

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

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) will not be ready to propose specific area openings for Alternative 4 at this meeting, for the reasons explained below. We continue to view the alternatives as having a different purpose and conservation and management urgency and support them moving ahead at a faster pace and support Alternative 5 and the analysis of block area closures (BAC) to continue with a coastwide scope.

Alternative 4 focuses on changes to the non-trawl RCA off Washington and Alternatives 1-3 on changes off Oregon and California. Alternatives 1-3 seek to reduce pressure on nearshore stocks while sustaining participation in the commercial nearshore fisheries by allowing access to the shelf rockfish populations that have benefited from the RCA closures. Alternative 4 focuses instead on the sablefish fixed gear fleet and providing access to shallower waters to target larger sablefish in late summer and early fall.

Commercial nearshore fisheries never developed in Washington. State waters are closed to commercial groundfish fishing, the landing of live fish is prohibited, and the non-trawl RCA has extended from shore to 100 fm or deeper since first implemented. In recognition of this difference, we identified four main objectives for evaluating changes to the non-trawl RCA off the state ([Agenda Item E.6.a, Supplemental WDFW Report 1, November 2021](#)):

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.

Based on general knowledge, it is clear that the entire area off Washington could not be opened without running afoul of one or more of these objectives. WDFW's interest therefore continues to be in evaluating openings of limited, sub-sections of the coast, in depths between 75 fm and 100 fm, and in opening them just to pot gear.

Identifying specific areas, defined by coordinates, is necessary before the analysis can proceed in full. More information on where direct and indirect conflicts between fisheries might occur or be avoided is needed before we will be able to do so, and data to help with the question is limited. For instance, the fixed gear sablefish fishery has not operated shoreward of the 100 fm RCA for 20 years, and the locations of recreational fishing sites are not systematically collected. Gathering the necessary information therefore requires close consultation with commercial and recreational stakeholders for their on-the-water knowledge. Initial discussions between them revealed more overlap than anticipated in the areas of interest. More discussions are needed to identify locations where conflict can be avoided.

In addition, the goal of avoiding conflict applies to tribal fisheries as well. More time is also needed for co-manager discussions on how this goal can be achieved.

In terms of the differences in urgency between Alternative 4 and 1-3, we do recognize the potential economic benefits that access to larger sablefish could provide (i.e., through higher catch rates and a higher price per pound). At the same time, the economic situation does not pose the same level of concern as elsewhere. Sablefish is highly utilized, and the fishery has been able to achieve a high percentage of the tier limits and trip limits while fishing seaward of the RCA. In addition, the annual catch limits (ACLs) for sablefish are increasing and the primary season is being extended next year to provide more time to harvest tier limits.

WDFW remains committed to further evaluation of Alternative 4 if just on a slower pace. We will be encouraging that aspects of the analysis that do not depend on precise area locations being defined to continue so that when specific areas are identified the analysis and Council consideration can proceed efficiently. We also expect that the analysis of the BACs could contribute to understanding the impacts and issues of Alternative 4 as well.

Under sections 303(a)(14) and 304(e)(B) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Council must share both the harvest restrictions and recovery benefits involved with rebuilding rockfish populations fairly and equitably among sectors. All sectors have sacrificed and contributed to the rebuilding of canary rockfish and the faster than expected rebuilding progress for yelloweye. The conservation circumstances have indeed changed sufficiently to consider relaxations of the RCA. WDFW will continue to advocate for a precautionary approach when relaxing harvest restrictions like the one the Council has taken with canary allocations and management measures within the non-trawl sectors.

Lastly, we highlight that much uncertainty remains with yelloweye. Even if the rebuilding projections are correct and the stock rebuilds before the end of this decade, the rebuilding analysis predicts annual catch limits that would not be large enough to accommodate historical levels of fishing. The ability to allow commercial gears with high yelloweye catch rates access to areas of the continental shelf off Washington could remain limited after the stock is rebuilt.