end date of 2023.
- Georges Bank winter flounder was previously approaching an overfished condition and is now overfished. It is not subject to overfishing. The stock is in a rebuilding plan that was revised in 2019 by Framework 58, with a target end date of 2029.

Stock status is unchanged, but continues to be uncertain, for Georges Bank cod, witch flounder, Atlantic halibut, and Georges Bank yellowtail flounder. The 2019 assessments for Georges



Bank cod, witch flounder, and Atlantic halibut were conducted as level 1 management track assessments, which means they were updated with new data and did not go through the Scientific and Statistical Committee's peer review panel. Instead, they were delivered directly to the Council. The 2014 TRAC assessment for Georges Bank yellowtail, the 2015 assessments for Georges Bank cod and Atlantic halibut, and the 2016 assessment for witch flounder were not accepted as a basis for management; since then, alternative approaches have been used to set catch advice for these stocks. The most recent assessments indicate these stocks are still in poor condition.

The assessments state that the Georges Bank cod and witch flounder biological reference points cannot be quantitatively estimated. The assessments recommended both stocks be considered overfished due to poor stock condition and that the overfishing status be considered unknown. In the case of witch flounder, the overfishing status was changed to unknown in 2016. Georges Bank cod retains its overfishing status, consistent with the determination from the 2013 Georges Bank cod benchmark assessment.

Atlantic halibut stock status cannot be determined analytically due to lack of biological reference points; therefore, the assessment recommended an unknown stock status. Similar to Georges Bank cod, the stock status for Atlantic halibut remains overfished, with overfishing not occurring, consistent with the 2012 assessment update for this stock.

Georges Bank yellowtail flounder was assessed separately, as part of the TRAC assessments. Based on TRAC status reports from 2019 and other years, the stock status of Georges Bank yellowtail flounder cannot be evaluated quantitatively or qualitatively. The stock assessment no longer supports the evaluation of the status determination criteria for the stock; therefore, consistent with the approach described above for Georges Bank cod and Atlantic halibut, the stock status remains overfished, with overfishing occurring, based on the last accepted assessment from 2013.

We use a national approach for making status determinations that are reported in the annual Report to Congress on the Status of U.S. Fisheries. Under this approach, where a known determination had previously been provided and a new assessment is rejected or the results are inconclusive, the existing stock status will not change. The status determination will remain until an assessment can provide new reference points and/or numerical estimates of existing status determination criteria or the Council implements alternative status determination criteria.

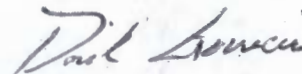
Next steps

Consistent with section 304(e)(7) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, we are evaluating whether adequate rebuilding progress is being made by other stocks currently in a rebuilding plan, based on the results of the 2017 and 2019 assessment updates. We will notify the Council of our determination as soon as possible, so that the Council can consider measures necessary for addressing all groundfish stock issues simultaneously.

As you are aware, we are using qualitative metrics to attempt to address stock status for several stocks, relying on previously accepted assessments and using empirical approaches to derive catch advice. We remain concerned that a lack of quantitative metrics is hampering our ability both to develop effective management measures and to evaluate the success of those measures. As you know, NMFS has been working to create national guidance to help address these issues. I suggest that the Executive Committee discuss this at its next meeting to plan next steps within the Council's 2020 priorities. We will continue to provide advice and collaborate on the development and implementation of rebuilding programs through our participation on the Groundfish Plan Development Team, the Groundfish Committee, and the Council.

If you have any questions about this guidance, or the development of rebuilding plans for these stocks, please contact Sarah Bland, Assistant Regional Administrator for Fisheries for the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, at (978) 281-9257.

Sincerely,



for

Michael Pentony
Regional Administrator

cc: Tom Nies, Executive Director, New England Fisheries Management Council
Dr. Jon Hare, Director, Northeast Fisheries Science Center
Jennifer M. Wallace, Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries

Enclosure

Enclosure

Summary of changes to stock status based on 2019 Groundfish Operational Assessments

Stock	Official Stock Status Based on Previous Assessment		Official Stock Status Based on 2019 Assessment		Rebuilding Program Start Date	Planned Rebuilding End Date
	Overfishing?	Overfished?	Overfishing?	Overfished?		
Atlantic Cod						
GB*	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5/1/2004	2026
GOM	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5/1/2004	2024
Haddock						
GB	No	No	No	No	5/1/2004	Rebuilt (2010)
GOM	No	No	No	No	5/1/2004	Rebuilt (2011)
Yellowtail Flounder						
GB*†	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	11/22/2006	2032
SNE/MA	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	5/1/2004	2029
CC/GOM	Yes	Yes	No	No	5/1/2004	2023
American Plaice	No	No	No	No	5/1/2004	Rebuilt (2019)
Witch Flounder	Unknown	Yes	Unknown	Yes	5/1/2010	2043
Winter Flounder						
GB	No	Approaching	No	Yes	5/1/2010	2029
GOM	No	Unknown	Not assessed in 2019		N/A	N/A
SNE/MA	No	Yes	Not assessed in 2019		5/1/2004	2023
Acadian Redfish	No	No	Not assessed in 2019		5/1/2004	Rebuilt (2012)
White Hake	No	No	No	Yes	5/1/2004	2014
Pollock	No	No	No	No	5/1/2010	Rebuilt (2009)
Windowpane Flounder						
Northern	No	Yes	No	Yes	5/1/2010	2029
Southern	No	No	No	No	5/1/2004	Rebuilt (2012)
Ocean Pout	No	Yes	Not assessed in 2019		5/1/2004	2029
Atlantic Halibut*	No	Yes	No	Yes	5/1/2004	2055
Atlantic Wolffish	No	Yes	Not assessed in 2019		5/1/2010	In rebuilding, data poor; end date not defined

GB = Georges Bank; GOM = Gulf of Maine; CC = Cape Cod

Bold reflects a change from previous status.

* Georges Bank cod, GB yellowtail flounder, and Atlantic halibut official statuses are based on the results of earlier assessments.

† GB yellowtail flounder was assessed separately by the Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee.