

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED  
IMPLEMENTATION OF COUNCIL APPROVED MORTALITY ESTIMATES FOR  
YELLOWEYE AND CANARY ROCKFISH RELEASED WITH DESCENDING DEVICES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Ocean Sampling Program (OSP) estimates total ocean recreational effort and catch (retained and released) by boat type (charter and private), port, catch area, and trip type (primary target species). Boat trip sampling is conducted randomly to generate estimates of catch and release for most ocean-caught species: salmon, rockfish and other groundfish, halibut, albacore and sharks. Each month, along with estimates of total catch, OSP provides RecFIN with the raw intercept data that includes the depth of capture by species. RecFIN uses the OSP depth data to estimate the proportion of fish caught in four depth categories and then applies the GMT surface release mortality estimates by depth to produce estimates of discard mortality. Total mortality is the sum of retained catch and discard mortality.

If the Council approves the use of mortality estimates for rockfish released with a descending device, implementation of those estimates will require additional data on the proportion of anglers using those devices by depth and species. This year, OSP samplers in all coastal ports will begin collecting that new piece of information during all randomly sampled angler interviews for both charter and private boats targeting halibut and bottomfish. On these trips, when an angler reports releasing a canary or yelloweye rockfish, samplers will follow up with an additional question asking how many of these fish were released using a descending device.

Council approved mortality rates for rockfish released with a descending device will only be applied to released canary and yelloweye rockfish in ports and fishing modes where WDFW is directly collecting data on the proportion of anglers using descending devices. WDFW does not intend to apply proxy estimates of the proportion of descending device use collected from one fishing mode or trip type to areas or trip types where this information is not being gathered. For example, OSP samplers will not ask questions about the use of descending devices when anglers are targeting salmon. At least initially, salmon trips are being excluded to address concerns about the potential negative impacts on sampling rates as a result of increased time spent on angler interviews. This is more of a concern for salmon trips which are typically longer due to the need to observe all retained fish for fin clips, collect coded wire tags (CWT), ask for information on marked and unmarked released fish, collect scale samples and any other biological data. Compared to encounters on trips targeting bottomfish and halibut, there are relatively few encounters with canary and yelloweye rockfish on salmon trips, but for those that do, surface release mortality rates will continue to be applied.

To continue to allow RecFIN to produce the final estimate of total mortality for retained and released fish, which it has since in 2009, data on descending device use will be incorporated into the raw intercept data along with the depth data and provided to RecFIN. The new data will allow RecFIN to estimate the proportion of canary and yelloweye rockfish released with a descending device by depth along with already estimated rockfish released at the surface according to the same depth categories. The total discard mortality estimate for canary and yelloweye rockfish will be the sum of mortality for the proportion of fish released with a descending device and the sum of mortality for the proportion of fish released at the surface.

During the first year of this new data collection, WDFW is focused on working through the data collection with the WDFW sampling program and the production of estimates with RecFIN and reviewing the initial data to work out any unforeseen issues. Although the new data may be provided to RecFIN monthly according to status quo data transmission schedules, it is likely that the application of the new mortality estimates, if approved, will not occur until the end of the year or potentially next year during this initial year. The intent is to have the data transmission and production of estimates through RecFIN flow in a way that reflects the current process in the future.

In addition, during this first year, WDFW will consider whether or not to implement a buffer to address the potential for the unsuccessful release of a rockfish using a descending device. In this situation, an angler may report having used a descending device but might not have noticed that the fish later resurfaced. The buffer in this case would be applied to the proportion of fish released with a descending device rather than to the mortality estimates themselves. For example, if 40 percent of anglers report using a descending device to release yelloweye (or canary) rockfish you could assume that only a portion of those were released to depth successfully.