



# FACT SHEET: GROUNDFISH

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## THE FISH

The groundfish covered by the Council's groundfish fishery management plan (FMP) include over 100 different species that, with a few exceptions, live on or near the bottom of the ocean. These are made up of the following species:

- Rockfish. The plan covers over 64 different species of rockfish, including widow, yellowtail, canary, chilipepper, yelloweye, and vermilion rockfish; bocaccio, cowcod, thornyheads, and Pacific ocean perch.
- Flatfish. The plan covers 12 species of flatfish, including petrale sole, Dover sole, starry flounder, arrowtooth flounder, and Pacific sanddab.
- Roundfish. The six species of roundfish included in the FMP are lingcod, cabezon, kelp greenling, Pacific cod, Pacific whiting (hake), and sablefish.
- Sharks and skates. All endemic skates are managed in the FMP, although all species except longnose skate and big skate are designated Ecosystem Component species that are not actively managed with annual catch limits (there is a monitoring requirement to ensure harvest is not appreciably increasing). The shark species managed in the FMP are leopard shark, soupfin shark, and spiny dogfish.
- Other species. These include ratfish, finescale codling, and all endemic grenadier species.

## THE FISHERY AND GEAR

Since there is such a wide variety of groundfish, many different gear types are used to target them. While the trawl fishery harvests most groundfish, they can also be caught with troll, longline, hook and line, pots, gillnets, and other gear. The West Coast groundfish fishery described in the FMP has five sectors:

- Limited entry trawl. This sector is comprised of fishermen with limited entry permits endorsed for



*A NOAA researcher processes fish for a groundfish trawl survey.*

trawl gear, including bottom and pelagic trawls. The limited entry program limits the number of vessels allowed to participate in a fishery. This sector is rationalized with a system of individual fishing quotas and harvest cooperatives.

- Limited entry fixed gear. This sector is comprised of fishermen with limited entry permits endorsed for line or pot/trap gears. Those limited entry fixed gear permits with a sablefish endorsement are able to target sablefish during the primary season (April through October) to catch individual vessel limits (termed tier limits) of sablefish. While sablefish is the primary target species in this sector, limited entry fixed gear fishers also target other groundfish species such as rockfish.
- Open access. This sector of the groundfish fishery is comprised of fishermen targeting groundfish without limited entry permits, and fishermen who participate in non-groundfish fisheries that incidentally catch groundfish. Trawl gear may not be used in the directed groundfish open access fishery. Trawl gears for target species such as pink shrimp, California halibut, ridgeback prawns, and sea cucumbers are exempted from this rule.
- Recreational. This sector includes anglers targeting groundfish species and others who target non-groundfish

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species but who incidentally take groundfish under recreational gears and regulations. The West Coast recreational fisheries are managed by the coastal states with management coordinated in the Council process.

- **Tribal.** This sector is made up of tribal commercial fishers who have a federally recognized treaty right to fish for federally managed groundfish in their “usual and accustomed” fishing areas. These tribes, all located in Washington state, include the Quinault, Hoh, Quileute, and Makah. Formal allocations to these tribes exist for sablefish and Pacific whiting. Other groundfish species allocations for this sector are decided in the Council biennial management process.

## THE MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

Groundfish are managed through a number of measures including harvest guidelines, quotas, trip and landing limits, area restrictions, seasonal closures, and gear restrictions (such as small trawl footrope requirements for trawling shoreward of the trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCAs are areas where fishing is prohibited to specific gears or sectors). All sectors of the groundfish fishery are currently constrained by the need to rebuild groundfish species that are overfished and managed under rebuilding plans (cowcod and yelloweye rockfish). Rebuilding plans specify the harvest control rules and target recovery years for these species.

The Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan contains the rules for managing the groundfish fishery. It outlines the areas, species, regulations, and methods that the Council and the Federal government must follow to make changes to the fishery. The plan also creates guidelines for the biennial process of setting harvest levels. Below are three general processes used to regulate groundfish harvests. Since these processes can take up to six months, they may be streamlined for some decisions.

The process for controversial or complex issues takes at least three Council meetings. Proposals for management measures may come from the public, from participating management agencies, from advisory groups, or from Council members. If the Council wants to pursue these proposals, it asks for other possible solutions to the problem being addressed and then directs the Groundfish Management Team (GMT), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and/or Council staff to prepare an analysis. At the next meeting when such a

proposal is on the agenda, the Council reviews the analysis and chooses a range of alternatives and possibly a preliminary preferred alternative. The analysis is then made available for public review, and the Council makes a final decision at the next meeting the item is scheduled.

The biennial management process was implemented in 2003 through Amendment 17 to the groundfish FMP and is detailed in Council Operating Procedure 9. Under the biennial cycle, eligible management measures are implemented for a two-year period and adjusted through routine inseason actions. Those management measures not eligible for implementation within the biennium can be considered for future action by the Council. Separate harvest specifications (overfishing limits [OFLs], acceptable biological catches [ABCs], and annual catch limits [ACLs]) are identified for actively managed stocks and stock complexes each year in the two-year period. This cycle provides more time for the Council and NMFS to work on other critical groundfish issues, and more time for public comment. At least a three-meeting process (typically September, November, April, and June) is used to decide biennial harvest specifications and management measures:

*September* (in odd years): the Council adopts final OFLs, final ABCs, and a range of ACLs for stocks where a change in the harvest control rules is contemplated. The Council provides initial guidance, including a range of new management measures for preliminary analysis.

*November* (in odd years): the Council chooses (for public review) preliminary preferred ACLs for stocks where a change in the harvest control rules is contemplated, and adopts a range of management measures for more detailed analysis.

*April* (in even years): the Council decides on final harvest levels, and chooses preliminary preferred management measures for public review.

*June* (in even years): the Council decides on final management measures.

The Council reviews management performance (i.e., fishing-related mortality, including landings plus discard mortalities) and socioeconomic impacts relative to management objectives (e.g., rebuilding plans) during the two-year management period in order to consider modifying harvest specifications and management measures in the next biennial

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management period. New assessment results are also considered when deciding biennial harvest specifications and management measures.

Pacific whiting are managed annually, with harvest levels set each year under the terms of the U.S.-Canada Pacific Whiting Treaty.

After considering Council recommendations and public comments, NMFS publishes the adopted regulations, thereby putting them into effect. For non-routine and annual management decisions, NMFS publishes a *Federal Register* notice and provides a public comment period before finalizing the recommendations. The GMT is involved throughout the decision-making process. The team is made up of staff from the three coastal state fishery management agencies (Washington, Oregon, and California), NMFS, and a representative for the tribes with a recognized treaty right to take federally-managed groundfish. Traditionally, the GMT monitors catch rates, recommends harvest regulations and annual limits, and analyzes the impacts of various management measures.

The GMT members present information to the Council, Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP), and other Council advisory bodies. GMT meetings are open to the public and public comment is generally accepted during the meetings.

The GAP advises the Council on policies and management decisions that affect the groundfish fishery and the public. The panel includes industry representatives of commercial and recreational groundfish sectors, a tribal representative, charterboat owners and operators, fishing organization representatives, processors, an environmental organization representative, and a public at-large representative. Each major commercial and recreational gear group is represented. Meetings are held at most Council meetings. The GAP operates by consensus and through majority and minority position statements that are offered as advice to the Council. GAP meetings are open to the public, and public comment is generally accepted during the meetings.

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