

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON INSEASON ADJUSTMENTS - FINAL ACTION

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) discussed inseason actions relevant to quillback rockfish off of California for the 2024 fishing year at the November 2023 Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting. Given that: (1) the California quillback rockfish 2023 annual catch targets (ACT) for both north and south of 40° 10' N. lat. have been exceeded, (2) the most recent data from the Groundfish Expanded Mortality Report ([Agenda Item G.1.b, NWFSC Report 2, September 2023](#)) and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Reports (see cites) show notable mortality from both the commercial and recreational groundfish sectors, and (3) quillback rockfish off California is anticipated to be designated as its own stock under the proposed Amendment 31 (88 FR 57400) in the near future. Without modifications to commercial trip limits, exceeding the quillback rockfish ACTs would be expected under continued status-quo management measures. Therefore, in an effort to pre-emptively reduce fishing impacts on quillback rockfish, the GMT is recommending changes to regulations in Federal waters for all of 2024 to limit mortality of California quillback rockfish. The recommendations listed below are designed to reduce commercial quillback rockfish mortality. Actions for 2024 commercial seasons are considered at this meeting so commercial regulations for 2024 will be in place for January 1, 2024. Most recreational fisheries off California are not scheduled to open until May 2024, and changes to recreational seasons to reduce quillback mortality will therefore be considered at the March 2024 Council meeting. This delay in recreational action will allow CDFW to gather more data on the impacts of the inseason changes that occurred in 2023. Additionally, CDFW plans on taking actions for state waters fisheries through the California Fish and Game commission for 2024 that may inform recreational inseason actions at the March 2024 Council meeting.

Adjusting Non-Trawl Rockfish Conservation Area Boundary Lines and Trip Limits

Quillback rockfish are most commonly encountered (landings and discard) between 21 and 50 fathoms in non-trawl commercial fisheries (see Table 7 of Agenda Item [G.8.a, Supplemental GMT Report 2](#)). To prevent bottom contact non-trawl fishing where quillback rockfish are caught and discarded, **the GMT recommends moving the shoreward boundary of the Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) from 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. to the inner boundary of the Exclusive Economic Zone (i.e., the state boundary line).** This action paired with California state action will reduce encounters with quillback rockfish. Data indicates quillback rockfish encounters in the area south of 36° N. lat. to the U.S./Mexico border are rare, suggesting fishing pressure in this area presents a low risk to quillback rockfish conservation concerns. The GMT will continue to monitor this area and will reconsider as applicable.

Quillback rockfish are a demersal (bottom) dwelling species. By restricting allowable gear to only gear types that fish in the water column (above the bottom) it is logical that impacts to demersal species should be reduced, though potentially not entirely eliminated. The gear types that comport to this concept include non-bottom contact stationary vertical jig gear ([50 CFR 660.330\(b\)\(3\)\(i\)](#)) and non-bottom contact groundfish troll gear ([50 CFR 660.330\(b\)\(3\)\(ii\)](#)), which include requirements for gear to be fished off the bottom (i.e., away from quillback rockfish). These gear

types are interchangeably referred to as “12E gear types” because they were implemented as management measure 12E in the 2023-24 groundfish harvest specifications and management measures action ([87 FR 77007](#)).

Within the three EFPs that were operating during the last several biennia (Emley-Platt, Real Good Fish, Cook), that used 12E gear, there have been limited catches of quillback rockfish observed. There were no observed catches in the Cook or Real Good Fish EFPs (noting a small sample of only 4 trips and 36 total sets between the two EFPs in 2019). For Emley-Platt, observed trips (2015-2021), the EFP averaged 0.5 lbs. (around 1/3 of a rockfish) per year of quillback rockfish ([Table A-3 of Agenda Item E.6, Attachment 1, November 2021](#)). At the same time, they caught an average of 4,948 lbs. of yellowtail rockfish, 1,653 lbs. of vermillion rockfish, 871 lbs. of bocaccio, and 704 lbs. of chilipepper rockfish per year. Looking at the bycatch rates, the average rate per haul was 0.29 lbs. of quillback rockfish per 10,000 lbs. of total catch. If comparing the bycatch to the midwater target stocks, the average rate on hauls where there was midwater rockfish catch present is 0.3 lbs. of quillback rockfish per 10,000 lbs. of midwater stocks. For perspective, assuming that a vessel landed an entire bimonthly trip limit (south of 40° 10' N. lat.) of all these stocks, the estimated quillback rockfish encounters would be less than 1 lb. While there is uncertainty around these estimates given the low sample size, the data from the EFPs suggest that 12E gear configurations fished in the Non-trawl RCA can be selective in targeting healthy midwater shelf stocks while minimizing impacts to quillback rockfish.

In addition, the Holloway EFP, which tested the use of longleader gear in the Oregon recreational fishery (*i.e.*, gear that is similar to 12E gear in that it is hook-and-line gear fished pursuant to off-bottom requirements), was established in October of 2017 and has since shown low encounter rates of quillback rockfish, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Annual quillback encounters (catch and release) from the Oregon recreational longleader fishery (seaward of the 40-fathom regulatory line) from 2018-2023 (Source: Ocean Recreational Boat Survey [ORBS])

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*
Quillback Encounters	4	28	29	15	21	52
Longleader Anglers Trips	5,090	2,690	2,818	2,520	4,588	5,753

*2023 includes data through Sep 30

Based on the design of 12E gear and midwater stocks are fished, the GMT concluded that continued use of these gear types are likely to pose minimal negative impacts to quillback rockfish. This conclusion is also based on the low quillback rockfish encounters as summarized from 2023 fish ticket data (before retention was prohibited) and relevant exempted fishing permit project catch/discard data from 2009-2022, (see [Agenda Item G.8.a, September 2023, Supplemental GMT Report 2](#)). Allowing 12E gear types will also help the Council minimize the potential negative socioeconomic impacts to the industry and coastal communities to the extent practicable

General Trip Limit Considerations

All GMT recommended trip limit changes are intended to apply for all of 2024 to keep catch of quillback rockfish within its 2024 ACT. While the intent of the GMT's inseason adjustment recommendations are to minimize potential impacts to quillback rockfish, these recommendations could incidentally result in unexpected increases in landings of other species. Many trip limit changes distinguish depth ranges to which they would apply, to limit opportunities for co-occurring species in depths where quillback rockfish are commonly encountered. The GMT notes that in most cases, the GMT trip limit model is unable to predict the potential shift in effort which is expected from limited opportunity in other rockfish species. The GMT will closely monitor landings in early 2024 and adjust trip limits accordingly.

Minor Shelf Rockfish LE/OA 42° N. Lat. to 36° N. Lat.

Due to the potential changes to trip limits, area management, and gear rules that the Council may recommend to NMFS as part of this inseason action to minimize impacts to quillback rockfish in the commercial sector, the GMT sees the potential for effort increases to minor shelf rockfish species, especially high value species such as vermilion rockfish. To this end, alternatives to adjust the minor shelf rockfish complex trip limits from 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. for the Limited Entry (LE) and Open Access (OA) sectors are proposed to minimize the potential expected effort shift anticipated to this group complex.

The GMT analyzed the potential reduction to LE and OA minor shelf rockfish complex trip limits between 42° N. lat. to 40° 10' N. lat. and between 40° 10' N. lat. and 36° N. lat. The GMT ran the trip limits with a reduction of 25 percent for all sectors. The GAP also requested that LE North (LEN) have a higher trip limit than the OA North (OAN) sector because it is a closed class of vessels. After team discussion, the GMT concluded that considering a reduction for OAN and not for LEN seemed equitable and would not increase risk to quillback rockfish in an appreciable way. Additionally, the GMT concluded reducing the LEN trip limit from 42° N. Lat. to 40° 10' N. Lat. by 25 percent reduced the trip limits minimally because there was only one vessel that had been bumping up against the trip limit. Typically, LE trip limits are higher than OA trip limits due to the restricted access of the fishery and equity concerns among the fisheries. Therefore, the GMT recommends no reduction in the LEN trip limit from 42° N. lat. to 40° 10' N. lat.

Table 2. Options to adjust shelf rockfish trip limits by period in the LEN (40° 10' - 42° N. lat.), LES (40° 10' - 36° N. lat.), OAN (40° 10' - 42° N. lat.), and OAS (40° 10' - 36° N. lat.) sectors, associated landings projections, and total landings. Bolded row represents the GMT recommendation. There are no geographic harvest targets to compare estimated total landings against the proposed trip limit change due to the split at 36° N. lat.

Option	Sector	Trip Limit	Est. Total Landings (mt)	Estimated Total Landings (mt)
No Action	LEN	800 lbs./mo.	0.6	101
	OAN	800 lbs./mo.	5.0	
	LES	8,000 lbs./2 mos.	11.8	
	OAS	4,000 lbs./2 mos.	83.6	
Option 1	LEN	800 lbs./mo.	0.6	84.9
	OAN	600 lbs./mo.	4.7	
	LES	6,000 lbs./2 mos.	11.6	
	OAS	3,000 lbs./2 mos.	68.0	
Option 2	LEN	800 lbs./mo.	0.6	71.8
	OAN	400 lbs./mo.	4.6	
	LES	4,000 lbs./2 mos.	10.6	
	OAS	2,000 lbs./2 mos.	56.0	

Limited Entry and Open Access Fixed Gear between 42° N. lat. to 40° 10' N. lat.

Projected 2024 landings for the LE and OA sector from 42° N. lat. to 40° 10' N. lat. are shown in **Table 2** above. The model is unable to predict the potential shift in effort that is expected from limited opportunity for other rockfish species. The trip limit reduction (Option 1) would reduce the OA monthly trip limits by 25 percent compared to Status Quo. Currently the OA is 800 lbs./ month. Option 1 would reduce OA trip limits to 600 lbs./ month.

Limited Entry and Open Access Fixed Gear between 40° 10' N. lat. and 36° N. lat.

Projected 2024 landings for the LE and OA sector from 40° 10' N. lat. and 36° N. lat. are shown in **Table 2** above. The trip limit reduction (Option 1) for LE and OA would reduce the bimonthly trip limits for all but LEN by 25 percent compared to Status Quo. Currently LE trip limit for minor shelf rockfish is 8,000 lbs./ 2 months, of which no more than 500 lbs. may be vermilion, and OA at 4,000 lbs./ 2 months, of which no more than 300 lbs. may be vermilion (per action taken in E3 of this meeting). Option 1 would reduce the LE trip limit for minor shelf rockfish to 6,000 lbs./ 2 months, of which no more than 500 lbs. may be vermilion, and OA to 3,000 lbs./ 2 months, of which no more than 300 lbs. may be vermilion.

The GMT recommends reducing minor shelf rockfish trip limits from 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. as described in option 1. The trip limit adjustment is expected to reduce landings by 29.2 mt. to account for the potential effort shift to the shelf rockfish species.

Lingcod LE/OA South of 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

The Council took action in September 2023 to reduce lingcod trip limits in the LE/OA fisheries South of 42° N. lat. to 34° 27' N. lat. to zero for November and December 2023 in all depths. Since September, the GMT analyzed lingcod association with quillback in West Coast Observer Program data and concluded there were no quillback rockfish caught by the same gear deployment for lingcod deeper than 75 fm. **The GMT recommends reducing the lingcod trip limit to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. inside the Non-Trawl RCA¹. The GMT recommends status quo trip limits seaward of the Non-Trawl RCA.** This alternative would reinstate the opportunity to land underutilized lingcod caught seaward of the RCA while continuing to prevent interactions with quillback rockfish. See California state regulations for rules that will apply in California state waters.

Other Flatfish LE/OA South of 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

Fishing for “other flatfish ” off California as defined [§ 660.11 General definitions](#) (between 42° N. lat. south to the U.S./Mexico border) is allowed within the non-trawl RCA with hook and line gear only ([§ 660.330 Open access fishery—management measures](#)). To prevent the possible interaction with quillback and yelloweye rockfishes within the RCA. **The GMT recommends reducing the “other flatfish” trip limit to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. inside the Non-Trawl RCA¹. The GMT recommends status quo trip limits seaward of the Non-Trawl RCA.** This alternative would allow for the opportunity to land other flatfish caught seaward of the RCA while preventing interactions with quillback rockfish. See California state regulations for rules that will apply in California state waters.

Minor Nearshore Rockfish LE/OA 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

Quillback rockfish is part of the minor nearshore complex in the area north and south of 40° 10' N. lat. **The GMT recommends reducing the trip limits for the minor nearshore rockfish complex to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. and 40° 10' N. lat. and between 40° 10' N. lat. to 36° N. lat.** See California state regulations for rules that will apply in California state waters.

Cabazon LE/OA 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

Cabazon is a co-occurring species with quillback rockfish. **The GMT recommends reducing the trip limits for cabazon to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. and 36° N. lat.** See California state regulations for rules that will apply in California state waters.

Quillback Rockfish LE/OA South of 42° N. lat.

For all the reasons described above and in [Agenda G.8.a, Supplemental GMT Report 5, September 2023](#), and to contribute to keeping mortality of quillback rockfish within its ACTs, **GMT recommends maintaining the prohibition on retention of quillback rockfish in Federal waters off California in all commercial groundfish fisheries for 2024.**

¹ Presumes the Council expands the Non-Trawl RCA shoreward to the inner boundary of the EEZ (i.e., the state water boundary).

Recommendations

Adjusting Non-Trawl Rockfish Conservation Area Boundary Lines and Trip Limits for 2024

- The GMT recommends moving the shoreward boundary of the RCA from 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. to the inner boundary of the Exclusive Economic Zone (*i.e.*, the state boundary line)

Minor Shelf Rockfish LE/OA 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

- The GMT recommends reducing minor shelf rockfish trip limits from 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. as described in option 1.

Lingcod LE/OA South of 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

- The GMT recommends reducing the lingcod trip limit to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. Lat. to 36° N. Lat. inside the Non-Trawl RCA².
- The GMT recommends status quo trip limits seaward of the Non-Trawl RCA.

Other Flatfish LE/OA South of 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

- The GMT recommends reducing the “other flatfish” trip limit to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat. inside the Non-Trawl RCA¹.
- The GMT recommends status quo trip limits seaward of the Non-Trawl RCA.

Minor Nearshore Rockfish LE/OA 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

- The GMT recommends reducing the trip limits for the minor nearshore rockfish complex to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. and 40° 10' N. lat. and between 40° 10' N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

Cabazon LE/OA 42° N. lat. to 36° N. lat.

- The GMT recommends reducing the trip limits for cabazon to 0 lbs./ 2 months between 42° N. lat. and 36° N. lat.

Quillback Rockfish LE/OA South of 42° N. lat.

- GMT recommends maintaining the prohibition on retention of quillback rockfish in Federal waters off California in all commercial groundfish fisheries for 2024.

PFMC
11/06/23

² Presumes the Council expands the Non-Trawl RCA shoreward to the inner boundary of the EEZ (*i.e.*, the state water boundary).