

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON INITIAL HARVEST
SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES ACTIONS FOR 2025-26
MANAGEMENT

Default Harvest Control Rules

Default harvest control rules (HCRs), as implemented under Amendment 24¹, will be applied to the best scientific information available to generate the 2025-26 harvest specifications, including overfishing limits (OFLs), acceptable biological catches (ABCs), and annual catch limits (ACLs). **The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) recommends that the Council indicate at this meeting if it would like to depart from the default harvest control rules (HCRs) for any species.** This timing is necessary to coordinate with stock assessors and prepare information for the November 2023 Council meeting when the Council is scheduled to adopt preliminary preferred ACL alternatives for overwinter analysis by the GMT. This information will also be discussed during the GMT's October 2023 work session.

Of the stocks that were assessed in 2023, the GMT recommends the Council adopt the default HCRs for copper rockfish off California, black rockfish off Washington, Oregon, and California, and petrale sole as described below and shown in Table 1.

Copper Rockfish: California

For the copper rockfish stock in California waters, the default HCR is a P* of 0.45 with the ACL set below the ABC due to the application of the 40-10 rule. The ABCs for copper rockfish are 134.1 and 135.2 mt and the ACLs are 131.9 and 133.1 mt for 2025-26, respectively. The potential harvest limits for copper rockfish in California may be constraining to the fishery and full attainment is a reasonable expectation. The risk to overfishing the stock as defined is low, however area-specific management will likely be required to address areas of localized depletion as identified in the stock assessment.

Black Rockfish: California

For the California black rockfish stock, the default HCR is a P* of 0.45 with the ACL set below the ABC due to application of the 40-10 rule (i.e., both the 2015 and 2023 assessments estimated the stock below the biomass target of 40 percent). The default ABCs with a P* of 0.45 for black rockfish in California are 233.8 and 246.8 mt with ACLs of 223.6 and 235.7 mt in 2025-26, respectively.

Black Rockfish: Oregon and Washington

For the state-specific black rockfish stocks in Washington and Oregon the default HCR is a P* of 0.45 with the ACL set equal to the ABC. In both Oregon and Washington, the impact to each stock by applying a P* of 0.45 compared to a P* of 0.40 is minimal based on the decision table, and the application of the default HCR of P* of 0.45 will provide the greatest management flexibility. In Oregon, the black rockfish ABCs and ACLs under a P* of 0.45 are already expected to constrain fisheries, and a lower P* could unnecessarily create additional constraints. There may be similar concerns in Washington if targeting of black rockfish returns to levels observed in 2019 and earlier

¹https://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/GF_A24_FMP_Language_Feb2015.pdf

due to constraints on other species (e.g., canary rockfish). The black rockfish ABCs for the Oregon stock in 2025-26 are 344 and 350 mt, respectively. The 2025-26 ABCs in Washington are 244.6 and 244.2 mt, respectively.

Petrale Sole

For petrale sole, the GMT does not see a clear rationale to support an alternative HCR at this time. The stock assessment is data rich, with relatively consistent estimates of stock status across assessments since 2013, and petrale sole is a highly productive flatfish stock with high resilience to harvest. Therefore, the GMT recommends the default HCR, ABC P* 0.45 for petrale sole with the ACLs set equal to the ABCs of 2,354 mt and 2,255 mt in 2025 and 2026, respectively.

Table 1. Stocks that were assessed in 2023 and for which the GMT recommends adopting the default HCRs.

| Stock | Default HCR |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Copper rockfish CA | ABC P* 0.45 |
| Black rockfish WA | ABC P* 0.45 |
| Black rockfish OR | ABC P* 0.45 |
| Black rockfish CA | ABC P* 0.45 |
| Petrale Sole | ABC P* 0.45 |

Alternative Harvest Control Rules

Under this agenda item, the Council is scheduled to adopt a preliminary range of P* values, ABCs, and ACLs for stocks where alternative HCRs are to be considered. This action will allow the GMT to initiate preliminary analyses at our October meeting. The GMT recommends alternative HCRs be considered for the following stocks (Table 2). The GMT was made aware late in the meeting that the constant catch default harvest control rule for Dover sole in 2025 and beyond is higher than the OFL. [Agenda Item G.6, Supplemental Revised Attachment 1](#) shows the ACL = ABC based on 30 percent SPR harvest rate, which is not the default HCR. The GMT does not have a recommended range of alternative HCRs for Council consideration at this time as we did not have time to discuss this issue in depth. The GMT requests for Council staff to investigate this. The GMT anticipates discussing alternative HCRs at the October GMT meeting.

Table 2. GMT proposed 2025-26 alternative HCRs for Council consideration.

| # | Stock | Default HCR | Alternative 1 | Alternative 2 |
|----------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1 | Rex Sole | ABC P* 0.40 | ABC P* 0.45 | N/A |
| 2 | Shortspine thornyhead | ABC P* 0.40 | ABC P* 0.45 | N/A |
| 3 | Canary rockfish | ABC P* 0.45 | ABC P* 0.40 | N/A |
| 4 | Sablefish | ABC P* 0.45 | ABC P* 0.40 | ABC P* 0.40 with sub-ACLs for North and South |

1-Rex Sole

The default HCR for rex sole is to apply a P* of 0.40 and set the ACL equal to the ABC. This has been the Council's choice since the last time it was assessed in 2013. The 2013 assessment was data-moderate and was informed by an index of abundance from the Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) West Coast Groundfish Bottom Trawl survey (WCGBT). The 2023 assessment, while still data-moderate, was informed by both fishery and survey data (survey index of abundance, fishery and survey length compositions, and survey conditional age-at-length data) and estimated growth within the model, providing a more informed understanding of the stock. During the Stock Assessment and Review (STAR) panel, a catch projection was conducted with a P* of 0.45, Alternative 1, as a possible management option. Actual removals are likely to remain well below the ABC under either P* value, making the risk of overfishing low, and a P* of 0.45 would provide the trawl fleet the greatest flexibility in the event of future expansion.

2- Shortspine thornyhead

The default harvest control rule for shortspine thornyhead is to apply a P* of 0.40 with the coastwide ABC split into two-area based ACLs north and south of 34° 27' N. lat. The apportionment method for shortspine thornyhead is a routine management measure that will be reviewed and/or updated in the 2025-26 harvest specifications package. A P* of 0.45 catch projection was requested at the STAR panel (Alternative 1) as a possible management option.

The projected ABCs using a P* of 0.45 are comparable to the GMT predicted catch projections for 2023 and 2024. Hence, shortspine thornyhead may become a constraining species to the trawl fleet even under the highest P* available to the Council. Additionally, due to anticipated increases in sablefish ACLs over the next few years, the trawl fleet that targets Dover sole, thornyheads, and sablefish (DTS) may expand effort, so full attainment of shortspine thornyhead is a reasonable expectation. Given these expected constraints, the GMT proposes the higher P* of 0.45 to analyze whether the Council can minimize impacts to the trawl fishery while still preventing overfishing of the stock.

3- Canary rockfish

The default HCR for canary rockfish is to apply a P* of 0.45 with the ACL set equal to the ABC. During the canary rockfish STAR panel, a catch projection was conducted with a P* of 0.40, Alternative 1, as a possible management option. The 2023 assessment of canary rockfish estimated a more depleted status compared to the 2015 assessment. As a stock with many different allocations and shares to various fisheries on the West coast, including two P* HCR options will allow for the Council to consider the trade-offs between the risk to the canary rockfish stock and the impacts to the fisheries.

4-Sablefish

The default HCR for sablefish is to apply a P* of 0.45 with the ACL set equal to the ABC. The Council could consider a P* of 0.40 (Alternative 1). Given the limited information available to inform the magnitude of the 2020 and 2021 year classes that are largely driving the projected increase in spawning biomass, the Council may want to consider a more risk-averse P*.

There has also been discussion about selecting a HCR that is more precautionary than P* 0.40 due to the roughly three-fold increase in projected sablefish ACLs even under a lower P*. In Alternative 2, the Council could consider applying a P* of 0.40, splitting the coastwide ABC into

ACLs north and south of 36° N. lat., removing off-the-top set-asides, and then setting sub-ACLs by area. This option was brought up in discussion following concerns raised by the Tribes about a constant catch scenario. As the tribal set-aside for sablefish is based on a fixed percentage of the sablefish ACL north of 36° N. lat., adopting a sub-ACL after off-the-top deductions and set-asides have been accounted for ensures tribal treaty rights to the resource are protected while offering the Council flexibility to accommodate concerns surrounding the relative lack of information available for this limited assessment update. The GMT anticipates evaluating specific options for setting sub-ACLs at the October GMT meeting, discussing with the GAP, and bringing specific options for the North and South areas at the November Council meeting. The GMT notes that options for setting the sub-ACLs could require modifying the typical sablefish allocation structure as outlined in the FMP.

Rebuilding Plans/Analysis

The Science Center is working on a rebuilding analysis for quillback rockfish that will be reviewed by the Groundfish Subcommittee of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (GFSC-SSC) during the Groundfish Mop-Up meeting at the end of September and will be available to the Council for discussion at the November meeting.

Routine Management Measures

The GMT reviews all routine management measures every harvest specifications cycle. Table 3 shows routine measures that the team or members of the public have identified at this time as warranting specific exploration.

Table 3. Select routine management measures to be explored in the 2025-26 harvest specifications action.

| Item # (not ranked) | Management Measures | Sector(s) | Description |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | Off-the-top deductions | Research, EFPs, and IOA | Incidental open access (IOA) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Review Sablefish north of 36° N. lat. off-the-top deduction for potential increase ○ Consider specific set-asides for the Pacific halibut fishery Consider increases to recreational sablefish set-aside for north of 36° N. lat. |
| 2 | Two Year Allocations | Trawl/ Non-Trawl | 2-year trawl/non-trawl allocations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Canary rockfish ● Bocaccio rockfish Shortspine thornyhead |
| 3 | Rebuilding Species Allocations | All | Yelloweye rockfish coastwide Quillback rockfish South of 42° N. lat. (anticipated) |
| 4 | Within trawl Set-aside | At-sea whiting | Review At-sea whiting 2025-2026 set-asides. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sablefish Darkblotched rockfish |

| Item # (not ranked) | Management Measures | Sector(s) | Description |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| 5 | Within non-trawl HGs, ACTs, or Shares | LEFG/OA/ Recreational | Preliminary 2-year within non-trawl HGs or shares for: Canary rockfish |
| 6 | Commercial Trip Limit Adjustments | OA (north of 40°10 N. lat., south of 40°10 N. lat.) and LEFG (north of 40°10 N. lat., south of 40°10 N. lat.) | Routine adjustments to this fishery’s management measures (e.g., trip limits, size limits, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adjusting for impacts from the quillback rockfish rebuilding plan ● Sablefish trip limit adjustments proportional to ACL changes ● Adjust commercial trip limits for consistency across fishing periods- (either bi-monthly or monthly) Consider gear-specific authorizations or constraints for non-trawl fisheries by depth bin. |
| 7 | Recreational Trip Limit Adjustments | OR, WA, CA Recreational | Routine adjustments to bag limits, season structure, length limits, etc. <i>-limited to federal waters only</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase the daily bag limit for Oregon sablefish from the general marine bag (currently 5) to 15. California is examining the potential savings that may come from eliminating the 10-fish Rockfish Cabezon Greenling (RCG) aggregate bag limit and replacing it with a rockfish bag limit of 5 fish in the aggregate, except for bocaccio, yellowtail, chilipepper and widow rockfish, which would be subject to the default California bag limit of not more than 10 per any one species and 20 finfish total. |
| 8 | Revise / Clean up Federal Regulations | All | Regulatory clarifications around the Farallon islands referencing state closures/ fisheries which are no longer applicable. |

New Management Measures

Table 4 lists the potential new management measures that the GMT has received. At the GMT’s October meeting, the team will scope the preliminary list of new management measures adopted by the Council under this agenda item. The GMT notes that items 1 and 2 are currently on the GMT workload prioritization list and have a path forward in that process and therefore the Council might consider not recommending that they move forward in the 2025-2026 harvest specifications and management measures process. Item 6 is also on the workload prioritization list; however, the GMT recommends maintaining it in the 2025-26 harvest specifications package because the team thinks there are conservation and management reasons that may warrant exploring.

Table 4. New management measures identified by the GMT, so far, for consideration for 2025-26.

| Item # (not ranked) | Management Measures | Sector(s) | Description |
|------------------------|--|-----------|---|
| 1 | Prohibit directed fishing on shortbelly rockfish | All | Oceana request , GMT workload prioritization list |
| 2 | Natural bait allowed with longleader gear in the recreational fishery | Rec. | Addition to GMT workload prioritization list in March 2023 |
| 3 | Create a recreational set-aside for sablefish south of 36° N. lat. | Rec. | Currently there is no recreational specific set aside for sablefish even though sablefish is being caught in recreational fisheries. Addition of a rec. set-aside for sablefish south is not anticipated to impact other sablefish fisheries and is needed for catch accounting and forecasting. |
| 4 | Require California recreational anglers to have a descending device aboard | Rec. | Add regulatory language that requires a descending device capable of returning rockfish to depth be aboard any California recreational fishing vessel that is fishing for or possessing groundfish |
| 5 | Update discard mortality rates (DMR) as appropriate for use in management | All | Update for surface mortality rates anticipated based on new research, OA fisheries currently do not have discard mortality rates adopted for use in management; this effort will add DMRs for the depth bins that have information |
| 6 | Open Access Permit/Registration | Non-Trawl | Identifying participants in the open access fleet would assist in identification of the population of vessels in this fishery. The benefits include (but are not limited to) improved observer coverage for non-bottom contact hook-and-line gear types, which are anticipated to be commonly used in the 2024 fishing year and beyond. |