

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON INSEASON ADJUSTMENTS INFORMATIONAL REPORT ON EARLY COVID-19 IMPACTS TO FISHERIES

The purpose of this report is to provide a first look at initial impacts of COVID-19 on groundfish fisheries and fishing communities by summarizing the limited quantitative and qualitative information available as of April 9, 2020. This early and static look at a dynamic situation will not attempt to predict long-term impacts of the ongoing disruptions and closures to West Coast commercial and recreational groundfish fisheries and dependent communities. As documented extensively in the [2019-2020 Harvest Specification and Biennial Management Measures analysis](#), West Coast fishing communities depend on a portfolio of commercial and recreational fisheries to support year-round operations. The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) will continue to monitor the status of groundfish and complimentary fisheries closely and, to the extent allowable under Federal regulations, suggest inseason responses to maximize economic opportunity for commercial and recreational participants throughout the remainder of 2020.

Commercial Fisheries

Industry participants along the coast have spoken with GMT members about the impacts of the abrupt loss of important overseas markets, particularly the closure of Chinese markets in late January. This negatively impacted both the tail end of the Dungeness crab and the particularly lucrative live crab fisheries. With the loss of markets for crab and, production output shifted to cold storage, and but with freezer space filling the volume of crab, groundfish, and other purchases will likely decrease. Frozen products generally provide lower revenue than fresh or live catch (Table 19, [Catch Share Five Year Review](#)), and a switch from premium fresh to frozen product negatively impacts both processors and the ex-vessel revenues paid to catcher vessels. Processors are also facing disruptions to shipping and labor shortages because of shelter-in-place orders that came into effect for most of the West Coast through the third and fourth weeks of March. Restaurants that remain open after these orders offer limited takeout and delivery menus, leading to reported reduction in demand for fresh domestic catch. Reports also indicate increasing retail and supermarket demand, including small, developing markets for community-supported fishery deliveries, which may partially compensate for the lost restaurant market.

The combination of decline in Asian markets and closure of domestic restaurants, among other factors, appears to have led to a decline in already-low sablefish prices, from an average of \$2.18 in January 2020, to \$1.22 in March, to \$0.81 in the first week of April (for which limited data are available). This decrease has negatively affected both fixed gear and bottom trawl groundfish fisheries. Preliminary e-ticket data indicate the first week of April prices for mid-water trawl rockfish are \$0.27 per pound, about half of the January value of \$0.49 per pound. Available e-ticket data do not show a significant change in the number of dealers or vessels participating, or volume of deliveries through the end of March. The GMT can provide a comprehensive summary of March and April landings at the June Council meeting.

Many West Coast commercial fishing and processing operations depend on seasonal participation in Alaskan fisheries. Alaskan fisheries face similar demand-side disruptions as those on the West Coast, as well as supply-side challenges, shared by some West Coast processors, of restrictions on seasonal-processing employees entering remote rural communities with limited medical resources. West Coast businesses and their communities, particularly in Washington and Oregon, are likely to be impacted by any declines in upcoming/ongoing Pacific cod, sablefish, Pacific halibut, salmon, walleye pollock, and crab fisheries in Alaska.

Recreational Fisheries

Many rural communities along the West Coast depend on income from recreational fishing, which supports local hotels, restaurants, and fishery support sectors like ice, bait, and gear shops. These communities also have less access to medical resources than urban areas, for example [Grays Harbor County, WA](#) (Westport) has 2,910 people to every primary care doctor, compared to 830 people per primary care doctor in [King County, WA](#) (Seattle). Some of these communities along the coast started taking measures to encourage tourists to stay at home to slow the spread of the disease before statewide shelter-in-place guidance. After statewide and local social distance guidance is relaxed, recreational fisheries may also be slow to rebound, with unemployment claims at unprecedented levels and individuals and families less likely to spend money on travel ([The New York Times](#)).

Washington Recreational Fisheries

The Washington coastal bottomfish fishery opened on Saturday, March 14th. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Makah Tribe closed access to their port for all non-tribal members on March 16th, and the Quileute Tribe closed access to their port for all non-tribal members on March 17th. The Westport Marina closed their boat launch on March 24th. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) issued a [statewide closure](#) to all recreational fishing on March 25th, which continues through at least May 4th, with a possible extension in accordance to Governor Inslee's "[Stay Home, Stay Healthy](#)" order. WDFW noted that recreational fishing as an activity does not inherently pose a risk to the health and safety of Washingtonians, but the additional activities involved, such as getting ice at a gas station along the way or launching a boat at a public ramp, increase the likelihood of violating the Governor's order.

Bottomfish angler trips in the few days of fishing opportunity in 2020 thus far are only a fraction of the typical ~4,800 bottomfish angler trips that occur during March and April. The current closure includes 2 days of halibut openings previously scheduled to begin on April 30th. May is typically a busy month in all ports, with an average of ~19,300 bottomfish and halibut angler trips coastwide. Table 1 details the average monthly angler trips for March through May and associated economic contributions. The month of May includes halibut trips, since many anglers combine their halibut effort with bottomfish targeting in areas where regulations allow.

Table 1. Average (2017-2019) monthly bottomfish charter and private angler trips and economic contributions for March, April, and May in Washington. Trip multipliers are from the [IOPAC Model](#), and units are 2015 dollars.

Month	Charter		Private		Total	
	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution
March	1,295	\$1,000,775	578	\$188,265	1,873	\$1,189,040
April	2,079	\$1,607,467	859	\$279,673	2,938	\$1,884,140
May*	6,348	\$4,907,536	12,988	\$4,229,854	19,336	\$9,137,390

*Includes halibut trips.

The first estimate of 2020, for the month of March, will be available in early May. Given the limited opportunity made available, an abnormally low number of angler trips and impacts are anticipated in comparison to the past three-year average.

Oregon Recreational Fisheries

The Oregon recreational fishery started out slowly in 2020. Winds and ocean conditions prevented marine effort, as most of the Oregon bar crossings were restricted, or closed, for most of the month of January. The resulting estimate of bottomfish effort and catch is zero for both. February had some good weather windows, and effort was very close to the 2017-2019 average. However, landings of black rockfish and lingcod were slightly below the 3-year average.

On March 12th, Governor Brown started to put in restrictions due to COVID-19, including limiting large gatherings and travel and increasing social distancing. Beginning on Sunday, March 21st, several communities and ports on the Oregon North Coast started restricting access to recreational facilities, including boat ramps, cleaning stations, and restrooms. On March 23rd, Governor Brown issued [Executive Order 20-12](#): “Stay Home, Save Lives,” which prohibited non-essential travel and gatherings outside of home or residence. At that time, most charter operators voluntarily suspended operations, and most Oregon ports statewide closed facilities to recreational fishing activities. On March 25th, the [Oregon State Marine Board](#) (OSMB) provided their interpretation that all Oregon charter and guide operations were prohibited by Executive Order 20-12, due to the requisite non-essential travel and the inability to maintain the minimum suggested physical distance of six feet. The above has resulted in the cessation of most, but not all, recreational bottomfish fishing activity in Oregon. Boats moored at private facilities or anglers who have access to open private ramps are still able to launch. Additionally, some beach/bank fishing continues to occur in localities where access has not been restricted by local governments.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) Oregon Recreational Boat Survey (ORBS) has limited samplers during the winter and early spring months. Those samplers are still performing their normal effort estimates (via video boat counts in most ports) and interviewing anglers, when they can do so while maintaining six feet of distance, but at a lower sample rate. They will continue to do so unless the Governor or ODFW Director’s office provides additional guidance. Data on effort and catches in March will be available in early May, and April data will be available in early June.

In most years, effort starts to increase in March as the weather improves, slightly decreases in April, and then intensifies in May (Table 2). Due to Executive Order 20-12, closure of local facilities and access, and people practicing social distancing, effort in March and April will decrease significantly from recent years. Similar decreases are expected for any future months when social distancing restrictions are in place.

Table 2. Average (2017-2019) monthly bottomfish charter and private angler trips and economic contributions for March, April, and May in Oregon. Trip multipliers are from the [IOPAC Model](#), and units are 2015 dollars.

Month	Charter		Private		Total	
	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution
March	4,280	\$ 1,867,450	4,669	\$ 792,469	8,949	\$ 2,659,919
April	2,820	\$1,371,422	1,994	\$338,442	4,814	\$ 1,709,864
May	5,840	\$ 2,840,019	7,761	\$1,317,275	13,601	\$ 4,157,383

Effort reductions lead to corresponding decreases in impacts (including discard mortality) to bottomfish species. Impact trends correlate with effort: starting to pick up in March, a bit of a dip in April, then ramping up in May. Landings of black rockfish in March through May are approximately equal to the landings in either July or August, about 20 percent of annual landings of black rockfish and other species except cabezon, which cannot be landed until July 1. Given the expected reduction in landings during months with social distancing measures in place, ODFW has already begun to receive requests to provide additional harvesting opportunities by increasing the general marine fish daily bag limit once recreational activities resume. Currently the general marine daily bag limit is 5 fish per day in Oregon state regulations and 10 fish in Federal regulations, which allows ODFW the flexibility to increase the bag limit in state regulation inseason, while still staying within the Federal bag limit regulation.

At this time, the recreational Pacific halibut fisheries are scheduled to begin April 30th. However, the impacts of anticipated delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and necessary social distancing are unclear.

California Recreational Fisheries

Prior to the opening season dates for boat-based fishing in each designated management area, the California recreational fishery has limited groundfish opportunities (shore-based and California scorpionfish) during January and February. Catch and effort levels from these fishing modes were minimal and consistent with prior years. On March 1, boat-based angling in the Southern Management Area (south of 34° 27' N. lat.) opened, with moderate weather conditions and typical effort.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, California Governor Newsom issued statewide [Executive Order N-3320](#) on March 19th, which required “all individuals living in the State of California to stay home or at their place of residence except as needed to maintain continuity of operations of the Federal critical infrastructure sectors.” This measure included the practice of maintaining a

minimum six feet of physical distance in addition to eliminating or minimizing non-essential activity. As of April 8th, the groundfish fishing regulations in California have not been formally changed or modified as a result of this order. However, many local municipalities and private harbor districts have taken action over the last several weeks to limit or close launching facilities, which has directly affected the private fleet and Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessel operations. Because the governmental COVID-19 responses are changing rapidly, the current guidance from the Governor to the public advises checking the latest Federal, state, county, and city orders regarding proposed activities to ensure compliance with the latest recommendations and directives.

The California Recreational Fishery Survey program (CRFS) ceased all sampling but is working diligently to adapt to the situation. Site effort counts are being conducted in locations that still have limited launching or private access capabilities, while remaining in compliance with physical distance recommendations. Despite these efforts, catch estimates for March and beyond will be affected. Partial estimates of catch and effort for March 2020, when restrictions to human movement and social distancing guidance went into effect, are expected to be available in early May.

Typically, angler effort increases considerably from March through June as the boat-based groundfish fisheries open successive management areas in the state, and access to fishing grounds increase with improved weather and ocean conditions. The Central and San Francisco Management Areas opened April 1, and the Mendocino and Northern Management Areas are scheduled to open on May 1. With government orders directing people to leave home only for essential functions or errands and to continue physical distancing, as well as the closure of many businesses and ocean access points, only a small proportion of the bottomfish effort normally seen during these months is expected to occur, resulting in lost trips and revenue that will be significant (Table 3). The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has received several requests seeking to extend the 2020 recreational seasons into January 2021 to offset the lost time on the water. With the potential for months of lost economic opportunities, it can be expected that more requests will be submitted seeking measures to offset and provide maximum relief.

Table 3. Average (2017-2019) monthly bottomfish charter and private angler trips and economic contributions for March, April, and May in California Trip multipliers are from the [IOPAC Model](#), and units are 2015 dollars.

Month	Charter		Private		Total	
	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution	Bottomfish Trips	Economic Contribution
March	32,470	\$9,935,046	7,575	\$2,317,909	40,045	\$12,252,955
April	39,720	\$12,153,407	12,517	\$3,830,031	52,237	\$15,983,439
May	44,864	\$13,727,613	18,148	\$5,552,909	63,012	\$19,280,522