



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
West Coast Region  
1201 NE Lloyd Boulevard, Suite 1100  
PORTLAND, OREGON 97232-1274

December 27, 2016

[RIN 0648-BG17]

Mr. Herb Pollard, Chair  
Pacific Fishery Management Council  
7700 NE Ambassador Place  
Portland, OR 97220

Dear Chairman Pollard:

By this letter, I am approving Amendment 27 to the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (PCGFMP). As you know, Amendment 27 consists of five components: 1) reclassifying big skate from an Ecosystem Component Species to “in the fishery;” 2) adding deacon rockfish to the list of species in the PCGFMP; 3) establishing a new inseason management process in California for black, canary, and yelloweye rockfishes; 4) making updates to clarify several stock assessment descriptions; and 5) updating several sections of the PCGFMP to address the rebuilt status of canary rockfish and petrale sole. The purpose of Amendment 27 is to conserve and manage Pacific Coast groundfish fishery resources to prevent overfishing, rebuild overfished stocks, ensure conservation, facilitate long-term protection of essential fish habitat (EFH), and realize the full potential of the Nation’s fishery resources. Actions taken under Amendment 27 are summarized below and are based on the best available science from fishery information and updated stock assessments.

First, big skate was classified as an Ecosystem Component (EC) species in Amendment 24 to the PCGFMP. Given the fishery information available at the time, it was thought that big skate was not targeted and had only small amounts of landings. However, a majority of the unspecified skate landed in the Shorebased Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program is now known to be big skate. For a stock to be classified as an EC species (according to National Standard 1 Guidelines), they should not be a target stock and should generally not be retained. Such large landings indicate big skate are being targeted and, therefore, generally are retained for sale, and can no longer be considered an EC species. Therefore, Amendment 27 reclassifies big skate as “in the fishery” and this rule proposes species specific harvest specifications.

Second, deacon rockfish (*Sebastes diaconus*) was recently described and adopted as a new rockfish (*Sebastes*) species by the American Fisheries Society based on evidence of the presence of two genetically distinct cryptic species in central California: deacon rockfish and blue rockfish. Deacon rockfish is therefore acknowledged as a PCGFMP species that is “in the fishery” based on the PCGFMP provision, “The category ‘rockfish’ includes all genera and species of the family Scorpaenidae, even if not listed, that occur in the Washington, Oregon, and California area. The Scorpaenidae genera are *Sebastes*, *Scorpaena*, *Sebastolobus*, and *Scorpaenodes*.” Finally, canary rockfish and petrale sole were declared rebuilt on August 4, 2015; therefore, all references to them as overfished stocks must be updated.



NMFS published a proposed rule to implement Amendment 27 and the 2017-2018 groundfish harvest specifications and management measures on November 28, 2016 (81 FR 75266), and we expect to have the final rule effective in early January, 2017. The final rule implements the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) recommendations from its June 2016 meeting on harvest levels and management measures for all groundfish species, as modified by Council recommendations regarding corrected sablefish annual catch limit (ACL) apportionment north and south of 36° N. lat. from its November 2016 meeting.

I have approved all of the Council's recommendations on harvest levels and management measures for 2017-2018. Therefore, NMFS is approving the Council's recommendation to designate deacon rockfish as part of the PCGFMP, reclassify big skate as an actively managed stock, and add new inseason management processes for commercial and recreational fishing in California.

Amendment 27 and the 2017-2018 groundfish harvest specifications and management measures were developed over several Council meetings and required the focused attention of the Council, its advisory bodies, and its staff. I am extraordinarily grateful for all of the time and attention the Council family has given to this significant management package. The work of members of the public at Council meetings and in their homeports, and the deliberations by the Council and its advisory bodies, demonstrate an impressive commitment to the principles of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Thank you for your time and care.

Sincerely,



Barry A. Thom  
Regional Administrator