



Coastal Oregon Marine Experiment Station

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Pacific Groundfish Conservation Trust, Inc.

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Canary Rockfish Project – Preliminary Report

Since the canary rockfish project began last July we have held two public workshops with fishers (in Newport, OR and Westport, OR) to discuss how we might develop a survey method for canary rockfish that would supplement the information provided by the NMFS triennial bottom trawl survey of the shelf. We began fieldwork in April. Although our sampling work to date has been very limited, preliminary results are encouraging.

Our initial work is focusing on the issue of the preponderance of male canary rockfish found in the trawl survey and commercial fishery. After canary rockfish reach the age of maturity (7-8 years) males are much more prevalent in the trawl catches, with males outnumbering females by as much as 3:1 or more. Recent stock assessments have modeled this data feature by allowing females to have an elevated rate of natural mortality. The fate of the older females, whether they are dead or only less available to trawl gear, has always been a major source of uncertainty in the stock assessments of canary rockfish.

On May 4th project staff members Scott Heppell (co-PI) and John Seigel (research assistant) traveled from Westport, WA aboard the F/V *The Slammer*, skippered by Rhett Webber, and fished with rod and reel and baited hooks at two sites at depths of about 400 to 600 feet. At the first site (called "The Tooth") they caught 26 canary rockfish and at the other site (called "South Gray's Canyon Outside") they caught 29 canary rockfish. Of the 55 canary rockfish caught, 36 were females, many of which were mature. The ovaries were removed and will undergo histological examination to determine maturity condition. Fish fillets from the canary rockfish were donated to Food Share.

The female canary rockfish fish caught on May 4th ranged in length from 44.5 to 61.0 cm (mean = 52.8 cm) and in weight from 1.36 to 3.08 kg (mean = 2.19 kg). Preliminary readings of their otoliths indicate that the female fish ranged in age from 7 to 16 years (mean = 10.2 yr).

An additional sampling trip on May 17th from Depoe Bay, OR aboard the F/V *The Tackle Buster*, skippered by Jergen Turner, encountered rough seas and was unable to fish offshore in deep water. Three inshore sites were fished with rod and reel but only two immature canary rockfish were caught.

During the upcoming summer and autumn we will continue our targeted lethal sampling of canary rockfish at untrawlable sites, identified by commercial and charter fishermen, where old/large canary rockfish are thought to exist. The Northwest Fisheries Science Center, at the request of the PGCT, granted us permission to collect 500 canary rockfish for this research project. Until we fully deplete this allocation we will attempt to collect 25 to 35 canary rockfish per site at each of four sites on a quarterly basis using hook and line and/or vertical longline gear. The spatial distribution of all the sampling sites remains to be determined, but we will attempt to sample at sites spread along the coasts of Oregon and Washington. If the results support our hypothesis that old female canary rockfish are alive and well and living in untrawlable areas along our coast, we may request your assistance to obtain a further allocation of canary rockfish for continuing and expanding this project.

We thank PGCT for supporting this project and for assisting us in making connections with members of the fishing industry. Numerous other groups have also contributed. Financial support for chartering the fishing boats has been provided by the Central California Joint Cable Committee, the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, and the Bandon Cable Committee. Also, the Port Liaison Project has provided travel funds so that fishers could come to our workshops and educate us about canary rockfish.

Sincerely

David B. Sampson and Scott Heppell
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CC: Dr. Elizabeth Clarke, Northwest Fisheries Science Center
 Dr. Donald McIsacc, Pacific Fishery Management Council