

Defining Characteristics and Long-Term Interests of the Pacific Sardine Fishery

Plenary Discussion Themes

- **The fishery could be improved by addressing issues of allocation in low-abundance years.**
Many harvesters and processors believe that the existing sardine fishery allocation mechanism can be improved, especially to improve flexibility in low-biomass years. A significant problem relates to the derby-like conditions resulting from reduced seasonal allocations. However, many participants in the sardine fishery feel that it is not a true derby fishery, even in low-biomass years, because they have been able to coordinate harvests to fill diverse market orders and manage product flows to avoid market gluts. They questioned what the fishery will gain with catch shares management. Most participants expressed that reaching industry-wide agreement on specific modifications to the allocation system (with different fishermen, processors, and buyers having different market needs) may be a challenge, especially if the allocation remains coast-wide.
- **The current seasonal allocations constrain choices about when to fish; fishermen are not able to fish at optimal times in their area.**
The fishery management structure and timing of the seasonal allocations conflict with market demands of size and quality of fish, especially during low quota years. The three groups agreed that in each region fishermen are “not able to fish for the right fish at the right time.” Though the fishery is conservatively managed and the stock is healthy (i.e., no overfishing, not overfished), the current allocation structure does not provide enough harvest flexibility to meet buyer demands. For example, October through December is the best time to fish in California, but shortened seasons prevent fishing during these months when sardines are typically larger, more abundant, and more valuable. Fishing schedules are important to consider, as fishing opportunities vary by region and the fat content of the fish changes throughout the year—an important factor in consumer and industry market demand. Furthermore, opportunity costs also result from needing to redirect effort away from a more lucrative catch (e.g., squid in California or whiting and salmon in the Pacific Northwest) in favor of securing sardine catch.
- **The structure of state and federal permits has inconsistencies and competing incentives.**
Participants perceive inequities in the permit programs between state limited entry and federal limited entry permit requirements. Many feel that the incongruence between state and federal permits (in California, Oregon, and Washington) causes unnecessary confusion related to differences in harvesting capacity constraints.
- **The fishery could benefit from a management strategy that empowers stakeholders to better anticipate and plan for future pressures.**
Industry is concerned that, going forward, external pressures could cause economic, market, and environmental uncertainty for the fishery. For example current pressure, by non-governmental environmental organizations for improved management of forage fish, is viewed by some as a discouraging warning. One group expressed the general sentiment that management tools and policies are needed that help industry better anticipate future environmental and economic pressures and be proactive in responding responsibly.