

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2023-2024  
HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The purpose of this report is to provide the Council with a summary of canary rockfish catch in the Washington recreational fishery in 2021 which approached the Washington harvest guideline (HG). The report also highlights our interest in discussing the need to add an evaluation of the non-trawl sector allocations of canary rockfish and the overall risk of exceeding the annual catch limit (ACL) to the analysis of the 2023-2024 management measures package in April.

Under the 2023-2024 harvest specifications and management measure schedule, the Council will take up two-year allocations and identify a preliminary preferred alternative in April. While November would have been the preferable time to raise this issue, the one-month lag in receiving recreational catch estimates and little reason to expect that the HG would be approached delayed our preparation of this information. Although allocations for canary rockfish have been an ongoing issue for the Council, we did not expect canary rockfish to be a priority for this cycle. Similarly, as the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) noted in November ([Agenda Item E.5.a., Supplemental Revised GMT Report 2, November 2021](#)), the 2023-2024 HGs did not appear constraining to any sector based on mortality in 2019 and 2020. The GMT did not evaluate 2021, likely because of the timing of final catch estimates for recreational fisheries and because discard estimates for commercial fisheries are not yet available.

In 2021, total canary rockfish mortality in the Washington recreational fishery was 39.4 mt, nearly three times the previous season high, which occurred in 2019. This compares to harvest guidelines (HG) of 43.3 mt in 2021 and 42.2 mt in 2022. While increases were anticipated in 2021-2022, September 2021 saw an almost nine-fold increase from the previous September high. The range of alternatives for 2023-2024, adopted by the Council in November, has the Washington recreational HG decreasing slightly to 41.5 mt in 2023 and 40.9 mt in 2024. The events of September 2021 have altered our views on the chances that the Washington recreational HG could be exceeded in 2023-2024.

With the already heavy workload for 2023-2024, WDFW is not requesting a full review across all sectors. However, we believe a narrower evaluation would show that the non-trawl sectors are unlikely to exceed the non-trawl allocation. Recognizing that the selective opening of the non-trawl RCA proposed for 2023-2024 would be expected to increase catches of canary rockfish, catches in the non-nearshore sector are likely to remain low. Moreover, with recent trends in the trawl sector the chance of exceeding the canary rockfish ACL would be expected to remain very low. Considering the overall conservation need for canary rockfish, it may be that no formal changes to allocations are needed for 2023-2024.

We notified the GMT of our interest in the evaluation at their January meeting and understand they will be prepared to provide an update on how catch has compared against projections and allocations. We thank them for their responsiveness and want to take this opportunity to provide the Council with the background for this request.

## **The 2021 Season**

Figure 1 shows running monthly totals from the Washington recreational groundfish seasons, 2013-2021. The season is open from mid-March through mid-October. The points in the figure represent total catch at the end of the month, meaning that the points at month 10 identify the total catch for the season. The contribution of catch from each month can be gauged from the steepness of the line coming from the previous month's point. As can be seen, the slope between month eight and nine in 2021 is by far the steepest in the time series.

Catch was higher overall in 2021, which was again an intended effect of management measure changes made for 2021 and 2022. Figure 1 also explains why, when preparing for November we did not anticipate the HG being approached. Tracing estimates through August on the graph, and considering the recent patterns for September and October, the eye would trace a path that ends near 25 mt.

On the cause of the spike in catch, we looked closely at the data and spoke with stakeholders about what changed in the fishery. Fishery participants attributed the cause to increased targeting of canary. This is reflected by the data in that the number of angler trips taken in September was not notably different in 2021. Also, as in past years, the monthly total of bottomfish trips was lower in September than May-August.<sup>1</sup> With relatively stable effort, it was an almost eight-fold increase in catch per angler that produced the change.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in the season, we had been hearing reports of anglers finding abundant and large canary rockfish in areas that had been closed by Yelloweye Rockfish Conservation Areas (YRCA) located in deeper waters of Marine Area 2. These YRCAs were re-opened in 2021 after being closed for 12 years. In speaking with fishery participants, the high September catch resulted from more anglers choosing to fish these deeper areas. The low availability of albacore tuna this year and early closure of the salmon season likely contributed to this change in fishing patterns.

## **The Council's Approach to Canary Rockfish**

The Council's mandate under the Magnuson-Stevens Act is to allocate the recovery benefits from successful rebuilding fairly and equitably among fishery sectors. The evaluation of fair and equitable sharing of benefits is a complex task, especially for a stock like canary rockfish that is caught across almost every fishery sector. Moreover, the evaluation depends on an understanding of what each sector may catch as rebuilding restrictions are lifted, and this has proven to be very difficult to predict. In recognition of this uncertainty in how catches will respond to changes in regulations, the Council's response toward canary rockfish has been cautious and incremental. Despite it not being part of the 2023-2024 cycle, the response is still ongoing.

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<sup>1</sup> Canary and other rockfishes are caught on other trip types (e.g. salmon and halibut) as well. Bottomfish trips are noted here because they accounted for the major increase in catch in 2021. Catch from all trip types is accounted for in our estimates and catch projection methods.

<sup>2</sup> There were 3,133 bottomfish angler trips in September 2021 that accounted for 13.2 mt of the catch. This equates to an average of 9.3 lbs. of canary rockfish per angler. In 2020, there were an estimated 3,009 angler trips in September and 1.6 mt of catch, which equates to 1.2 lbs. per angler.

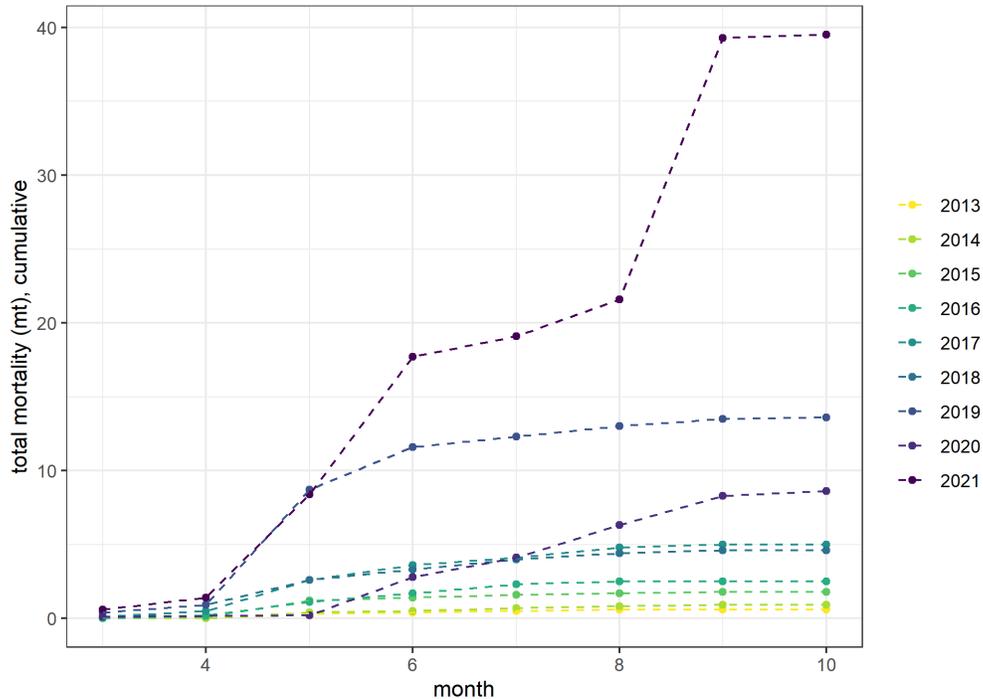


Figure 1. Total cumulative mortality (mt) of canary rockfish in the Washington recreational fishery by month and year.

The approach taken for Washington’s recreational fishery has also been very precautionary, as can be seen in the patterns of total mortality in Figure 1. The 2013-2014 biennium was the last under rebuilding. As can be seen, the lines depicting those seasons end with the lowest total cumulative mortality. The lines for 2015 and 2016 also pair together and end only slightly higher. The management changes for those years were minimal. The 2017-2018 seasons also pair together and make a larger jump up the y-axis. In 2017, WDFW allowed the retention of one canary rockfish but only in Marine Areas 1 (Columbia River) and 2 (Westport). In 2018, anglers could retain one canary rockfish in all Marine Areas (MA 1- 4). It wasn’t until 2019 that WDFW removed the canary rockfish sub-limit. The COVID-19 pandemic conditions broke the pattern for 2020. Yet 2019 did see a larger increase in canary rockfish mortality and we would have expected 2020 to look similar if conditions had been normal.

While we are evaluating options for constraining catch to the HG, we believe that reimposing major restrictions on the fishery would be premature until allocations are next evaluated more fully by the Council. With the cautious approach taken, we have only begun to understand what the fishery could catch. The 2021 season provided a better understanding of where catch rates could reach. However, the pandemic conditions of 2020 and 2021 also raise a lot of questions of how the events of these years may represent what we expect to be more typical conditions in 2023 and 2024.