

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON THE COUNCIL'S  
RECOMMENDED 2015-2016 SORTING REQUIREMENT FOR SLOPE ROCKFISH

In June, the Council recommended that landings of Rougheye Rockfish/Blackspotted Rockfish, and Shortraker Rockfish be required to be reported individually on fish tickets beginning January 1, 2015 instead of as part of the Slope Rockfish market category. The Slope Rockfish market category is what the Department has used to record landings of the Council's Slope Rockfish North stock complex. The new sorting designation will alter that relationship by leaving Rougheye/Blackspotted and Shortraker in the stock complex but taking them out of the market category. As is seen below in the figures, the market category has included landings of non-slope rockfish species because of compliance issues (i.e. Shelf Rockfish and non-stock complex stocks are sometimes landed and reported as Slope Rockfish).

We have submitted this report to notify the Council, its advisors, and the public that we are considering requiring the sorting of additional Slope Rockfish species by state rule. We expect to have a Preproposal Statement of Inquiry published in Issue 14-17 of the Washington State Register to give us the option of having a rule in effect by January 1, 2015.<sup>1</sup> This Preproposal Statement announces the possibility of a rule making and requests public comment on the general topic of a rule change. At this time we are unsure if we will pursue a rule making beyond this first step. As explained below, we filed the Preproposal to keep the option open. We encourage comment and involvement from the Council and its advisors and give more detail on future possible steps in the process and opportunity for comment below.

The motivation for this consideration involves the potential impacts of the Council's recommended sorting requirement on the Department's port sampling program and the estimates of landings that program supports. As discussed below, we have some preliminary concerns over how the removal of the three species from the state's Slope Rockfish market category might affect the quality of catch estimates for the other species landed into the market category. A rule making would allow us options to address any issues of concern that we identify.

The mix of species landed in the Slope Rockfish will vary between areas, ports, and states. We are not suggesting a coastwide evaluation and instead are focused only on the circumstances specific to Washington's sampling program.

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington State Register can be viewed at this link:  
<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/laws/wsr/wsrbyissue.htm>

Any additional state regulation would apply only to non-tribal vessels and buyers landing or purchasing groundfish in the state's ports. The treaty tribes regulate fish ticket reporting for tribal vessels and buyers. At the same time, landings of Slope Rockfish by treaty tribal vessels are sent to PacFIN and the species-specific estimates of landings are based on the same sampling data and estimation procedures as the non-tribal landings. The Department will work closely with our tribal co-managers in determining how to address the sorting requirement. It would be possible to have different sampling protocols and estimation procedures for tribal and non-tribal landings if circumstances between the tribal and non-tribal fisheries called for such differences.

#### *Reasons for evaluating additional sorting requirements*

A sorting designation for Rougheye/Blackspotted was considered during both the 2013-14 and 2015-16 management measures. The intended purpose of a sorting designation is to improve estimates of landings of the species by eliminating statistical sampling error by moving to a total count/census of landings for that species. Yet removing a species has the potential to change the parameters involved with sampling the species that remain in the market category. With the many issues being considered over the past two biennial cycles, we did not have time to examine how the precision of our landings estimates for the other slope rockfish species might be affected by additional sorting requirements.

Species composition port sampling is one of our key tools for tracking landings into the state. The Department uses random sampling of the Slope Rockfish market category (i.e., "species composition sampling") to estimate the landings of each species landed within the category. Landing different species together in a group can reduce the challenge of identifying and sorting very similar looking species and can improve the accuracy of landings estimates by reducing misidentification and misreporting. Samples taken by the Department's port biologists are combined to create quarterly proportions for each species observed, by port and gear type, and applied to all landings into the market category to produce species-specific estimates of landings. Statistical sampling by expert port biologists produces accurate identification, yet estimates produced from sampling involved uncertainty and variability.

While such an evaluation of a sorting designation would be prudent for any species being removed, we have particular concern with Rougheye and Shortraker because they have made up a major portion of landings into the Slope Rockfish market category in Washington. Removing them from the category therefore has the potential to impact our sampling and catch estimates for the species left in the category. Some tables and figures from our initial exploration of our Slope Rockfish sampling data basic are displayed below. We plan to evaluate that potential impact in detail over the next two months.

The impact could be positive if the new sorting requirements result in fewer landings, in terms of the number of species and weight, needing to be sampled. If so and we are able to maintain the general level of sampling effort, then the percentage of the market category that we are able to sample might increase and improve the precision of catch estimates. On the other hand, our port samplers are unable to intercept every landing. If landings into the Slope Rockfish market category become more sporadic, then they may be observed less frequently and result in less precise estimates of landings.

In addition, there is a point at which the appropriateness of a sampling approach becomes questionable. The Council's new sorting requirement might reduce the number of species landed into the market category enough so to make individual reporting more cost effective than a sampling approach. Species composition sampling of the Slope Rockfish market category is only one of the sampling tasks charged to our port samplers. Eliminating sampling of that category could free up time for those and other tasks.

If we do decide to proceed with the rule making, we expect to evaluate the following alternatives:

- A. No additional requirements to the federal regulations (i.e. "No Action").
- B. Add Redbanded Rockfish to the list of species to be reported individually.
- C. Require all species currently landed as Slope Rockfish to be sorted individually.

The logic behind considering Alternative B is that Redbanded Rockfish is the most distinctive of the Slope Rockfish species and should be easy for fishery participants to identify. It is also the second or third most frequent of the species landed into the market category for fixed gear and bottom trawl, respectively. Removing Redbanded from the market category therefore might have little adverse impact on vessels and buyers (because of the relative ease of identifying it) while improving the sampling environment for the remaining species in the market category. Removing Redbanded could also, as discussed above, make landings more variable and harder to sample and lower the precision of landings estimates.

In addition, the mix and number of species landed into the Slope Rockfish market category varies by gear type. If we move forward with a state rule making process, we may evaluate the option of having different sorting rules for the different gear types.

#### *The Timing and Steps in the Potential Rule making Process and Areas for Comment*

The Preproposal Statement of Inquiry is, again, just the first step in the state's rule making process and does not commit us to moving forward. If we do choose to move to the next step, we could issue a formal proposed rule as early as October 22. If we do, we would solicit written

comments and also hold a public hearing during the week of November 25. For any rule to be effective by January 1, we would need to issue a final rule no later than December 1.

If we do issue a proposed rule we will include analysis of our sampling data to aid public comment. The comment period would also overlap with the November Council meeting and we would distribute materials for the Briefing Book. We would very much benefit from feedback on the feasibility and logistical burden for vessel and buying operations to sort more species than Rougheye/Blackspotted and Shortraker. Such comments could be submitted during this Preproposal stage or after we issued a proposed rule.

### *Preliminary Evaluation of the Data*

The following tables and figures are based on the actual species composition samples taken by the Department and two scenarios recalculated from that data.

- **Scenario 1:** removes Rougheye, Blackspotted, and Shortraker from the data as if they had been reported outside of the market category.
- **Scenario 2** does the same but also removes Redbanded.

The two scenarios provide an initial look at what might be expected with new sorting requirements. However, assuming the scenarios represent what we would expect to see in the future hinges on an assumption that fishing behavior and catch would not have been affected by different sorting requirements. New sorting designations might alter the mix of species seen in the samples, for example, by making it easier to properly sort the remaining species (i.e. if Rougheye and Shortraker are sorted out of the Slope Rockfish market category then vessels and buyers that have inappropriately included Darkblotched Rockfish and other non-slope rockfish stocks in the market category may do so less often).

**Table 1.** Monthly average of total pounds sampled and number of landings sampled for the Slope Rockfish market category. The scenarios change the pounds we would have seen landed for both bottom trawl and fixed gear. In contrast, the number of landings with Slope Rockfish would change substantially for fixed gear while remaining largely the same for bottom trawl.

**A. Fixed Gear Hook and Line – Pounds Sampled**

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Actual Samples	807.7	689.5	692.9	684.7	755.4
Scenario 1	111.9	144.4	187.4	153.6	201.8
% diff. from Actual	86.1%	79.1%	73.0%	77.6%	73.3%
Scenario 2	11.2	28.1	17.2	9.5	10.9
% diff. from Actual	98.6%	95.9%	97.5%	98.6%	98.6%

**B. Fixed Gear Hook and Line – Number of Landings Sampled**

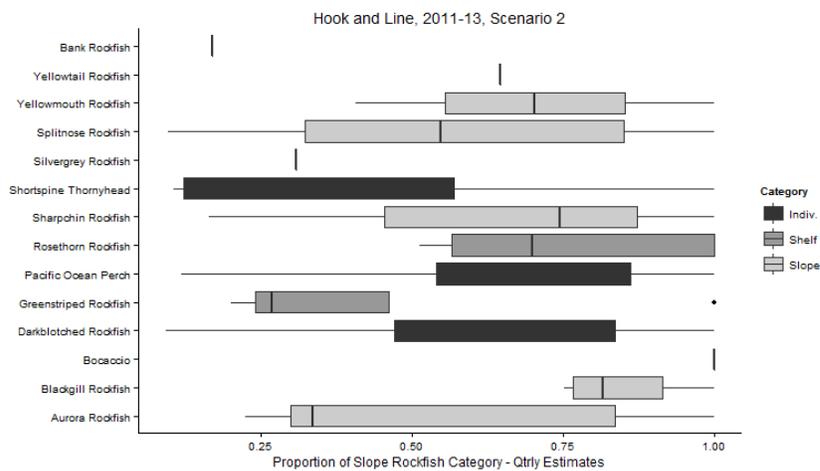
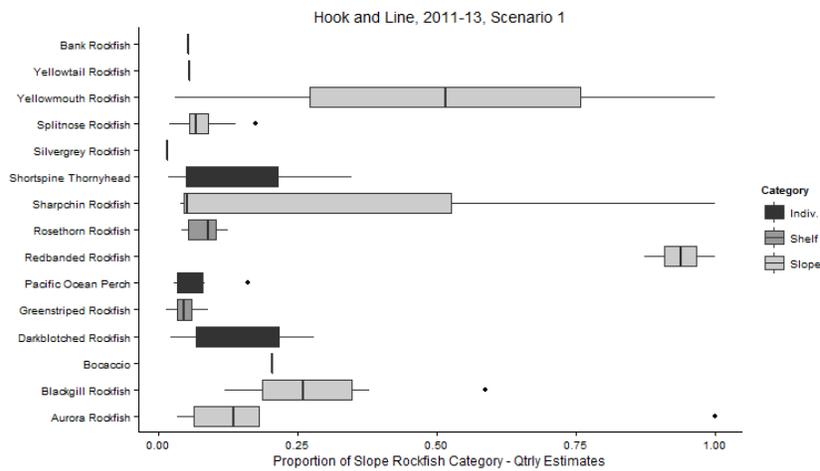
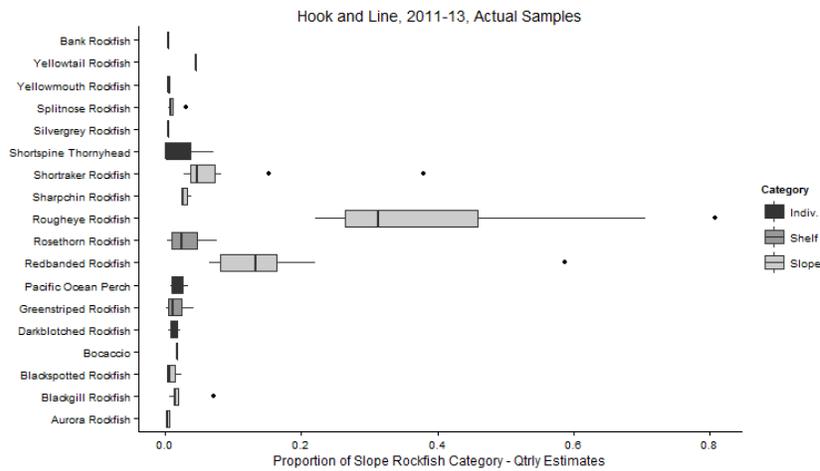
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Actual Samples	7.0	6.2	5.1	4.3	5.2
Scenario 1	5.3	4.4	4.3	3.9	4.3
% diff. from Actual	23.9%	28.4%	14.8%	9.5%	16.2%
Scenario 2	2.7	1.9	2.4	2.1	1.2
% diff. from Actual	61.9%	68.9%	52.4%	52.0%	77.4%

**C. Bottom Trawl – Pounds Sampled**

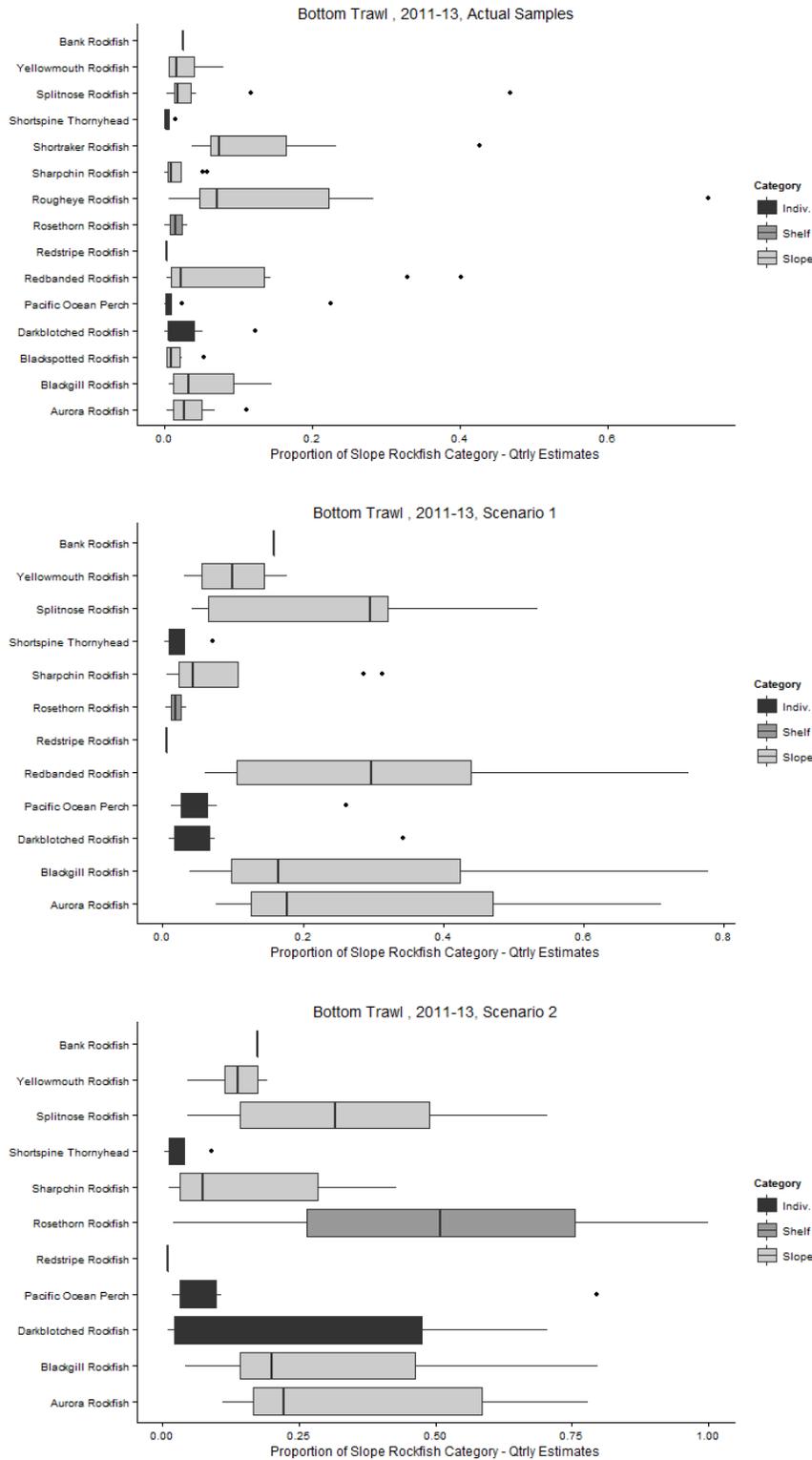
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Actual Samples	396.9	205.8	321.0	407.5	280.9
Scenario 1	68.3	25.5	68.1	146.5	113.9
% diff. from Actual	82.8%	87.6%	78.8%	64.0%	59.5%
Scenario 2	44.1	12.9	48.2	94.6	86.1
% diff. from Actual	88.9%	93.7%	85.0%	76.8%	69.3%

**D. Bottom Trawl – Number of Landings Sampled**

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Actual Samples	2.2	1.0	1.7	1.7	1.3
Scenario 1	2.2	1.0	1.6	1.6	1.3
% diff. from Actual	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	5.4%	0.0%
Scenario 2	2.2	1.0	1.6	1.6	1.3
% diff. from Actual	0.0%	0.0%	5.4%	5.4%	0.0%



**Figure 1.** Species composition proportions—all ports combined—for the actual samples taken over 2011-2013 and the two scenarios for fixed gear hook and line. The shading of the boxplots corresponds to the Council’s harvest specifications (i.e., Slope = Slope Rockfish stock complex member, Shelf = Shelf Rockfish stock complex member, Individ. = non-stock complex stock).



**Figure 2.** Species composition proportions—all ports combined—for the actual samples taken over 2011-2013 and the two scenarios for bottom trawl gear. The shading of the boxplots corresponds to the Council’s harvest specifications (i.e., Slope = Slope Rockfish stock complex member, Shelf = Shelf Rockfish stock complex member, Indiv. = non-stock complex stock).