

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
BIENNIAL HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS FOR 2019-2020 FISHERIES – FINAL ACTION

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) received an overview of the topic from Mr. John DeVore, Council groundfish staff officer, and offers the following comments and suggestions.

California scorpionfish and lingcod

The GAP recommends the preferred harvest control rules for lingcod and California scorpionfish, which are annual catch limit (ACL) = ABC with a P* of 0.45. These recommendations comport with both the GAP and Groundfish Management Team (GMT) recommendations in March and the Council's March decision.

Yelloweye rockfish

The GAP discussed the proposed yelloweye rockfish alternatives under this agenda item and recommends **Alternative 1, with a spawning potential ratio (SPR) of 70 percent, resulting in a 2019 ACL of 39 mt and a 2020 ACL of 40 mt.** The GAP understands there is some risk to this alternative, as it assumes the higher stock productivity (i.e., steepness and natural mortality relative to past assessments) in the base model of the 2017 yelloweye stock assessment is the true state of nature. Furthermore, it would add one more year to the median time to rebuild relative to the No Action alternative – 2028 vs. 2027. It is important to note that absent all fishing, the median year to rebuild is 2026, a mere two years earlier than Alt. 1. At the same time, the fishing opportunities afforded by additional yelloweye could provide increased stability to fishing communities on the West Coast. Almost every sector is affected by yelloweye; a little flexibility goes a long way to keep coastal communities economically viable into the future.

The GAP understands the risks to the stock and the rebuilding plan, but feels Alt. 1 is still precautionary in nature. The decisions here are similar to the risks we take on all stock assessments and is supported by the best science available. Harvest rates are low relative to stock biomass – 1 percent of the age 8-plus biomass – such that it appears fishing effort has little to no impact on the recovery of the species.

Tradeoffs

The GAP discussed that workload tradeoffs would need to be considered, recognizing Alt. 1 will necessitate a new rebuilding plan. Since yelloweye is important to almost all sectors and the coastal communities those sectors support, the GAP feels this is a high priority issue. As in the past, the GAP would like to see the biennial harvest specifications and management measures completed for a January 1, 2019 start date, including this yelloweye item.

Fishery-specific benefits

Yelloweye rockfish is one of the most constraining species in the groundfish fisheries. Liberalizing the ACL would provide more opportunity for all sectors. The default harvest control rule will liberalize some of the recreational and nearshore fisheries to an extent. Alternative 1 would allow additional fishery flexibility and opportunity. Specifically:

Recreational fisheries: The higher ACL of Alt. 1 would allow anglers in all three states the opportunity to fish deeper, may open some closed areas, and provide more all-depth fishing days. Recreational fleets also may be able to access other popular groundfish stocks such as lingcod north of 40°10' N. lat., and yellowtail rockfish.

Additional yelloweye would also provide more opportunity to sport fishermen during all-depth halibut fisheries.

A higher ACL would also minimize the possibility of early closure of recreational seasons by reducing pressure on other species such as blue/deacon rockfish, etc. Oregon had to close its season early in 2017 and California had to institute depth constraints later in the year. These closures and limitations hit southern Oregon and northern California fishing communities especially hard since salmon seasons also were closed in both the Oregon and California Klamath Management Zone (KMZ).

Non-whiting trawl (IFQ): The amount of yelloweye under No Action or Alt. 1 remains small, especially compared with historical landings from all fisheries prior to 2000. It is important to note that the precautionary increase under Alt. 1 would not create new opportunities or reinstate old, pre-IFQ, opportunity. Any increase would simply allow more flexibility.

Additional fish in the catch shares program would free up the flow of quota in the market. Fishermen tend to hold on to any yelloweye quota for most of the year in order to cover potential interactions with yelloweye during season. The assurance of more yelloweye quota will allow trawlers an easier avenue to cover potential overages, thereby creating more quota trading. In short, it would allow the IFQ system to work the way it was intended.

More yelloweye could provide increased access to other species and areas. For example, Dover sole is found on both the shelf and slope, but Dover caught on the shelf are better quality. Trawlers are hesitant to fish the shelf due to potential yelloweye bycatch. Yelloweye quota increases could allow some exploratory fishing on the shelf, giving fishermen some assurance they could cover any potential yelloweye overage while obtaining better quality fish for the market. Any fishing effort on the shelf would remain governed by strict IFQ management that is conservative by nature.

Underutilization in the shoreside IFQ fishery has been apparent since its implementation. Anything to provide some relief to the shoreside fishery would be helpful – especially since yelloweye quota prices have been documented at more than 50 times higher than other species.

Commercial fixed gear fisheries: California deeper nearshore permits became transferrable on April 1 and GAP members are concerned this could reactivate latent permits and cause an effort shift from the south to the north. The Northern California live fish fishery is lucrative; an influx of roughly 100 more permits and fishermen to this area will likely result in more yelloweye impacts. More metric tons for the nearshore fishery will prevent this sector from going over its allocation, keep the fishery open year round and reduce the need for inseason adjustments.

Similar to sport fisheries, a higher yelloweye ACL for fixed gear fishermen could afford them greater opportunity to access healthy lingcod stocks in the north. Also, fixed gear fishermen could access species such as copper rockfish and other nearshore and shelf species.

Longleader gear has proven successful in the recreational fishery at avoiding yelloweye. With more yelloweye, fixed gear fishermen could explore potential use of this gear type to access the RCA to target widow, canary, and yellowtail rockfish.

Other benefits

The GAP notes the higher ACL under Alt. 1 would create benefits not directly related to harvesting.

Data needs: Some exempted fishing permits (EFPs) are constrained by yelloweye impacts. Higher ACLs will provide some flexibility for existing and potential EFPs that are designed to provide crucial data to various groundfish stock assessments.

Ecological benefit: More yelloweye in sport fisheries would allow some changes to fleet behavior and lessen the impacts on highly exploited nearshore species, such as black rockfish and cabezon. These nearshore species have been primary targets in non-trawl fisheries since implementation of RCAs and other depth restrictions in the early 2000s to foster rebuilding of overfished species.

Lack of fishing data in stock assessments has been an ongoing issue with stock assessments. More yelloweye – obtained from any fishery – will help inform future assessments.

Fixed gear fishermen on the GAP noted more yelloweye would allow the fleet to spread out more thereby avoiding localized depletion of other stocks.

Risks and assurances

The GAP also discussed the risk of a higher yelloweye ACL as it pertains to fishing behavior. Trawlers, especially, are unlikely to risk fishing on the shelf to a great degree as any yelloweye quota increase under Alt. 1 is still very small. Furthermore, the trawl fleet is still limited by gear configurations that prevent fishermen from going into yelloweye habitat. Most trawl fishermen will not change their existing fishing behavior to a large degree. By design, any trawl IFQ fishing behavior changes to access healthy stocks will remain limited by IFQ management to stay within the trawl allocation and under the overall ACL.

At the same time, a potential research project brought up under open comment at this meeting, the Yelloweye Absolute Abundance Survey concept, has the potential to provide a lot of research of yelloweye habitat and inform the next stock assessment for this species. The GAP is very supportive of this effort, as it could also be used for other species. This project also could provide the Council with assurances of yelloweye abundance in areas not accessible by traditional survey methods.