

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT FISH AND WILDLIFE SUPPORT FOR APPLYING THE RAMP-DOWN APPROACH TO REBUILD YELLOWEYE ROCKFISH

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) continues to support the ramp-down approach for setting the optimum yield (OY) for yelloweye rockfish under its rebuilding plan. Reducing the OY from the 2008 level of 20 mt to 13 mt in 2009 would have drastic effects on Washington's recreational and commercial fisheries. While, under the ramp-down approach, the OY is reduced to 14 mt in 2010, having a median OY of 17 mt in 2009 would provide a smoother transition. This transitional period would be used to: 1) collect additional data to be used in future yelloweye stock assessments; 2) work with commercial and recreational constituents to develop additional yelloweye rockfish protection measures; and 3) provide an opportunity for coastal communities to prepare for anticipated additional economic loss.

Status of the Stock and Rebuilding Analysis

Yelloweye rockfish are especially long-lived and late to mature. According to the rebuilding analysis, in the absence of fishing beginning in 2009 ($T_{F=0}$), the stock would be rebuilt in 2049. Therefore, slight changes in the OY at the beginning of the rebuilding schedule make little to no difference in the time needed to rebuild (see Tables 3a. and 3b. in the rebuilding analysis, Agenda Item D.3.a, Attachment 12). Continuing the ramp-down strategy in 2009 and 2010, and then applying the current spawning biomass per recruit (SPR) of 0.719 beginning in 2011 produces a median year to rebuild of 2082 (Table 3a., Alternative 3). Conversely, applying the SPR of 0.719 beginning in 2009 (which would produce an OY of 13.3 mt in 2009 and 13.6 mt in 2010) produces the same median year to rebuild (Table 3b., Alternative 3).

Additional Data Needed

As noted in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the 2007-08 Groundfish Specifications and Management Measures, Amendment 16-4, and the Status of the Yelloweye Rockfish in 2006, the yelloweye rockfish stock assessment is data poor and highly uncertain. The baseline assessment model assumed a single coastwide stock and complete mixing. Given the apparent sedentary nature of this species, this assumption may be unrealistic; however, sufficient data are not currently available to support area-specific models. This is especially problematic in trying to reconstruct the historical population required to model the population off Washington. Although data are too sparse for a specific model off the Washington coast, previous assessment authors have stated that the data would suggest a less depleted yelloweye resource in this area than what the model would indicate.

Funding for Research

Rockfish research, especially using non-extractive data collection methods, is costly. While WDFW would very much have liked to repeat the submersible survey we conducted in 2002, the project was cost-prohibitive. However, in early 2007, WDFW was successful in securing additional rockfish research funds through legislative action.

At our request, the Washington State Legislature and Governor approved a measure to add a \$35.00 surcharge to commercial licenses used for directed groundfish fishing, which would include charter licenses and non-limited entry delivery licenses, and licenses that allow the landing of incidentally caught groundfish. A \$.50 surcharge was also added to all recreational

saltwater fishing licenses, both short-term and season licenses. These fees are deposited into a dedicated account to be used by WDFW for rockfish research and stock assessments. The Westport Charterboat Association, the Coastal Coalition of Commercial Fisheries, and individual anglers supported this measure in recognition of the need to collect additional data for yelloweye rockfish.

Data Collection Efforts

WDFW is working on several initiatives to collect additional biological data and fishery information, including:

- In 2006 and 2007, WDFW partnered with the International Pacific Halibut Commission to enhance their longline halibut survey by setting additional stations in “untrawlable” areas off Washington’s north coast. WDFW plans to continue this effort in 2008 and understands that the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife would also like to expand the enhanced survey with additional stations off Oregon.
- WDFW is working with scientists from Alaska and British Columbia to assemble and review data on yelloweye growth and natural mortality; these data could potentially be used to address the assumption for natural mortality (M) in the next stock assessment.
- Collection of biological and species distribution information from federal and state at-sea observer and logbook programs.

In addition to these efforts, WDFW is exploring additional research projects, including using a remotely operated vehicle, to collect additional data for future assessments. We are currently going through an internal review process to identify priority projects for the newly created research fund.

WDFW is also continuing to develop a yelloweye occurrence and habitat Geographic Information System database and working with stakeholders to refine yelloweye rockfish conservation areas (YRCAs).

Impacts to Washington Recreational Fisheries

Under the $T_{F=0}$ yelloweye OY, the estimated loss to recreational fisheries is about 1,150,000 angler trips. Washington recreational bottomfish and halibut angler trips are estimated to decline by 30% under the yelloweye OY of 13 mt . These projected reductions in angler trips would cause undue hardship on Washington’s coastal communities that are already depressed.

For reference, the status of Washington’s coastal communities was described in the 2000 U.S. census. In 2000, Neah Bay had an unemployment rate of 24% with a median household income of \$21,635; these data indicate that 29.9% of the Neah Bay population is below the poverty level. A lot of the employment in Neah Bay is seasonal in nature, with fisheries employing about 300 people per year. The coastal community of La Push had an unemployment rate of 27.4%, with a similar median household income, indicating that 34.5% of the population is below the poverty level. In Westport, the median household income is \$32,037, which indicates that 14.3% of the population is below the poverty level.

In 2006 and 2007, Washington’s recreational fisheries were further constrained by the implementation of depth restrictions off our North Coast and central areas, where yelloweye are caught. These include a 20-fm depth restriction applied to the fisheries operating out of Neah Bay and La Push from late May through the end of September, and a 30-fm depth restriction

from mid-March through mid-June to the recreational fishery out of Westport. Given the location of the continental shelf off Neah Bay, the 20-fm depth restriction is about 0.5 to one mile offshore. These depth restrictions, especially in the North Coast area, have severely impacted recreational bottomfish fisheries targeting healthy lingcod and black rockfish stocks, and have resulted in additional economic loss to the coastal communities, which are highly vulnerable and have very low resiliency.

Impacts to Washington Commercial Fisheries

Under the $T_{F=0}$ yelloweye OY, the estimated loss to commercial fisheries is over \$100 million in ex-vessel revenues, which would result from complete closures of the tribal groundfish fisheries and closures of Washington longline and pot fisheries. Commercial ex-vessel revenues could decline by as much as 40% under the yelloweye OY of 13 mt. To ensure this low OY was not exceeded, the non-trawl rockfish conservation area would have to expand from the shoreline to 150 fms offshore, precluding access to prime sablefish and dogfish areas that are the backbone of Washington's longline fishery. The economic impacts resulting from these measures, again, would cause undue hardship on Washington's coastal communities that are already depressed. Areas labeled "most vulnerable" with regard to commercial fishing in Washington include Neah Bay and Ilwaco; other commercial vulnerable areas with low resiliency include La Push, Westport and Bellingham.

In closing, as mentioned above, WDFW continues to support the ramp-down strategy for setting the OY for yelloweye rockfish. This approach would allow us to collect additional data to be used in future yelloweye stock assessments and work with commercial and recreational constituents to develop additional yelloweye rockfish protection measures.