#### Ocean Surface Currents - Papa Trajectory Index

Contributed by William T. Stockhausen

Resource Ecology and Fishery Management Division, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, NOAA

Contact: william.stockhausen@noaa.gov

**Last updated: July 2021**

**Description of indicator:** The Papa Trajectory Index (PTI) provides an annual index of near-surface water movement variability, based on the trajectory of a simulated surface drifter released at Ocean Station Papa (50oN, 145oW; Figure 1). The simulation for each year is conducted using the “Ocean Surface CURrent Simulator” (OSCURS; <http://oceanview.pfeg.noaa.gov/oscurs>). Using daily gridded atmospheric pressure fields, OSCURS calculates the speed and direction of water movement at the ocean’s surface at the location of a simulated surface drifter. It uses this information to update the position of the simulated drifter on a daily basis over a specified time period. For the index presented here, OSCURS was run for 90 days to simulate a surface drifter released at Ocean Station Papa on December 1 for each year from 1901 to 2020 (trajectory endpoints years1902 to 2021).

FIGURE 1 (MAP) GOES HERE

Figure 1: Simulated surface drifter trajectories for winters 2011-2021 (endpoint year). End points of 90-day trajectories for simulated surface drifters released on Dec. 1 of the previous year at Ocean Station Papa are labeled with the year of the endpoint (50oN, 145oW).

**Status and trends:** In general, the trajectories fan out northeastward toward the North American continent (Figure 1). The 2020/21 trajectory was most similar to those of 2011/12, 2013/14, and 2015/16. Trajectories in all four years were primarily to the north, initially arcing slightly to the east in December. The 2020/21 trajectory was influenced in December by low sea level pressure (SLP) anomalies centered far to the west in the Aleutian Islands coupled with a weaker system of high pressure anomalies off California that formed a dipole oriented from the southeast (high pressure anomalies) to the northwest (low pressure anomalies), with the resulting winds contributing to the northeasterly progession of the drifter. By February, however, the SLP system had rotated somewhat counterclockwise so that it was oriented along a more east-west line. In addition, the high pressure anomalies had increased in the east while the low pressure anomalies had decreased in the west. The resulting shift in the winds stalled the drifter in its previously northerly direction and forced it more to the east. As a result, the ending latitude for the 2020/21 trajectory (and thus its PTI value) was ~2o more southerly than the 2011/12, 20113/14, and 2015/16 trajectories (the 2011/12 trajectory was notable because its ending latitude was the northernmost of all trajectories since 1994; Figure 2). The 2013/14 and 2015/16 trajectories coincided with the development and continuation of the “Blob” of warm surface waters along the eastern Pacific coast and the return of the Pacfic Decadal Oscillation (PDO) to a warm, positive phase associated with winds from the south near the coast.- In contrast to 2013/14 and 2015/16, the PDO was negative during the winter of 2020/21.

FIGURE 2 (TIME ) GOES HERE

Figure 2: Annual, long-term mean (green line) and 5-year running mean (red line and squares) of the Papa Trajectory Index time-series end-point latitudes (dotted black line and points) for 1902-2021 winters.

The PTI time series (Figure 2, black dotted line and points) indicates high interannual variation in the north/south component of drifter trajectories, with an average between-year change of >4o and a maximum change of greater than 13o (between 1931–1932). The change in the PTI between 2010/11 and 2011/12 was the largest since 1994, while the changes between 2011/12 and 2012/13, and between 2012/13 and 2013/14, represented reversals with slightly less, but diminishing, magnitude. Such swings, however, were not uncommon over the entire time series. The changes from 2013/14 to 2015/16 constituted a relatively rare event when the index changed very little over three successive years. The 20120/21 value represents a return to PTI values above the long term mean, following 4 consecutive years of values below the mean.

Over the past century, the filtered (5-year running average) PTI has undergone five complete oscillations with distinct crossings of the mean, although the durations of the oscillations are not identical: 26 years (1904-1930), 17 years (1930-1947), 17 years (1947-1964), 41 years (1964-2005), and 10 years (2005-2015). The filtered index indicates that a shift occurred in the mid 2000s to predominantly southerly anomalous flow following a ~25 year period of predominantly northerly anomalous flow. This was indicative of a return to conditions (at least in terms of surface drift) similar to those prior to the 1977 environmental regime shift, although this cycle ended rather quickly, as the filtered PTI crossed the mean in the opposite direction in 2011. A similar shift back to anomalous southerly flow appears to have occurred in 2016. Since 2005, the PTI appears to be fluctuating on a much shorter time scale (~10 years per mean crossing) than previously.

**Factors influencing observed trends:** Individual trajectories reflect interannual variability in regional (northeast Pacific) wind patterns which drive short term changes in ocean surface currents, as well as longer term changes in atmospheric forcing that influence oceanic current patterns on decadal time scales.

**Implications:** The year-to-year variability in near-surface water movements in the North Pacific Ocean has been shown to have important effects on the survival of walleye pollock (*Theragra chalcogramma*) by affecting its spatial overlap with predators (Wespestad2000), as well as to influence recruitment success of winter spawning flatfish in the eastern Bering Sea (EBS; Wilderbuer2002). Filtered PTI values greater than the long-term mean are indicative of increased transport and/or a northerly shift in the Alaska Current, which transports warm water northward along the west coast of Canada and southeast Alaska from the south and consequently plays a major role in the Gulf of Alaska’s heat budget. Interdecadal changes in the PTI reflect changes in ocean climate that appear to have widespread impacts on biological variability at multiple trophic levels (King2005). There is strong evidence that the productivity and possibly the carrying capacity of the Alaska Gyre and of the continental shelf were enhanced during the “warm” regime that began in 1977. Zooplankton production was positively affected after the 1977 regime shift (Brodeur1992), as were recruitment and survival of salmon and demersal fish species. Recruitment of rockfish (Pacific ocean perch) and flatfish (arrowtooth flounder, halibut, and flathead sole) also increased. However, shrimp and forage fish such as capelin were negatively affected by the 1977 shift (Anderson2003). The reduced availability of forage fish may have contributed to the decline in marine mammal and seabird populations observed after the 1977 shift (Piatt1996).