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Fish and Game Commission Adopts Emergency Closure for Lingcod in Ocean Waters

SAN DIEGO - Responding to concerns that the harvest of a popular West Coast favorite will exceed its allowable catch for 2000, the California Fish and Game Commission took emergency action to close all ocean-based fishing for lingcod statewide during the final two months of the year. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has indicated they will compliment the state action by restricting fishing for lingcod from three to 200 miles offshore.

Lingcod has been declared "overfished" by the NMFS and a rebuilding plan has been developed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC). Fishing for lingcod was closed this year in Southern California during January and February and in central California during March and April to protect this highly prized bottom fish species, which grow to over 30 pounds in weight. Restrictions have been applied to fisheries from Cape Flattery in northern Washington, to the California/Mexico border with the aim of recovering the population to a maximum level of sustainable harvest.

The emergency regulation goes into effect as soon as it is reviewed by the Office of Administrative Law and filed with the Secretary of State. The process normally takes 10 days. The regulation will remain in effect only through December, however. After this, new regulations aimed at protecting lingcod and other important marine bottom feeding species are expected to be in place.

In a related matter, the Commission decided against closing fishing for rockfish in Southern California during the same period as the lingcod closure.

The projected overage in catch of bocaccio rockfish - the object of the rockfish closure - was not so compelling as it was for lingcod, according to Robert Treanor, the Commission's Executive Director. For bocaccio, the final harvest could easily be less than projected if anglers continued to concentrate on other marine finfish species during the final months of the year. For lingcod, the harvest would still be over the target if catches are even half the DFG prediction, said Treanor.

Both closure recommendations were made by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and follow multi-year rebuilding plans that have been developed for lingcod and bocaccio rockfish by PFMC, said LB Boydston of the DFG's Intergovernmental Affairs Office. Boydston estimated optimum yield for both species will be exceeded before the end of the year based on recent years' landing patterns, and places both species at less than 10 percent of their unfished population levels.

This is a very critical time for both species and we need to get started on the right foot in our efforts to restore the populations to healthy levels, Boydston said.

The Commission's decision to close the lingcod fishery is expected to have a minor economic impact on the state's ocean recreational fishery because lingcod are usually caught when fishing for rockfish, and are only occasionally the object of individual fishing trips. The proposed rockfish closure would have been more severe, said Boydston.

The Commission's action on Oct. 20 was not its first effort to help restore numbers to the failing fisheries. In addition to two-month closure periods for both species in the southern and central portions of the state, the Commission also lowered the number of rockfish and lingcod individual anglers and divers may catch and keep each day and increased the minimum size limit for lingcod. The decision followed a similar action in November 1999 by the PFMC, which includes representatives from Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, the Coastal Tribes and the NMFS. The reductions were in response to state and federal fisheries scientists'

concerns for the overall health of lingcod and rockfish stocks and the continued declines in West Coast population numbers.

In 1999, assessments of bocaccio off California and lingcod off Washington, Oregon, and California determined that the stocks in those waters had declined by more than 90 percent from their unfished population levels. The declines occurred during the past two decades and have resulted in major fishery reductions in the affected areas, both recreational and commercial.