

Prioritizing Fish Stock Assessments

- **HISTORY:** A system to prioritize fish stock assessments was requested by OMB. Comparable requests have appeared in recently proposed legislation. NOAA Fisheries has been working on a potential prioritization system and a prototype was presented to the CCC in May 2012.
 - Each Council – Center pair has a process, with varying degrees of formality; by which assessments are prioritized today. We are not seeking to replace these processes.
- **GOAL:** The goal of the prioritization is to help each region achieve a good portfolio of baseline monitoring for all managed stocks, and full assessments for priority stocks. The types of data collected for these assessments and the frequency with which they should be re-assessed will be guided by the prioritization process.
- **SUPPORT:** NOAA Fisheries will support the prioritization system by providing a database of relevant information for each stock: commercial fishery value, recreational fishery importance, ecosystem importance, stock status relative to target and limit levels, biological factors that affect stock fluctuations, history of assessments, etc.
- **TARGET ASSESSMENT LEVEL:** An important first step is a comprehensive evaluation of the level of assessment needed for each stock. Some lightly fished stocks may need no assessment beyond monitoring of catch and some simple indicator of stock status. Other stocks can be sufficiently well assessed using moderate data collection programs. More important stocks will warrant focused fishery-independent surveys and collection of data on fish ages.
- **TARGET ASSESSMENT FREQUENCY:** A stock's target assessment frequency should depend on its intrinsic variability over time as well as its importance to the fishery and ecosystem. High natural fluctuations create a greater need for frequent updates in annual catch limits. Stocks with high fishery and/or ecosystem importance need more frequent assessment updates to quickly provide access to increases in abundance while assuring prevention of overfishing. Target update periods are expected to range from 1 year to about 6-10 years.
- **PRIORITIZATION:** The priority for updating an assessment depends principally upon the degree to which it is due or overdue relative to its target frequency. For stocks that are equally due or overdue according to their target frequency, priority will be given to stocks that are on rebuilding plans or are at risk of overfishing or depletion. Among stocks that are still tied, priority would go to stocks that have new information indicating a drift from the previous forecast and to stocks with higher fishery importance.
- **REGIONAL PROCESS:** It is recommended that each region conduct management strategy evaluations on a few representative stocks in order to understand the implications of stock variability, assessment imprecision, assessment frequency, and time lags between assessment and management implementation.
- **NEXT STEPS:**
 - Distribute draft to Councils for comment – fall 2013;
 - Create database of needed information – winter 2014;
 - Each region begins work on comprehensive baseline evaluation – begin spring 2014;
 - Test and tweak system after database is available – summer 2014;
 - Begin implementation – fall 2014.