

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON NON-TRAWL SECTOR AREA MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is proposing to include limited changes to the seaward boundary of the non-trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) off Washington in the Range of Alternatives (ROA) for Non-trawl Sector Area Management. WDFW proposes identifying select areas that meet the following objectives:

1. Minimize additional bycatch of yelloweye rockfish.
2. Avoid conflicts with recreational and other fisheries currently fishing within 100 fm.
3. Avoid areas of sensitive habitat and minimize potential habitat impacts.
4. Identify areas that are large enough and distant enough from the 100-fm line to be enforceable by Vessel Monitoring Systems.

WDFW anticipates that areas meeting these objectives would generally be seaward of the 75-fm line, as currently defined in regulation, but may use specific coordinates that do not attempt to follow a single depth contour. WDFW recommends that the Council continue to limit the other changes contemplated in the ROA to the non-trawl RCA to areas off Oregon and California.

I. Background

As noted in the [Agenda Item E.6 Attachment 1](#) analysis under this November agenda item, the non-trawl RCA off Washington closes waters between the shoreline and the boundary line approximating the 100-fm depth contour. The original intent of closing this area to non-trawl commercial fishing was to promote the rebuilding of rockfish stocks. Off Washington, the non-trawl RCA was a main feature of the rebuilding plans for canary and yelloweye rockfishes. Unlike in California and Oregon, it extends to the shoreline and leaves no nearshore areas open to commercial groundfish targeting.

The map in Figure 1 shows the current non-trawl RCA off Washington along with the 75-fm depth contour defined in regulation. The map also shows a large area off the northern Washington coast restricted to protect yelloweye rockfish. The North Coast Recreational Yelloweye RCA (YRCA), which makes up 514 square miles, is closed to recreational fishing for groundfish and halibut and is a designated area to be avoided (voluntary closure) by commercial fixed gear. The North Coast Commercial YRCA overlaps a portion of the North Coast Recreational YRCA and is closed to commercial fixed gear fishing. The map also displays the recreational deepwater lingcod closure, which has been a key part of rebuilding canary and yelloweye rockfishes while maintaining recreational opportunity in the state. With canary rockfish rebuilt, WDFW and the Council have been exploring precautionary relaxations of the lingcod closure. In contrast to a closure in place during the full lingcod season, under the current season structure, anglers are prohibited from fishing for, retaining, or possessing lingcod seaward of the line except on days open to the primary (all-depth) halibut season in Marine Area 2 as well as from June 1 through June 15 and September 1 through September 30 in Marine Areas 1 and 2. Finally, the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) closures are also displayed on the map. While fishing with fixed gear is allowed within these areas, they may help indicate potentially important habitat to consider when identifying areas to open.

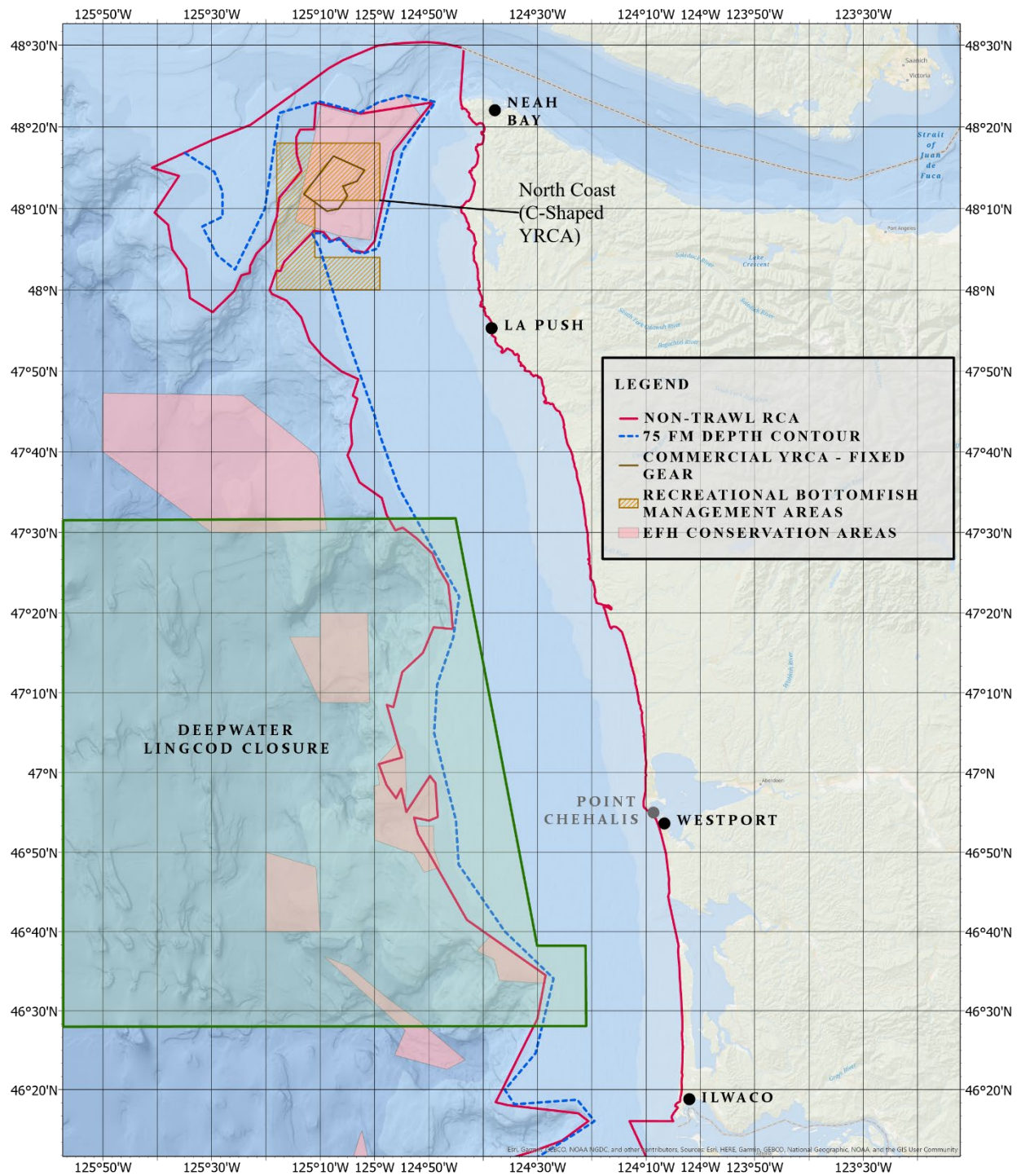


Figure 1. Washington non-trawl RCA shown (red line) with the boundary line approximating the 75-fm depth contour (blue dashed line), YRCAs, EFH, and the deepwater lingcod closure.

II. Proposed Changes

WDFW received a request from participants of the primary sablefish tier fishery off Washington to investigate adjusting the seaward boundary of the non-trawl RCA. Unlike the goal of opening areas of the non-trawl RCA off Oregon and California, namely, to increase access to midwater rockfish stocks, the purpose of opening the RCA off Washington would be to increase the value of sablefish catch. Fishery stakeholders expressed that they anticipate being able to catch larger sablefish within the 100-fm line, resulting in a higher price per pound of sablefish. Stakeholders are particularly interested in accessing the outer edges of the non-trawl RCA during the late summer and fall.

WDFW does not support changes to the shoreward boundary of the non-trawl RCA off Washington due to high risk of exceeding the yelloweye rockfish ACL. Largely for that same reason, WDFW is considering recommending that only pot gear be allowed for use in any newly opened areas off Washington. Yelloweye bycatch is considerably lower with pot gear compared to longline gear. WDFW understands that the use of pot gear would require the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to consider how any changes would be in agreement with the existing Biological Opinion for humpback whales.

Other considerations that will need to be made when opening areas within the non-trawl RCA off Washington include whether to allow:

- access to both the limited entry and open access fixed gear sectors or to only one of the sectors,
- vessels to carry multiple gear types on-board and to fish with different gear types within and outside of those areas, and
- targeting of other stocks aside from sablefish, such as lingcod, within those areas.

These considerations and the objectives identified above are those WDFW highlights as rising to the top of the decision on whether to relax the non-trawl RCA. We recognize that the Council may have other considerations and expect that the analysis will consider the full suite of factors required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and other applicable laws.

WDFW recognizes the challenge that lacking specific coordinates might pose for analysis but believes that the analysis can proceed and inform more specific proposals. For example, while we anticipate that only certain areas would see modifications to the non-trawl RCA, it would be helpful to have information on habitats and yelloweye rockfish catch rates off Washington as a whole in order to identify areas to avoid. In addition, if this approach is adopted into the ROA, WDFW would continue to lead discussions with stakeholders on areas of interest to recreational anglers and seek input from stakeholders from other commercial fisheries. WDFW would also request discussions with our tribal co-managers on the coast as many areas of interest will overlap with or otherwise have indirect effects on their usual and accustomed (U&A) fishing areas. With additional analysis and dialogue, WDFW anticipates that coordinates could be identified for any proposed areas warranting further consideration when the Council next takes up the issue.

On the timing of that next step, with implementation scheduled for 2024 at the earliest, WDFW recommends that the Council delay the schedule for selecting a preliminary preferred alternative (PPA), which is currently listed on the Year at a Glance for the April 2022 Council meeting to give analysts enough time to thoroughly consider potential impacts and give WDFW enough time to narrow down specific areas to consider. This delay would also reduce overlap with analysis needed for the 2023-2024 harvest specifications and management measures process and PPA selection.