

## WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2021 AND 2022 GROUNDFISH MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) met with stakeholders on January 6 and March 11, 2020 to review and discuss proposed recreational management measures for 2021 and 2022. In this report, we summarize key points from the analysis of the proposed management measures and recommend preliminary preferred alternatives for public review.

### Recreational Management Measures

Recreational fisheries in Washington are primarily constrained by yelloweye rockfish although in recent years, additional measures have been needed for black rockfish. Closer attention to catch of other nearshore species has also become necessary to ensure catch does not exceed HGs. Depth restrictions have been an effective tool for minimizing encounters and keeping catch within state specific harvest guidelines (HG). Largely influenced by the yelloweye rockfish annual catch limit (ACL) alternatives under consideration for 2021-2022, the integrated analysis for Washington recreational fisheries ([Agenda Item G.6, Attachment 2](#)) considers management alternatives that focus on the timing and need for depth and area restrictions. The alternatives also consider reducing restrictions on the retention of healthy rockfish species and take an additional incremental step toward the relaxation of depth and area closures that began in 2019 and 2020.

The proposed measures are projected to keep catch within preliminary harvest limits for 2021 and 2022 (Table 1). We would like to point out that some of the projected impacts summarized in this report have been updated from what is described in the integrated analysis ([Agenda Item G.6, Attachment 2](#)). Data on the performance of the fishery under the relaxed measures in 2019 was incorporated into the analysis and lends confidence to the recommendations to the additional steps recommended below.

Based on stakeholder input, WDFW recommends the following management measures as the preliminary preferred alternatives (PPA) to be considered along with the full range of alternatives for public review.

#### Bag Limits and Sublimits

##### Recommendation:

1. Revise the provision that allows flatfish retention in excess of the 9 fish daily aggregate limit from three to five flatfish, in all marine areas (Marine Areas 1 through 4).

##### Discussion:

Currently, flatfish species are part of the daily aggregate bag limit. However, these species are healthy and allowing retention of additional flatfish outside of the 9 fish daily limit would provide

additional opportunity for recreational anglers interested in targeting them. This measure is not likely to increase encounters and mortality for yelloweye rockfish, nearshore species like black rockfish, or other nearshore species as anglers are less likely to encounter these while targeting flatfish on sandy substrate.

#### North Coast (Marine Areas 3 and 4)

##### Recommendation:

1. Revise the dates that the 20-fathom depth restriction is in place to: June 1 through either, July 31 or August 15;
2. Allow the retention of the following species seaward of 20 fathoms on days open to the recreational halibut fishery: Pacific cod, sablefish, lingcod, bocaccio rockfish, silvergray rockfish, canary rockfish, widow rockfish, and yellowtail rockfish.
3. Allow yellowtail and widow rockfish retention seaward of 20 fathoms in July and August;

##### Discussion:

Depth restrictions are the most restrictive in the north coast management area where encounters with yelloweye rockfish are the highest. With only minimal modifications, recreational groundfish fishing has been limited to the area shoreward of 20-fathoms from May through September since 2006. The alternatives for the north coast subarea continue to provide anglers with more access to healthy groundfish species that have been limited by the 20 fathom depth restriction.

The alternatives would reduce the time period when the 20 fathom restriction is in place by no more than one month compared to what was in place in 2019 and 2020. Yelloweye catch per angler from May 2019, which is the most recent period when groundfish retention was allowed seaward of 20 fathoms, was used to estimate projected impacts for the time period when the depth restriction would be lifted.

In addition, the preferred alternative would allow the retention of more rockfish species on days open to the recreational halibut fishery and the retention of yellowtail rockfish and widow rockfish would be allowed in July and August. This action would provide recreational anglers with access to underutilized and recreationally popular deepwater rockfish species such as canary rockfish. Allowing anglers to achieve more of their groundfish daily limit while fishing in deepwater could have the secondary benefit of relieving some pressure on nearshore species.

In 2019 and 2020, yellowtail rockfish and widow rockfish retention was allowed seaward of 20 fathoms in July and August on days open to the salmon fishery. The rationale behind this allowance is that these two midwater species are often encountered while anglers troll for salmon. However, the salmon season was so restricted in 2019 that there were few days where anglers could retain yellowtail rockfish and widow rockfish. Removing the provision that links this measure to salmon days would provide additional opportunity to access healthy mid-water rockfish species without being constrained if salmon seasons are short. Given that anglers would not need to be targeting salmon in order to retain yellowtail and widow rockfish seaward of 20 fathoms, a

precautionary approach to estimating projected impacts to yelloweye rockfish was used. The projection assumed complete removal of the 20 fathom line for both July and August and the yelloweye per angler rate observed on halibut trips in May 2019. These trips provide the best available data on yelloweye catch rates because that is the time and trip type where anglers are known to have been fishing deeper than 20 fathoms.

As noted, these changes build on the modest changes adopted for 2019 and 2020 and continue to provide access to deepwater areas and healthy groundfish stocks in a precautionary manner. The analysis shows that the recommended measures will keep catch from exceeding yelloweye rockfish ACTs and HGs while also likely shifting effort away from stocks like black rockfish and other nearshore species where catch has been close to recreational harvest guidelines in recent years.

### South Coast (Marine Area 2)

#### Recommendation:

1. Revise the 30-fathom line to be in place from May 1 through May 31;
2. Open the deepwater lingcod closure area from June 1 – 15 and September 1 – 30;
3. Open the Washington South Coast and Westport YRCA.

#### Discussion:

Input from south coast (Marine Area 2) stakeholders echoed the input from stakeholders from the north coast (Marine Areas 3 and 4) subarea that indicates a preference for a conservative approach to implementing management changes in 2021 and 2022.

Revising the start date for the 30-fathom depth restriction from the second Saturday in March through May 31 to, May 1 to May 31 would provide a greater amount of access to deepwater areas prior to the opening of the halibut season in early May. Projected impacts for the later start date were estimated by looking at the yelloweye rockfish encounters per angler in 2017 and assumed an increase in angler effort of 35 percent for the months where the depth restriction would no longer be in place (March and April). Projected mortality and angler effort from 2019 were used for months where management measures are not proposed to change. Using the high yelloweye per angler encounters from 2017, even though yelloweye rockfish retention was prohibited, may better reflect current yelloweye abundance compared to past years given its progress toward rebuilding. Final yelloweye estimates of mortality from 2019 were used to estimate projected impacts in months where depth restrictions remained unchanged.

Angler effort is expected to increase as a result of the added fishing opportunity the recommendation changes would provide. Additionally, salmon seasons could continue to be restrictive. Poor recreational salmon opportunities have shifted more recreational effort to groundfish fisheries in recent years. Compared to 2015-2016, limited salmon fishing opportunities and other factors increased angler effort by approximately 35 percent per month. This 35 percent

increase was used to estimate increased effort and the resulting projected impacts to yelloweye rockfish.

Also following on management measures adopted for 2019 and 2020, the deepwater lingcod closure in Marine Area 2 would be open for two more weeks than in September 2019. In addition to the two week opening in June, the entire month of September would be open to lingcod fishing in the deepwater area. Projected impacts for yelloweye rockfish and angler effort assumes that catch and effort double in September compared to what was observed in 2019.

The preliminary preferred alternative also includes opening the Westport Offshore YRCA and the South Coast YRCA to recreational fishing for groundfish and halibut year round. The South Coast YRCA is a small closure, three by one nautical miles in size, was implemented during the 2007-2008 biennial harvest specification and management cycle<sup>1</sup> in response to higher yelloweye rockfish and canary rockfish encounters during 2006. WDFW added another small closure (two by one nautical mile) in the same general area in 2009<sup>2</sup>, referred to as the Westport Offshore YRCA. Both areas have remained closed to recreational groundfish and halibut fishing since their implementation.. Commercial fishing is not prohibited in these areas.

When these YRCAs were implemented, WDFW worked with stakeholders to identify the specific boundaries for both areas. While there was no quantitative data to analyze and project a reduction in yelloweye rockfish and canary rockfish mortality resulting from these closures, anecdotal information from recreational charter anglers from the south coast management area suggested that there was enough fishing effort on a significant concentration of the rebuilding species in these areas that a closure would be a meaningful measure to help keep recreational catch below the HGs.

With canary rockfish rebuilt and higher recreational HGs for yelloweye rockfish in 2021-2022, the additional restrictions of these small closed areas are no longer necessary. Reopening both YRCAs can provide anglers with access to healthy lingcod and canary rockfish stocks. WDFW still does not collect spatial data at the level of detail needed to quantify increased yelloweye rockfish and canary rockfish encounters that might be expected as a result of opening these YRCAs and there will likely be additional mortality as a result of open these areas.

However, given that recreational catch of yelloweye rockfish under the preferred alternative is projected to be 5.72 mt, which is 1.78 mt and 2.08 mt lower than the ACTs in 2021 and 2022 respectively and reflects an even larger buffer of 3.98 mt and 4.18 mt in 2021 and 2022 respectively between projected catch and the HG, there is sufficient leeway to consider opening these areas inspite of the lack of quantitative projected estimates.

Further, as described in federal regulations (50 CFR 660.60 (c) (3)), these closed areas are a routine management tool similar to seasons and bag limit adjustments, reinstating the closed area can be

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<sup>1</sup> [Final Environmental Impact Statement for 2007-2008 Groundfish Harvest Specifications and Management Measures](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Final Environmental Impact Statement for 2009-2010 Groundfish Harvest Specifications and Management Measures](#)

implemented rapidly through state emergency regulation followed by inseason action if necessary to keep catch within Washington's HGs or ACTs in 2021 and 2022.

### Columbia River (Marine Area 1)

#### Recommendation:

1. Open the deepwater lingcod closure area June 1 – 15 and September 1 – 30;
2. Allow groundfish retention on all depth halibut days, either all groundfish or, select species to align with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife regulations.

#### Discussion:

Stakeholders from the Washington portion of the Marine Area 1 subarea have requested consideration of allowing rockfish retention with halibut on board during the all depth halibut fishery. Currently, groundfish retention is prohibited during the all-depth halibut fishery with the exception of flatfish species, sablefish, and Pacific cod on days open to the recreational halibut fishery. Lingcod retention is also allowed with halibut on board but only north of the Washington–Oregon border.

The Columbia River area is co-managed with ODFW. This measure was analyzed to align WDFW regulations with ODFW's proposal to consider allowing longleader gear and limited groundfish retention during the Pacific halibut fishery. While the analysis considered the retention of all groundfish, the measure could be limited to the those species allowed under ODFW's longleader gear (yellowtail rockfish, widow rockfish, canary rockfish, redstriped rockfish, greenstriped rockfish, slivergray rockfish, chilipepper, boccaccio, and blue/deacon rockfish). Limiting it to these species could minimize catches of black rockfish and other nearshore species such as copper rockfish and quillback rockfish where any increased mortality could risk exceeding HGs.

Relaxing the deepwater lingcod closure restriction in Marine Area 1 would allow access to deepwater lingcod during a similar timeframe to that allowed in Marine Area 2. This would provide additional regulatory consistency between these two adjacent management areas. Additionally, this approach would allow opening the deepwater area in a precautionary fashion. The proposal would only allow relatively short openings in the spring and fall, doing so would allow for better understanding of potential impacts to yelloweye rockfish and other species before completely removing long standing depth restrictions.

### Recreational Fisheries Summary

The preliminary preferred alternatives recommended in this report reflect the continued interest by Washington stakeholders and WDFW in taking a precautionary approach to the relaxation of measures put in place to lower catches of yelloweye rockfish and canary rockfish.

The conservation need for such measures is much different than when first implemented. Nonetheless, precaution remains warranted because of the management uncertainty. WDFW has the adaptive management capacity using Washington's Ocean Sampling Program (OSP) and

ability to rapidly change rules inseason to respond to catch that increases unexpectedly. OSP can produce estimates of groundfish catch with a one-month lag time. Our regulatory processes can react quickly to the need for additional depth restrictions, area closures, groundfish retention restrictions, or changes to seasons through emergency changes to state regulations if inseason catch reports indicate that recreational harvests of overfished species or non-overfished species are exceeding pre-season projections to the point where HGs, ACTs, or ACLs are at risk of being exceeded.

Projected mortality for the Washington recreational fishery in 2019 and 2020 under the PPA are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Projected Mortality, 2021-2022 HG/ACT, and projected mortality (mt) for the Washington Recreational fishery under the Preferred Alternative.**

<b>Stock</b>				<b>2021-2022</b>
	<b>2019 Final Mortality</b>	<b>2021 WA HG/ACT</b>	<b>2022 WA HG/ACT</b>	<b>Projected mortality PPA</b>
Canary Rockfish	13.47	43.2	42.2	15.34
YELLOWEYE ROCKFISH	3.73	9.7 / 7.5	9.9 / 7.8	5.72
Black Rockfish	234.49	274.9	272.9	234.49
Lingcod	170.11			183.89
Nearshore Rockfish	10.04	18.4	17.7	10.04
<i>Blue Rockfish</i>	<i>1.24</i>	<i>6.3</i>	<i>6.1</i>	<i>1.24</i>
<i>Quillback Rockfish</i>	<i>3.16</i>	<i>0.7</i>	<i>0.7</i>	<i>3.16</i>
<i>Copper Rockfish</i>	<i>3.08</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>2.1</i>	<i>3.08</i>
<i>China Rockfish</i>	<i>2.56</i>	<i>9.1</i>	<i>8.7</i>	<i>2.56</i>
<i>Brown Rockfish</i>	-	-	-	-
<i>Grass Rockfish</i>	-	-	-	-
Yellowtail Rockfish	48.21			60.46
Vermilion Rockfish	2.69			3.24
WA Cabezon/Kelp Greenling	10.64	17.7	15.1	10.64
Cabezon	9.01	12.2	9.6	9.01
Kelp Greenling	1.63	5.5	5.5	1.63