



Groundfish Enterprise Allocation Council

1362 Revell Drive, Manotick, ON, Canada, K4M 1K8

Tel: 902-526-4582

Fax: 613-692-8250

E-mail: vascotto@vrsi.ca

2017 GEAC Northern Cod Stewardship Proposal:

Objectives During the Rebuilding Phase:

We must accept that the stock remains in a period of rebuilding. As a general set of objectives for the stock, we believe the following key principles must be consistent with any stewardship fishery:

- The rebuilding objective is for the spawning stock biomass (SSB) to **attain** and be **maintained** in the Healthy Zone (>80% of Bmsy).
- An interim objective is to reach Blim on a trajectory that productivity factors will dictate (recruitment, growth, natural mortality), while enabling limited fishing activity at a very **conservative** harvest rate during the rebuilding period.
- Most of the growth in biomass should be **re-invested** towards further re-building of the SSB, at least until Blim is reached.
- Until Blim is achieved, preventable declines in SSB will be **avoided** with high probability.
- Until Blim is achieved, TAC increases will **follow significant and verifiable growth** in the SSB; the approach is to avoid a situation where the TAC needs to be reduced.

The status of the stock must also be considered in light of the objectives presented above. It is clear that the following considerations on stock status must be made:

- The SSB was at 1/3 of Blim at the time of the 2016 assessment and was projected to double in the next three years.
- Stock growth at the end of 2016, as indicated from the RV survey, was less than 1/3 of the projected growth. Concurrently, catches from the Inshore Stewardship/Recreational fisheries more than doubled.
- Projections suggest that some level of decline in SSB may commence as early as 2019.
- Projections of stock growth vs harvest are uncertain and could be over-optimistic because of other ecosystem processes and uncertainty in total removals from the stock.
- The RV Survey suggests that stock recovery is asymmetrical with greatest growth in 3K and poorest growth in 3L.

Context of the Stewardship Fishery:

The original goal of the Stewardship Fishery for Northern Cod was to “...bring the perspectives of scientists and harvesters closer together”. It has since morphed into a de-facto commercial fishery with some groups calling for an increased catch.

In order for the Newfoundland Cod fishery to achieve full-value, the value of each pound of fish landed must be maximized and it must be provided to markets willing to pay a premium price for a premium

product. There are several key principles that must be achieved, and they must be consistent with the rebuilding objectives for the stock defined above:

- Improving the quality of fish landed
- Achieving high-quality products out of the raw material landed
- Signalling to the world that Newfoundland is a premium year-round cod producer
- Gaining product acceptance in lucrative, non-commodity based markets

It is with these factors in mind that we propose the following approach to the Stewardship fishery in 2017.

General Principles:

- **Removals to be kept as low as possible** – this must include accounting for and limiting removals by the recreational fishery. We note that there are some concerning signals which may limit or reverse expected growth in the stock, requiring a conservative approach to be employed.
- **Component harvest be proportionate to the health of each stock area** – We note that the asymmetrical recovery may lead to variable exploitation rates which cannot be ignored.
- **Impacts on cod stocks from other areas migrating into the 2J3KL management area be minimized** – Any stewardship fishery must not be conducted to the detriment of neighbouring stock areas.
- **Harvesting practices and strategy be conducted in a fashion consistent with maximizing landed quality** – This is key to achieving success for the future Northern Cod Fishery.

Offshore:

The offshore historically landed 40% of the catch from the Northern Cod Fishery. Much of this catch was landed during the November-April period when tissue quality was at its highest and provided valuable shore-based processing employment when supplies were limited. We seek to achieve these benefits while signalling to the world that Newfoundland is a Premium year-round supplier of high-end cod products. This proposed fishery will help to increase the value and market position of catch from all sectors.

To achieve this balance, we propose the following:

- 500 mt stewardship allocation to the >100' sector
- Harvest undertaken during the winter period
- Landings will be distributed among the three offshore stock areas
- Biological samples will be taken and bycatch profiles generated. This will include collection of samples for the ASP/GEAC FIP project.
- Report outlining effort, catch locations, bycatch profile and biological information will be provided to DFO within four months of the conclusion of the fishery.
- Catch will be processed at Icewater Seafoods plant in Arnold's Cove. This will serve two important purposes:
 - Provide employment when raw material volumes are limited
 - Help to secure premium year-round market access for Northern Cod to the benefit of all sectors.

Inshore:

GEAC recognizes the current pressures being applied to substantially increase the catches from the inshore stewardship fishery. The health of stock must also be strongly considered. We also understand that if the plan implemented in 2016 were to be enacted at an earlier point in the season (e.g. May), total removals from the fishery could easily have doubled with unforeseen results.

We recognize that the stock components are experiencing asymmetrical recovery. The 2016 RV survey biomass showed the biomass concentrated in 3K, with 3L showing consistently low recovery. This would suggest that some components may be able to sustain higher gross removals than others. We also acknowledge the significant research done by DFO indicating that the inshore catches in southeastern 3L do contain substantial catches of 3Ps cod – a stock that is experiencing serious problems, with significant reductions in the TAC.

We are also concerned at the risk of large spring and summer landings of low-quality cod when they are in a state of recovery after spawning and with the soft flesh inherent with heavy feeding activity during this period of warming water and air temperatures. The flesh of this fish is challenging to market in premium export fillet markets, generating a risk of a poor reputation being derived for NL caught cod. Large catches of low-quality cod could be perceived as a ‘waste’ of fish that could otherwise contribute to better markets and be re-invested in future Northern Cod stock production.

It is with this in mind that we propose the following management considerations for 2017, consistent with the General Principles provided above:

- Given uncertainty and patterns observed in the survey index, total removals should be below and otherwise not exceed the 2016 level.
- The start date should not be before August 13th (similar to 2016) to enable the potential for fishers to land high quality cod.
- Strict controls should be applied in 3L east/south of St. John’s to mitigate catch of the beleaguered 3Ps stock. This could include a cap on removals and temporal closures during periods when 3Ps cod are known to be susceptible to the Stewardship fishery in this area.
- Area-based catch limits should be introduced by DFO to better reflect the survey biomass in each of 2J, 3K and 3L.
- Fleet report be provided within four months of the conclusion of the fishery that includes landings locations, bycatch profiles and biological details of cod sampled through the at-sea observer program.