



## STOCK STATUS UPDATE OF CUSK (*BROSME BROSME*) IN NAFO DIVISIONS 4VWX5YZ

### Context

Cusk, *Brosme brosme*, is caught as bycatch in certain directed fisheries. Most landings are in the groundfish longline fisheries. Commercial catch rates for Cusk declined after the 1980s. Changes to management measures (e.g., reductions to trip limits, overall caps, and bycatch percentages) may have contributed to this reduction in catch rates (and landings); however, it is thought the decline in Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) is also due to a decline in Cusk abundance (Harris and Hanke 2010). The extent of the decline in abundance is not known.

The Industry-DFO Halibut Fixed Station Longline Survey (Halibut Survey) catch per station has been accepted as the ongoing index for monitoring Cusk biomass. The Upper Stock Reference (USR) and Limit Reference Point (LRP) for Cusk were set at 26.6 kg and 13.3 kg, respectively (Harris et al. 2012). The 3-year geometric mean of the biomass index was accepted as the metric for monitoring Cusk status relative to the USR and LRP.

Cusk was assessed as Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 2003 and later reassessed as endangered (COSEWIC 2012). In response to the 2003 assessment, the Governor in Council decided in 2013 not to add Cusk to the List of Wildlife Species at Risk set out in Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) (Minister of Justice, Canada 2013).

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) Resource Management Sector asked DFO Science to assess the 3-year geometric mean of the Cusk index from the Halibut Survey relative to the USR and the LRP. The information will be used by DFO Resource Management as background for discussions with various industry stakeholders on management measures.

The current 3-year geometric mean (2016-2018) of the Cusk biomass index remains above the LRP at 16.7 kg.

This Science Response Report results from the Science Response Process of December 5, 2018, on the Stock Status Update of Cusk in NAFO Division 4VWX5YZ.

### Background

The Halibut Survey, a longline survey that samples an area from the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, along the Scotian Shelf to Georges Bank, is considered to provide a useful index of the trend in Cusk abundance in Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) Divisions 4VWX5 since 1999. Longline gear is an effective sampling tool for Cusk as demonstrated by the commercial fishery; over 90% of landings were made by the longline fleets (Harris and Hanke 2010).

The Halibut Survey is conducted annually, generally from May to July. Variations in the Halibut Survey fishing protocol include a shift to the use of larger hook size, larger geographic area that each 'station' encompasses, lack of consistency in stations sampled, and variation in soak time

**Maritimes Region**

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and bait type. These variations are not accounted for in the Cusk biomass index, and would contribute to the high variability and could bias estimates.

**Description of the Fishery**

In the commercial groundfish fisheries, Cusk are caught primarily in summer and fall, with very limited landings in winter (Table 1). While the fishing year runs from April 1<sup>st</sup> through to March 30<sup>th</sup> of the following year, landings from April – November comprise between 93% and 98% of the fishing year landings from 2007 – 2015. Cusk landings have been declining, falling to 140 metric tonnes (mt) in 2017, and reaching only 126 mt by the end of November in 2018. The steep decline in longline effort directed at Cod, Haddock and Pollock have likely contributed to this decline. Current Cusk bycatch from the longline fleet comes primarily from the Halibut directed fishery. Cusk landings are currently managed by means of bycatch caps and trip limits.

Table 1. Cusk landings in metric tonnes per calendar year from 2007 to 2017.

| Year | 4X5YZ | 4VW | Total |
|------|-------|-----|-------|
| 2007 | 963   | 55  | 1018  |
| 2008 | 561   | 48  | 609   |
| 2009 | 535   | 38  | 573   |
| 2010 | 439   | 29  | 468   |
| 2011 | 444   | 34  | 477   |
| 2012 | 454   | 37  | 491   |
| 2013 | 338   | 44  | 382   |
| 2014 | 181   | 25  | 206   |
| 2015 | 151   | 38  | 189   |
| 2016 | 146   | 25  | 171   |
| 2017 | 112   | 27  | 140   |

**Analysis and Response**

The 57 fixed stations from the Halibut Survey that have been sampled in all years since 1999 are used to calculate the survey indices for Cusk (Harris et al. 2012). In 2014, data from Station 159 was excluded due to serious damage to the gear which resulted in a non-typical catch. The long-term mean for station 159 is 13.2 kg.

The subset of stations includes some of the preferred habitat for Cusk, such as the deeper areas along the shelf edge, although only a few of these 57 stations are in the Gulf of Maine, the area of highest commercial landings. The catches at each station (standardized to catch (kg)/1000 hooks), were used to calculate a biomass index. When the number of hooks fished was not recorded, it was assumed that the survey standard of 1000 hooks was fished in that set. In some cases, stations were fished by 2 or 3 sets of fewer hooks that sum to roughly 1000 hooks. In these cases, all of these sets were included in calculating the standardized catch for the station.

The recent trend in the Halibut Survey (3-year running geometric mean) was used to determine the status of the Cusk biomass in relation to the reference points. The biomass index from the Halibut Survey has been at or above the LRP since 2015 (Figure 1). A high level of variability is indicated by the wide confidence interval.

Maritimes Region

Cusk are a long-lived slow-growing species; any response to reduced fishing removals will take several years (around 10 years) as they recruit slowly to the adult population and fishery.

Indicator of Stock Status

The 3-year geometric mean (2016-2018) of the survey index for Cusk is 16.7 kg (Figure 1).

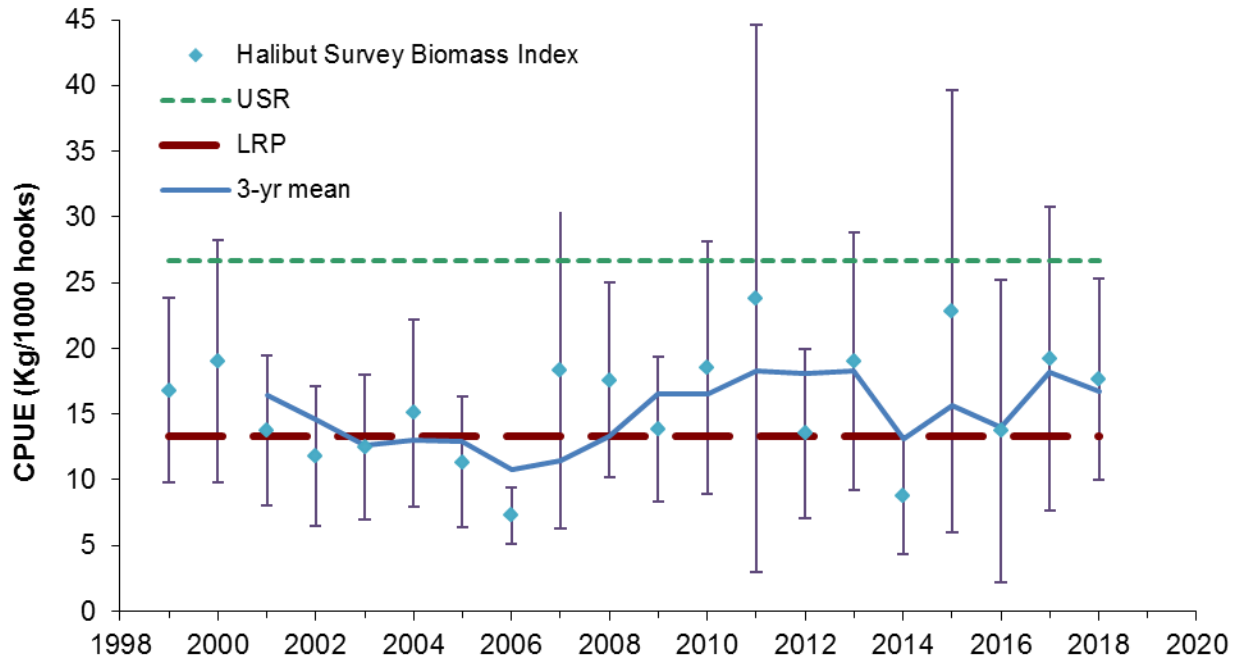


Figure 1. The biomass index for Cusk in the Halibut Survey (blue diamonds) with 95% confidence intervals. The green dashed line represents the Upper Stock Reference (USR) point, the red dashed line represents the Limit Reference Point (LRP), and the solid blue line represents the 3-year geometric mean of the index.

Conclusions

The 3-year geometric mean (2016-2018) of the Halibut Survey biomass index for Cusk remains in the cautious zone at 16.7 kg.

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**Sources of Information**

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