

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON EXEMPTED FISHING PERMIT FOR YELLOWEYE ROCKFISH

This report accompanies the proposal that the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has submitted to continue the Enhanced Yelloweye Recreational Fishery Biological Sampling Project Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) ([Agenda Item E.4, Attachment 3, November 2021](#)). WDFW initially applied for this EFP in 2019 and began collecting yelloweye rockfish in 2021. The new EFP would continue the same sampling plan and objectives into 2023-2024, as was anticipated in the 2019 proposal.¹ The purpose remains to collect scientific data from the recreational halibut and bottomfish fishery off Washington while evaluating the feasibility and benefits of establishing the program in regulation.

The importance of biological data collection, specifically length and age data, from yelloweye rockfish to improve estimates of stock status and productivity was highlighted in the 2017 stock assessment ([Gertseva, V. and Cope, J.M. 2017](#)). The EFP would address this need by allowing select recreational anglers to retain yelloweye rockfish and provide them to WDFW staff. As described in Council Operating Procedure 19, an EFP is necessary to allow anglers to engage in prohibited activity and can be issued to state agencies for the purpose of collecting limited experimental data.

Outside of the EFP, retention of yelloweye rockfish has been prohibited in the Washington recreational fishery since 2002 when the stock was declared overfished. Projections for when yelloweye rockfish are expected to be rebuilt have improved since the 2011 rebuilding plan, which projected the stock to be rebuilt by 2074 ([Taylor, I.G. 2011](#)). Yelloweye rockfish are now projected to rebuild by 2029, based on the 2018 rebuilding analysis ([Gertseva, V. and Cope, J.M. 2018](#)). The Washington recreational fishery is the major source of yelloweye catches off Washington. Prohibiting retention has been a successful management strategy but has come at the cost of losing data. Prior to 2021, the first year of the WDFW EFP, the only data that was collected from the recreational fishery was the number of discarded fish, as reported by recreational anglers to WDFW's Ocean Sampling Program (OSP). Key information for stock assessments, such as length, age, sex, and fecundity of the catch, were not available. Prohibiting retention also requires WDFW to borrow a potentially non-representative average weight from other fisheries when estimating total mortality of yelloweye.²

The number of fish collected as part of the 2021-22 EFP is on track with the target number stated in the initial 2019 proposal. WDFW set a target of collecting 100-200 fish for the entire biennium, and as highlighted in the 2021 Preliminary Report of Results ([Agenda Item E.4, Attachment 8, November 2021](#)), 97 yelloweye rockfish were delivered to WDFW as of October 15, 2021. This amounts to approximately 0.2 mt, but WDFW anticipates that any extra mortality due to EFP retention would arise from retained fish that would have been discarded with a descending device

¹ The 2019 proposal can be viewed at [Agenda Item H.5, Attachment 8, November 2019](#).

² OSP estimates the total number of fish caught, discarded, and retained. The average weight is used to convert the estimate of numbers of fish into metric tons.

and estimated to survive. The same target of 100-200 fish is set in the 2023-24 proposal ([Agenda Item E.4, Attachment 3, November 2021](#)).

The EFP involves working with select anglers primarily because of WDFW's limited capacity to collect the retained fish. The 2021-22 proposal anticipated working with approximately 10 private and charter vessels, and at the time, NMFS confirmed that participation of up to 15 vessels is acceptable. In 2021, a total of twelve vessels participated in the EFP. For the 2023-2024 EFP, we propose working with up to 15 total vessels, a mix of private and charter. This will not increase the mortality impacts, because the program will stop after collecting 200 fish. In addition, and as was the case for the 2021-22 biennium, "a set-aside is not needed to execute this EFP, as catch will be accounted for in the Washington recreational share of the yelloweye rockfish harvest guideline" ([Agenda Item H.5.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, November 2019](#)).

WDFW is currently evaluating the 2021 data for use in the average weight calculation for 2021 mortality estimates, and all data will be loaded into RecFIN's Biological Data System for use in the next yelloweye rockfish stock assessment. We anticipate the 97 fish collected in 2021 contributing to improved estimates of the age and length composition and selectivity in the next assessment. In sum, this EFP will continue providing critical fishery data and improve biological information on the yelloweye rockfish stock off Washington. Furthermore, it would give managers some insight on management measures that may allow for a permanent and perhaps larger program for collecting yelloweye rockfish and species. Creation of such a program would require a change to federal and state regulations.