

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2025-2026 MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) offers the following thoughts on potential changes to recreational and commercial management measures for the 2025-2026 biennial groundfish cycle.

Washington Recreational Management Measures

WDFW will analyze routine changes to management measures for recreational fisheries such as season dates, bag limits, and depth restrictions. In response to management changes implemented for 2023 and 2024, WDFW will review the most recent catch and effort data (through 2023) along with preliminary annual catch limits and state specific harvest guidelines or annual catch limits considered at this meeting to develop a range of management measures that will result in catch that meets, but does not exceed, allowable harvest amounts for 2025 and 2026. In addition to recreational bag limits and sub-limits, the primary management tools used in the Washington recreational fishery have been depth restrictions and area closures. Catch information from the WDFW Ocean Sampling Program (OSP), which includes depth, provides data to analyze the impacts of depth restrictions and bag limits.

Management measures analyzed in recent biennium have been focused on reducing restrictions on recreational fisheries intended to limit encounters with yelloweye and canary rockfish. WDFW, with support from Washington recreational anglers has taken a very precautionary approach to reducing restrictions to ensure that harvest guidelines are not exceeded. This precaution was warranted because of the uncertainty in projected encounters after a long period of significant fishery restrictions. During the last groundfish management cycle, WDFW flagged the importance of canary rockfish to the recreational fishery and the precautionary approach taken to allowing retention of canary rockfish ([Agenda Item E.9.a, Supp. WDFW Report 1, March 2022](#)). With the results of the 2023 canary rockfish stock assessment and likely significant reduction in the ACL for 2025 and 2026, we reiterate our request for a thorough exploration of the canary rockfish allocation for all sectors to understand the degree of management action that may be needed in the next biennium.

Rockfish Commercial Sorting Requirements

WDFW has identified an increasing number of operations where buyers are sorting rockfish in a way that interferes with our ability to take valid species composition samples of the market categories (i.e., stock complexes). This has created additional work for our port biologists, including workarounds to ensure the representativeness of the species composition samples. In general, groundfish landings in WA are less frequent than when our sampling procedures were designed, and sampling appears to be less efficient now than in the past. We also have some concern that sorting practices may affect the accuracy of our estimates.

Species composition sampling is meant to provide accurate estimates of species-specific landings without needing to burden buyers with or rely on them for species identification. Many rockfish species are difficult to tell apart, and rockfish can be landed in large volumes. However, it now

appears that an increasing number of buyers are sorting rockfish to species level on their own accord. Working with buyers to accurately sort to species may not involve more effort than it has taken to maintain valid market category sorting.

In light of these changes, WDFW is considering requiring all rockfish to be sorted to species through state regulation. We are bringing the issue to the Council to invite any discussion around whether other states on the West Coast are identifying similar experiences and whether there is interest in revising the coastwide federal regulations on sorting requirements.

Patterns in the fixed gear sablefish sectors may help illustrate some of the issues. Off WA, the fixed gear sectors fish seaward of the 100 fm line and so primarily encounter slope rockfish. The Council recommended sorting requirements for rougheye/blackspotted rockfish and shorttraker rockfish in the 2015-16 biennial management measures package. We had concerns about the effect of that change on our sampling at that time and considered mandating species-specific reporting back then. The reason is that rougheye make up the bulk of slope rockfish landings in these sectors. And as expected, its removal led to the market category consisting almost exclusively of redbanded rockfish (Figure 1). The removal of rougheye also brought down the size of landings in the market category (Figure 2, left panel).

Redbanded is relatively easy to identify. There are a number of species that are currently being sorted in the slope rockfish category, which are more difficult to identify, and also include ones that should be reported individually or as part of a different category (Figure 3). Species specific reporting would create more work over the short-term in terms of training of buyers and checking for clean sorts. However, factoring out redbanded landings, the typical size of landings into the slope rockfish market category has been less than 25 pounds in recent years with landings above 50 pounds being infrequent (Figure 2, right panel). This would be a manageable amount for buyers and WDFW to ensure accurate species identification.

We have not yet evaluated the trawl landings into WA to the same level of detail. Trawl landings are typically higher volume than fixed gear. At the same time, we know of large volume buyers that have preferred to sort rockfish to species for many years. The number of trawl landings into the state is also much lower than in the past. There are sector-specific sorting requirements in federal regulations for the trawl ([50 CFR 660.130\(d\)](#)), limited entry fixed gear ([50 CFR 660.230\(c\)](#)), and open access ([50 CFR 660.330\(c\)\(2\)](#)) sectors of the groundfish fishery, and therefore, it would be possible to modify sorting requirements for one or more sectors, separately.

If there is interest in considering revisions to federal sorting requirements, adding it the 2025-2026 management measures analysis would be appropriate given the fundamental catch accounting purpose they serve. Alternatively, the issue may fit with phase 2 of stock definitions and consideration of stock complexes. Catch accounting is one reason for having stock complexes, but there are other reasons as well (e.g. setting trip limits on the complex instead of on individual species). Lastly, WDFW works routinely with our tribal co-managers on port sampling and species composition estimation and is aware of the preference for species-specific reporting from more than one tribe.

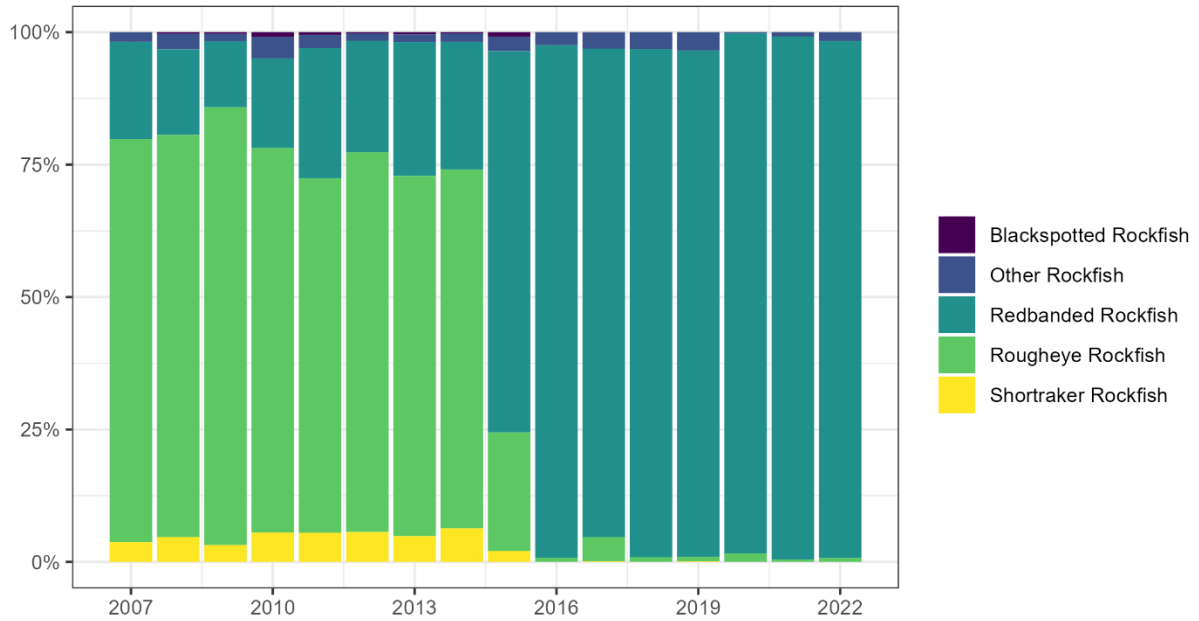


Figure 1. Species composition percentages, 2007-2022, for landings of slope rockfish by fixed gear vessels in WA. The percentages are of the total pounds sampled by WDFW each year across all ports.

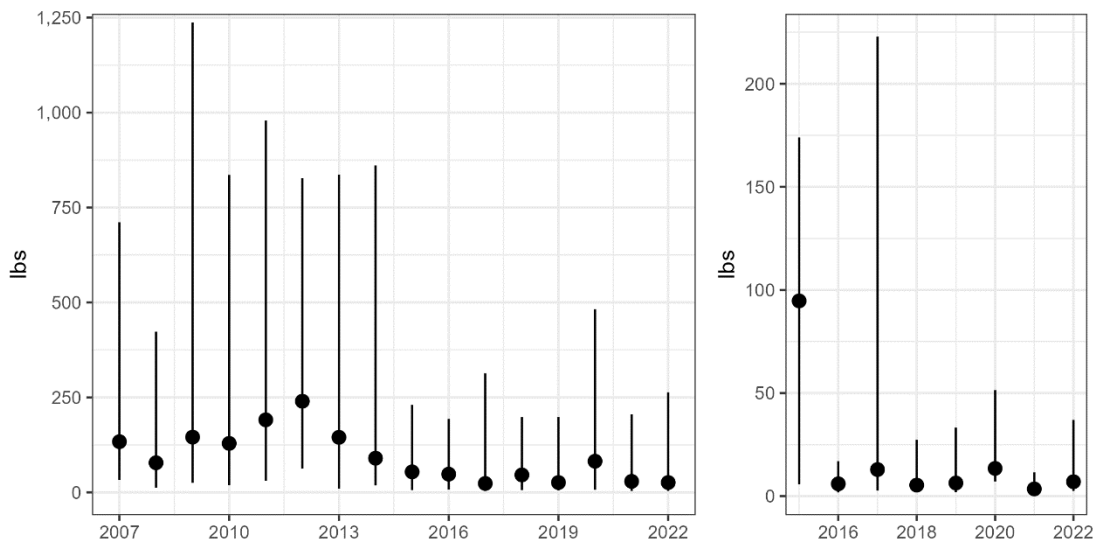


Figure 2. The left panel shows the annual distribution of pounds per landing for fixed gear deliveries of slope rockfish into WA, 2007-2022, as summarized by median values (points) and 10th to 90th percentile intervals (lines). The right panel shows the same information, 2015-2022, with redbanded rockfish landings subtracted out.

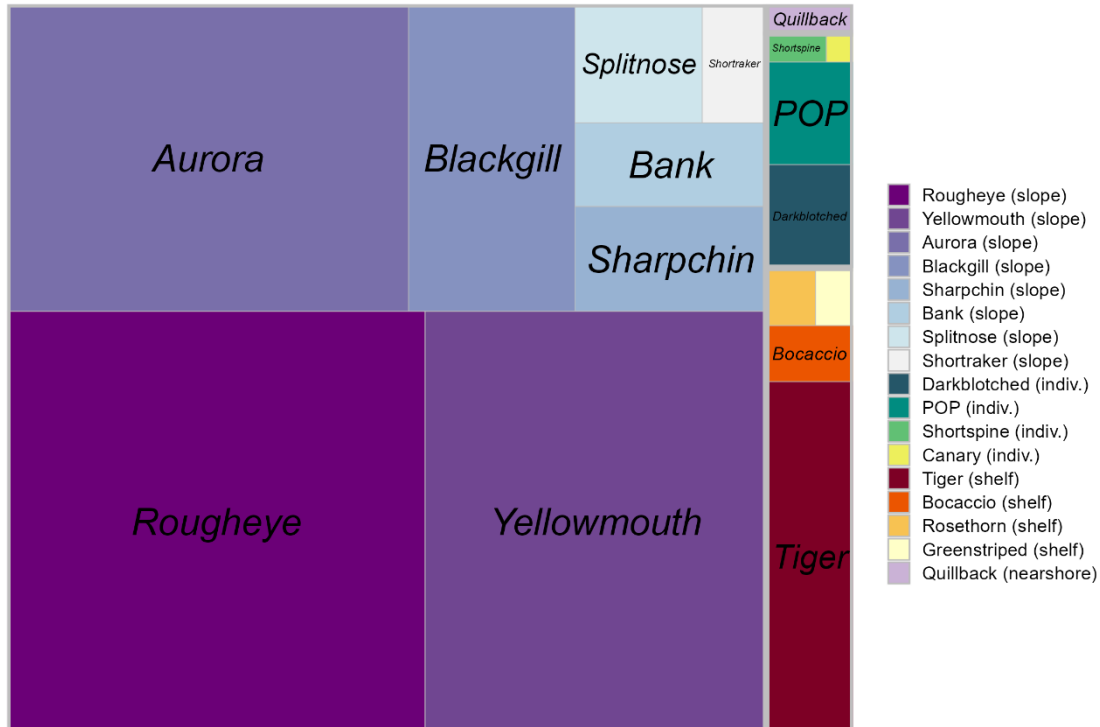


Figure 3. The size of each box is proportional to the species percentage of the total landings in the slope rockfish market category, 2018-2022, with redbanded removed from the calculation.