

Groundfish EFP Proposal: Cowcod (*Sebastes levis*) Fishing off Southern California Coast

PFMC – Sunday, November 17, 2019

H.5 Preliminary Exempted Fishing Permit Approval for 2021-2022

Date of Application: October 14, 2019

Applicants:

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Purpose and Goals

Purpose

An important West Coast groundfish stock that was formerly overfished has now been rebuilt ahead of schedule. The cowcod (*Sebastes levis*) stock south of 40°10' N. latitude has been managed under a strict rebuilding plan. Rebuilding has severely constrained West Coast fisheries in California for nearly two decades. Rebuilding cowcod was achieved through large area closures, non-retention rules, and very low allowance for incidental bycatch. While the PFMC works to loosen depth and area restrictions, current fisheries dependant and life history data are wanted to better resolve the state of the stock. The purpose of this EFP is to gain recreational hook and line data necessary for an informed decision in maintaining a sustainable optimum yield from this newly rebuilt stock. Nevertheless, the topmost priority remains regaining recreational fishing access to the many other fisheries prosecuted in cowcod habitat that rebuilding cowcod has denied for the past 19 years.

Under the original rebuilding plan, the stock was expected to rebuild by 2090. However, the Council's management measures allowed the stock to rebuild much more quickly. Access to retain cowcod caught by recreational anglers will provide the rockfish harvest data along with more current life-history data. The need for these data is most clearly illustrated by the speed with which this population rebounded, given the very lengthy recovery time previously predicted.

We propose fishing in all waters less than 100 fathoms, including within the current Cow Cod Conservation Areas, which encompass more than 4,200 square miles of ocean waters.

Goals

This EFP seeks to allow a small number of CPFV chartered vessels to fish in depths down to 100fa, south of 40°10' N. latitude, under a 7mt Total Allowable Catch (TAC) per year of cowcod. This opportunity to study cowcod catch rates, gear selectivity and age and growth will provide needed data to make informed decisions with regard to appropriate bag limits and season lengths in coming seasons. We want to provide the opportunity for very limited retention of cowcod within the CCAs without the fear of overreaching with this newly rebuilt stock. Our topmost priority is full recreational access to fish the many other species of rockfish found there, even without any retention of cowcod, if necessary. The data gathered in this very limited cowcod retention fishery will ultimately aid fisheries managers in determining whether and how much cowcod retention can be supported, given groundfish season lengths and spatial access no longer being restricted by cowcod bycatch.

Out of an abundance of caution, this EFP would be in lieu of having a more open initial retention fishery for cowcod – with the goal of gaining needed data with greater regulatory control than an outright opening of cowcod retention via a bag limit and season.

Disposition of Catch Target species (rockfish) and legal incidental catch (cowcod), will be kept per current regulations for size and bag limits. Fish not authorized for retention would be released alive, if possible, utilizing barotrauma descending devices. If desired, incidental catch of certain species that cannot be released alive could be retained by the observer and provided to NMFS or other researchers.

Justification

Unresolved Problems and Major Uncertainties

The major issue and uncertainty associated with the new cowcod assessment is the lack of fisheries dependant and current life history data, particularly age data, adequate to estimate recruitment deviations. (2019-Cowcod-STAR-Panel-Report_SEPT2019BB.pdf)

Recommendations for Future Research and Data Collection Specific recommendations for the next cowcod assessment:

1. Evaluating how to structure the NWFSC Hook-and-Line survey index given its expansion into the CCA, also independent analysis of information content in NWFSC Hook-and-Line survey.
2. There are a number of improved data collections that would be beneficial to the next assessment of cowcod.
 - a. Continue to conduct the NWFSC Hook-and-Line survey which was an important source of fishery independent data for cowcod.

- b. Having multiple absolute abundance observations for cowcod from visual survey are important to understanding the stock size and status of the stock.
- c. Given the lack of biological data for cowcod, it is critical to improve and expand collection of length and age data for fishery and fishery independent data sources.
- d. The majority of ages available for cowcod were read by a single age reader. As data collection increases having additional age double reads and age validation information would be beneficial.
- e. Rockfish species, particularly in southern California waters, have been observed to produce multiple broods within a single year. Collecting biological data to better understand the potential fecundity for cowcod across size and is important to understanding the reproductive potential of the population.

3. The WCGBTS provides some abundance information for smaller cowcod. Adding sampling within the CCA while continuing with a sampling intensity of over 700 cells per year (a four-vessel survey, as opposed to the two-vessel survey conducted in 2019) would provide improved information on the abundance of these size and age classes.

(Cowcod_2019_ExecSummary_SEPT2019BB.pdf)

The lack of access to the CCA by the recreational anglers and lack of updated data for analysis shows the need for this EFP. The use of chartered CPFV vessels with observer coverage fishing inside the CCAs using hook and line methods will gather the needed data. The catch composition will greatly improve the ability of fisheries managers to set the correct depth, area, and limits as they contemplate opening more of the CCA and RCA to fishing.

We anticipate observer coverage by a field scientist trained to recover otoliths, take all necessary measurements and make all assessments as to gender and reproductive state. For cowcod, these data and otoliths would be recovered, measured, or assessed at sea as is usual aboard research vessels. Thus, participating anglers would be able to retain their catch, validating the fisheries dependant nature of the exercise. Neither such field scientists nor the vessel's skipper, passengers or crew shall be burdened with additional tasks unrelated to fishing or gathering these data on cowcod, as such scientific "piggy-backing" can quickly become overburdening.

Under this EFP, a maximum of 20 trips annually would be made with an average of 25 anglers and 50 hooks per vessel (2 per line). Assuming a total cowcod catch of 2 fish per angler per trip, this would result in a maximum of 1,000 fish retained. At an average weight of 15 pounds this would result in a total of 15,000 pounds taken (6.8mt) per year. Any cowcod taken on a given charter in excess of 2x the total number of anglers, per day, would be measured, then descended and released.

The EFP would allow participating anglers to fish depths down to 100fa with access to CCA for all legal species in addition to cowcod. Ultimately lifting the season length and spatial restrictions imposed in rebuilding the cowcod stock will be of tremendous benefit to the recreational fleet and the groundfish resource by more widely distributing fishing effort and allowing greater access.

Several factors have been considered including:

- A limited number of trips,
- Targeting the number of fish recommended by the scientific community,
- Minimizing risk – avoiding an accidental overreach and still rebuilding rockfish species,

Safety at sea – providing participants the opportunity to avoid unsafe sea conditions without penalty.

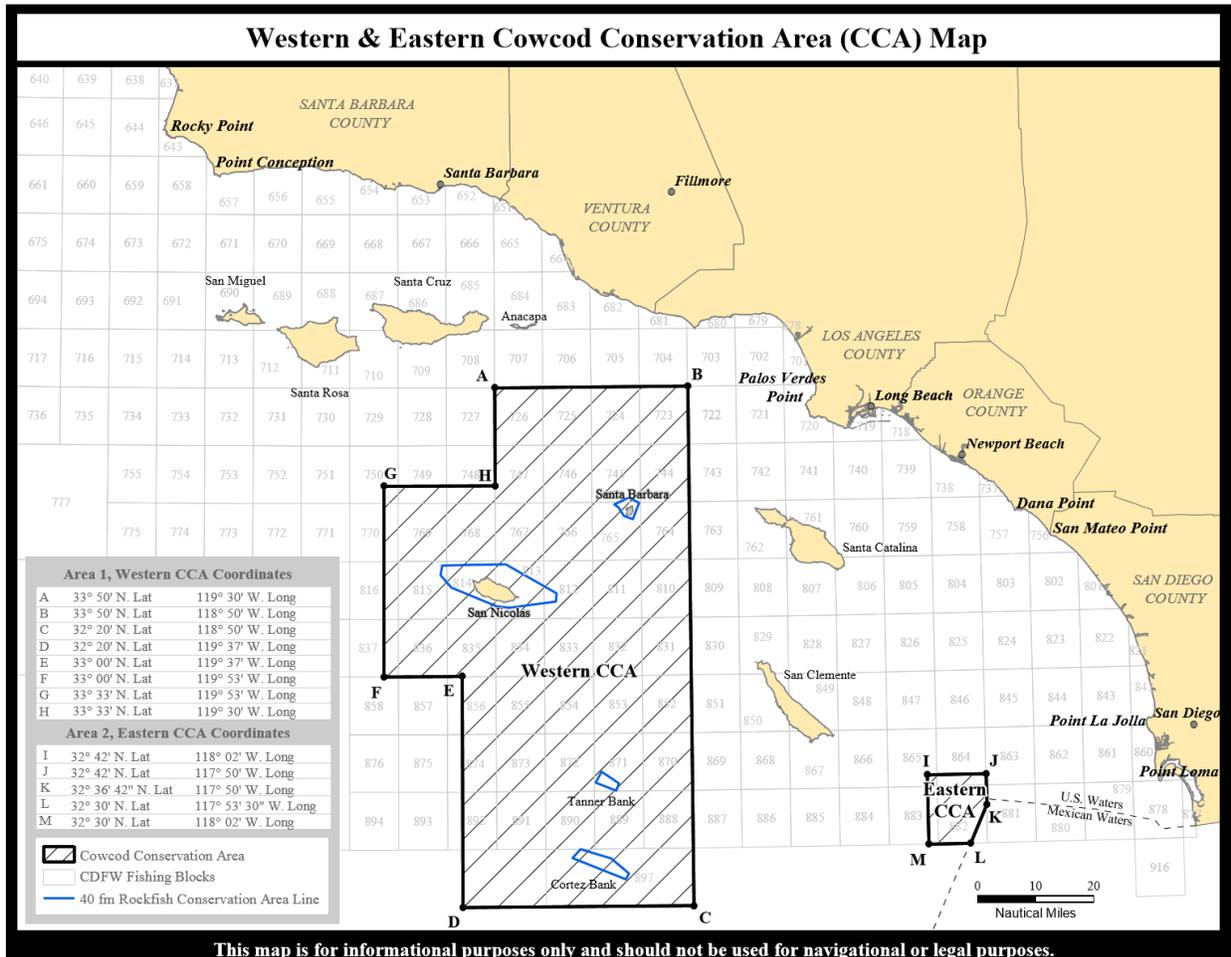
With consideration of these factors, the applicants welcome discussing this proposal with the SST, GMT and GAP, and are open to considering modifications.

Total Duration of the EFP

This EFP proposal is for a total of 2 years (2021-2022) with up to 20 fishing days each for the first and second year or until TAC is met each year.

Location of Fishing under the EFP

The fishing will occur south of 40°10' N. and include areas currently within the CCAs to a depth of 100 fathoms.



Description of the Gear to be Used Specifications

Each angler will fish either 2-hook dropper loop, 2-hook shrimp fly or heavy jig with no more than one additional hook in line. Once the fisher feels the weight hit bottom, they will immediately pull the line up such that it does not drag on bottom so as to avoid snagging.

Effort

Trip length: To be determined based on charter schedules, cost and observer coverage. No more than one trip at a time will be out fishing.

Vessels: Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessels licensed by the State.

Number of vessels fishing under this proposed EFP: maximum total 20 at sea days per year with no more than one vessel fishing at any time.

Species to be Harvested (target and incidental): All rockfish species caught and retained will be within current take and bag restrictions other than cowcod. Anything over will be recorded and released.

No prior data exists from which to pull an exact catch composition estimate.

Catch Accounting and Compliance

This EFP will incorporate a standardized data collection and reporting format. Under the terms of this EFP there will be 100% observer coverage. Fisheries Observers will collect data on fishing gear, location, catch, and disposition of catch.

Precautionary Measures

Given the depth, and abundance of cowcod now to be found within the CCA, the utmost caution will be exercised. Measures include:

1. 100% observer coverage
2. Status and evaluation call before each trip – Before each vessel departs on a trip, a cumulative catch accounting report (i.e., running total for the season) and evaluation of the trips taken thus far will be reviewed to determine if another trip can be made and to discuss lessons learned. If it is likely that the allocated harvest cap would be exceeded in the upcoming trip, then all fishing under the EFP will cease for the season. Participants on each call would include the EFP participants and could include NMFS (SF & OLE), CDFW (Marine Region & Enforcement).
3. A functional daily cap at 2 cowcod per angler. Once the cowcod cap is reached, fishing will cease for that day, irrespective of whether bag limits of other groundfish have been reached, based upon catch accounting as verified by the scientific observer.
4. Trip reports and the normally required CPFV vessel log will be submitted electronically by day's end, such that the total catch of cowcod is kept current.
5. Participating vessels will be AIS equipped with the system active for the duration of the trip.
6. Vessels participating in this EFP will display a banner with "EFP FISHING" written in 1ft high letters and displayed on both port and starboard sides of the vessel.

Data Collection and Analysis Methodology

Set and Haul Data: Position (GPS Coordinates, Time, and Bottom Depth)

Catch: As is standard procedure with vessel logbooks using the electronic method. Cowcod otoliths for aging ashore, along with all standard life history data including, but not limited to TL, TW, Gender, reproductive condition and gonad weight.

Data Analysis including CPUE will be calculated allowing comparison between short and long drops and different gear configurations.

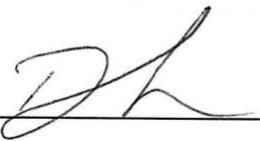
Choosing Participants Vessels participating in this EFP will be chosen on their desire to participate, their ability to accommodate our charter requirements, observer, study requirements and biological sampling needs.

Planned Fishing by Participants: Fishing will take place in appropriate habitats within the latitudes and depths indicated above. Finding these habitats is important to the success of the EFP. Favorable weather conditions are critical for this type of fishing, which involves drifting (not too much wind or current), thus fishing times will be left to the discretion of the captains.

Signatures



Wayne Kotow



Doug Lasko