



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
Northeast Fisheries Science Center  
166 Water Street  
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June 30, 2015

Dear NRCC Partners:

At our May 2015 meeting, we discussed the upcoming suite of Operational Assessments for 20 New England groundfish stocks. The NRCC recognized the value in this operational approach, in that it provides information useful to making fishery management decisions for a larger number of stocks and more rapidly and frequently. However, the NRCC also understood that trade-offs are inherent with this approach.

To provide more rapid assessments, these Operational Assessments are conducted using the existing, peer-reviewed assessment model for each stock, updated with new data collected since the last assessment. There is little to no scope for revising the underlying assessment model, as any such changes would require significant analytical work and would also require expanded peer review and discussion. This additional analytical work and peer review are typical of Benchmark Assessments, which are conducted for stocks that require incorporation of significant new information or a different analytical approach.

The NRCC supported completion of the upcoming 20 Operational Assessments and also recognized the importance of setting clear constraints on modifications to the existing models and data streams for each Operational Assessment. These constraints are essential to avoid the possibility for greatly increasing the complexity of each assessment, with resultant delays and reduction in our capacity to complete such a large number of assessments. Communication of these constraints is necessary to discourage external scientists or stakeholders from investing in developing new approaches or data streams that could not be accommodated within the Operational Assessment framework.


In the interest of setting and communicating these constraints, the NRCC reviewed a comprehensive list of types of modifications and agreed whether each type of modification could be accommodated within an Operational Assessment or if the modification could only be considered within a Benchmark Assessment. Since efficiency is essential to the success of the Operational Assessment concept, the majority of modifications could not be accommodated. However, in addition to incorporating new data from existing data streams to update current parameters in the existing assessment models, the NRCC felt that Operational Assessments could make minor adjustments to account for (a) updated information on growth and maturation of fish; (b) changes in values of reference points, but not the underlying basis for the reference points; and (c) introduction or modification of retrospective adjustments for biomass or fishing mortality. Modifications to the discard mortality data stream would be beyond the scope of an Operational Assessment in most cases, but, given recent changes to discard mortality data used for management of the cod recreational fishery, the NRCC agreed that modifications to discard mortality data streams could be considered for the Operational Assessment for Gulf of Maine cod and for other stocks with similar significant changes to discard mortality data.

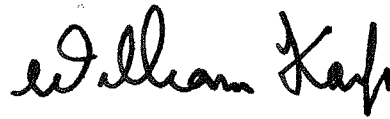


Other modifications to existing assessment models or data streams would require more extensive analysis consistent with Benchmark Assessments. Modifications of this sort include: (a) changes to the abundance and trend data streams (e.g., changes to surveys, survey indices, LPUE); (b) changes to measures of scale (e.g., new or revised measures of catchability, new catch estimate data streams); (c) changes to the bases for reference points (e.g., updated priors on steepness, incorporation of regime changes); (d) changes in model configuration (e.g., changes in selectivity function, differential weighting of likelihood components, down-weighting of information such as specific year classes, splitting surveys and modeling data separately, new models); and (e) changes in biological information (e.g., changes in natural mortality). None of the modifications in items (a) to (e) will be considered in the Operational Assessments of groundfish in September 2015.

We provide this summary of our discussion for your review and feedback, and seek your concurrence in communicating these guidelines to the public, on behalf of the NRCC.



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