



New England Fishery Management Council

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Council Approves Witch Flounder Specifications; Recommends 2017 Gulf of Maine Cod and Haddock Recreational Measures

The New England Fishery Management Council has approved new witch flounder specifications for the 2017-2019 groundfish fishing years. Allocations will be based on an acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 878 metric tons (mt). When adjusted for management uncertainty, the ABC results in an annual catch limit (ACL) of 839 mt. This value is almost double the 441 mt ACL currently in place for the 2016 fishing year, which ends April 30, 2017.

The specifications are part of Framework Adjustment 56 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan. The Council approved other framework measures in November (see list next page) but held off on witch flounder specifications pending the completion of a new benchmark stock assessment.

During its Jan. 24-26 meeting in Portsmouth, NH, the Council: (1) received a briefing on the new assessment; (2) made several decisions related to the assessment itself and witch flounder specifications; (3) approved revised 2017-2019 annual catch limits; and (4) voted to submit Framework 56 to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for approval. The target implementation date is May 1, the start of the 2017 fishing year.

The assessment was conducted as part of the 62nd Stock Assessment Workshop (SAW)/Stock Assessment Review Committee (SARC), which wrapped up in December. The SARC and independent peer reviewers

Revised Witch Flounder Specifications (Based on 878 mt ABC and PDT's sub-component analysis)

Fishing Years	U.S. ABC	Annual Catch Limit (ACL) Values in Metric Tons						
		State Waters	Other sub-components	Groundfish	Commercial Groundfish	Sectors	Non-Sector Groundfish	Total
2017-2019	878	35	70	735	735	719	16	839

Notes: The overfishing limit (OFL) for witch flounder is unknown. The "other sub-components" category accounts for incidental catch of witch flounder in the scallop, fluke, squid, and other fisheries. Witch flounder catch in the small-mesh, midwater trawl, and recreational fisheries is minimal. Canadian catch is less than one metric ton.



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concluded that neither the overfished nor overfishing status of the stock could be determined, so both are now considered “unknown.” The model used to conduct the assessment was rejected because it exhibited a problematic retrospective pattern, meaning it tended to underestimate fishing mortality and overestimate biomass. The SARC instead used an “empirical approach” and based its conclusions on: (1) a three-year/six-survey moving average of exploitable biomass estimates; and (2) the mean exploitation rate observed from 2007-2015, which was 0.060.

The Council supported using this empirical approach but noted that the 2018 and 2019 ABCs are likely to change based on the 2017 operational assessment for witch flounder. The Council requested that the operational assessment consider changes to the exploitation rate used under the empirical approach.

Following the witch flounder discussion, the Council voted to submit Framework 56 to NMFS for review. The framework also contains:

- A Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank northern windowpane flounder sub-annual catch limit (sub-ACL) for the scallop fishery;
- A temporary, two-year modification to the existing accountability measure policy for the scallop fishery so that accountability measures *only* apply when the scallop fishery exceeds its sub-ACL for George Bank yellowtail flounder or northern windowpane flounder *and* the overall ACL for that stock is also exceeded;
- An increase in the herring midwater trawl fishery’s Georges Bank haddock sub-ACL from 1% to 1.5%; and
- Proposed 2017 U.S./Canada quotas for shared stocks on Georges Bank.

The 2013 year class of witch flounder, also known as gray sole, was found in all surveys this year, a positive signal for the future.



Witch flounder as seen during the 2016 HabCam scallop survey. – NEFSC photo

Proposed Fishing Year 2017 U.S./Canada TACs in Metric Tons (mt)

	Eastern GB Cod	Eastern GB Haddock	GB Yellowtail Flounder
Total Shared TAC	730	50,000	300
U.S. TAC	146	29,500	207
Canada TAC	584	20,500	93



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Recreational Measures: In other groundfish related actions, the Council also asked NMFS to consider implementing the following Gulf of Maine cod and haddock recreational fishing measures for the 2017 fishing year. NMFS has the final say on this action, so the Council's vote is only a recommendation.

- **Gulf of Maine cod** – zero possession;
- **Gulf of Maine haddock** – a 12-fish per-person bag limit, a 17" minimum size, and two closed seasons:
 - Sept. 17, 2017-Oct. 31, 2017 closed
 - March 1, 2018-April 14, 2018 closed

Recreational fishermen have exceeded their 2016 sub-ACLs for both stocks, and three months remain in the fishing year. Preliminary figures indicate that 192% of the Gulf of Maine cod sub-ACL has been harvested and 115% of the recreational fishery's Gulf of Maine haddock sub-ACL has been taken.

Therefore, based on the best scientific advice available, the Council agreed to recommend zero cod possession for 2017 on all recreational trips by both private and for-hire vessels.

The Council then focused on trying to maximize recreational fishing opportunities on haddock while avoiding impacts on cod.

Southern Windowpane: The Council voted to ask NMFS to consider all possible remediation methods available to put in place a one-year exemption to the pending accountability measures for southern windowpane flounder for fishing year 2017.

Priorities: The Council reviewed its 2017 groundfish priorities, which include, among many other actions: setting ABCs and ACLs for all stocks; supporting operational assessments for all stocks; reviewing groundfish catch in "other" fisheries; revising Atlantic halibut measures; improving the recreational management process for Gulf of Maine cod and haddock; and launching a groundfish monitoring amendment.



A large haddock caught on a recreational charter boat trip.
– Dave Waldrip photo

Atlantic halibut: The Council agreed to send a letter to the Coast Guard, NOAA enforcement officials, and state agencies engaged in Joint Law Enforcement Agreements requesting that enforcement of the three-nautical-mile state waters limit be a high priority during the Maine halibut season, which runs May 1-June 30.

Groundfish documents used during this meeting are available at:
<http://www.nefmc.org/library/groundfish-january-2017>.
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