Pacific Fishery Management Council Approves Pacific Sardine Fishing Levels for 2020

April 4, 2020. “One thing everyone agrees on is the need to improve the sardine stock assessment,” stated Marc Gorelnik, vice chair of the Pacific Fishery Management Council. Conducting the meeting via webinar due to COVID-19 concerns, the Council approved management measures for Pacific sardines for the season July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021, after considering reports from its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), CPS Management Team and Advisory Subpanel and the public. Environmental groups pleaded for more precaution and much lower harvest limits, arguing that the stock assessment indicates that the stock is at low and declining levels, and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) declared the northern sardine subpopulation as ‘overfished’ in 2019, so the Council must develop a rebuilding plan. However, the Council supported the recommendations of the SSC, management team and advisory subpanel, in light of the fact that the biomass estimate remained essentially the same as last year. So, they approved an Annual Catch Target of 4,000 metric tons for all uses, as in 2019.

“We greatly appreciate the expressions of concern from the management team and advisory subpanel, and the Council’s action based on those concerns.” said Diane Pleschner-Steele, Executive Director of the California Wetfish Producers Association (CWPA). “We thank the Council for hearing us,” she continued, adding, “This conflict is between what fishermen say is out there, based on what they see, and what biologists say, based on insufficient science.” Both fishermen and independent scientific surveys have documented sardine recruitment and growing abundance since 2015. The problem is that NOAA’s sardine acoustic trawl surveys have not seen it, and those surveys have largely driven the stock assessments in recent years.

The 2020 stock assessment reported no evidence of recruitment, but the model used to predict biomass has not updated the age data from the fishery since 2015, because the directed fishery has been closed since that time. To resolve this Catch-22, CWPA submitted an application for an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The Council unanimously supported this effort, along with the 2020 management measures.
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If approved by NMFS, this EFP will allow CWPA to coordinate a closely-controlled directed fishing effort to capture sardine schools throughout the year. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has agreed to sample and age all the landings and provide that data for the next stock assessment.

Another thorny problem that California fishermen are facing is the current scientific assumption that all sardines found in water temperatures above about 62 degrees F are deemed to be ‘southern’ stock sardines that have migrated up from Mexico. Thus, these fish are subtracted from the ‘northern’ sardine stock assessment. This assumption and current management policy have frustrated fishermen, especially in Southern California, because all catches are deducted from the ‘northern’ sardine harvest limit.

This issue, and many more, arose during the Council’s sardine discussion. Environmental groups are now asking the Council to revise the entire management structure to provide more forage for other species. These groups discount the mounting evidence of recruitment and abundance, and ignore the fact that the fishery for the entire CPS complex, including sardine, amounts to less than two percent of the key forage pool, which also includes other forage species. Moreover, scientists widely acknowledge that environmental forcing drives the abundance of sardines and other CPS; these stocks rise and fall based on Mother Nature’s whims, with negligible impact from fishing.

This discussion will likely continue at future Council meetings, as environmental groups campaign to further reduce fishery catches for sardines and other CPS. Meanwhile, CWPA and California sardine fishermen, as well as sardine fishermen in the Pacific Northwest, are committed to conduct the research necessary to improve the sardine stock assessment. If the ‘northern’ sardine stock assessment accurately reflected the abundance of sardines reported by fishermen virtually yearlong (in water temperatures below 62 degrees F), northern sardines would not be considered ‘overfished.’

California fishermen and processors are grateful that the Council considered the issues and uncertainties raised and combined scientific underpinning with practicality and common sense. Balance is a key mandate of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The Council and NMFS are required to consider the needs of fishing communities, not just biology, in developing rebuilding plans. The future of California’s historic wetfish industry hangs in the balance.

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