WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PRELIMINARY PREFERRED HARVEST MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR 2025-26 FISHERIES

Rockfish Commercial Sorting Requirement

In November 2023, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) submitted a report highlighting how the Council's sorting requirements for Rougheye/Blackspotted and Shortraker, together with changed fishing patterns in the state, have created challenges for our species composition sampling (Agenda Item E.7.a, Supplemental WDFW Report 1, November 2023). These changes have led us to ask whether requiring buyers to sort to species could produce more accurate estimates of landings while freeing up time for our samplers to collect other data.

We thank the Council for adding the issue to the biennial package and the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) for the preliminary analysis and scoping of the issue. We concur with the GMT's reasoning that impacts from this action would vary by state and by sector based on species diversity and volume of landings, with generally lower complexity in Washington compared to Oregon and California (Agenda Item F.5.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, April 2024). We also understand their concerns over having sufficient time to evaluate impacts to processors and state sampling programs (Agenda Item F.7.a, Supplemental GMT Report 4, March 2024). Recognizing the different circumstances in each state and the workload considerations, we propose removing this action from the 2025-26 management measures package. At the same time, we continue to see the issue as a priority and will be encouraging Council consideration through an alternative process. The upcoming stock definitions process could be an efficient place to consider sorting rules because of the closely related topic of stock complexes. WDFW may also consider enacting changes to sorting requirements by state regulation.

Additionally, the discussions and analysis that have taken place to date as part of this new management measure proposal have revealed the potential need to evaluate current sampling and species composition practices across all three states. The last comprehensive review was completed in the 1990s. We look forward to discussing options for next steps with our state, federal, and tribal sampling program partners.

Recreational Bottomfish Management Measures

WDFW met with stakeholders on October 11, 2023, January 17, and March 20, 2024, to review and discuss proposed recreational management measures for 2025 and 2026. In this report, we summarize key points from the analysis of the proposed management measures and recommend preliminary preferred alternatives (PPA) for public review.

Canary rockfish presents a constraint for Washington recreational fishery management in the upcoming biennium. After canary was declared rebuilt, the Council's approach to relaxing management measures varied by sector. At the recommendation of WDFW, the Council took a cautious approach toward the Washington recreational fishery because of the uncertainty in how

catch rates might change, and bag limits and restrictions were relaxed gradually. From 2017 to 2023, Washington recreational harvest guidelines ranged from 50 mt to 41 mt, respectively. Total mortality showed a high degree of variation, ranging from 5.0 mt to 22.1 mt and peaking at 39.5 mt in 2021 (Table 1). Prior to 2021, most canary rockfish were harvested in May along the south (Marine Area 2) and the north coasts (Marine Areas 3 and 4, Figures 1 and 2). Under expanded opportunity in 2021 through 2023, canary rockfish harvest grew with a particular concentration on bottomfish trips in June and September in Marine Area 2 (Figures 3 and 4). Where previously, canary rockfish were retained incidentally on bottomfish and Pacific halibut trips, canary rockfish became a focal point. These years have improved our understanding of the importance of canary to the Washington recreational fishery and of how quickly catch rates can increase.

Without additional measures, the canary rockfish projected mortality for 2025 is expected to exceed the preliminary state recreational harvest guideline (HG) of 17.3 mt. The alternatives for the Washington recreational fishery include a range of options to reduce canary rockfish mortality including sub-bag limits and seasonal closures (Agenda Item F.5, Revised Attachment 2, April 2024).

Based on stakeholder input and supported by analysis demonstrating a highly targeted fishery for canary rockfish, WDFW proposes to use 2023 canary rockfish estimated mortality as the numerical basis for informing the estimate of projected mortality and subsequent savings associated with management measures for the 2025-2026 biennium. We also recommend implementing a four canary rockfish sub-bag limit and annual catch target (ACT) for consideration as the preliminary preferred alternative (PPA) along with the full range of alternatives for public review.

While we are recommending alternatives to constrain harvest consistent with the preliminary Washington recreational harvest guideline, WDFW remains interested in continued evaluation of fair and equitable sharing of the canary rockfish stock. We raised this topic in March 2022 as the Council was contemplating management measures for the 2023-24 harvest specifications cycle (Agenda Item E.9.a, Supplement WDFW Report 1, March 2022). At that time HGs did not appear to be constraining any sector. The management measure analysis for the 2025-26 biennium as discussed below has begun to shed light on how much canary rockfish the Washington recreational sector could potentially catch noting that there are still significant restrictions on depth that limit access to canary rockfish during certain portions of the season. Circumstances now dictate restrictions, yet discussion of fair and equitable allocations—allocations that balance the burden of reducing catch and share the benefits of rebuilding across sectors — remain unfinished and should continue through this and upcoming cycles.

Discussion

The time series of catch rates for canary is too variable and too short to confidently predict catch for 2025 and 2026. Our initial approach was to use an average of 2022 and 2023 as the basis for catch projection. However, despite the fishery operating under the same regulations during those years, canary rockfish catch was markedly different (Table 1). In 2022 total canary rockfish mortality was 37.1 mt compared to 22.1 mt in 2023, a 40 percent decrease. Given the difference, our evaluation of the data and stakeholder input described below, we believe it reasonable to use 2023 as representative of catch and effort. At the same, in recognition of the uncertainty and the

potential for the return of the patterns seen in 2021 and 2022, we propose implementing an annual catch target (ACT) with predetermined regulatory actions to slow harvest, should it be attained.

Despite the decline in canary rockfish mortality between 2022 and 2023, our exploratory analysis of canary rockfish retention in the recreational bottomfish fishery indicates a high degree of targeting occurred in both years. Stakeholder input received at public meetings confirmed this and further described the dynamics of the fishery leading up to 2023 as being unique. The consensus of stakeholders from Marine Area 2 is that the fishery in that area is unlikely to see 2021 or 2022 levels of canary rockfish catches repeated. The fishery in Marine Area 2, beginning in 2021, was accessing newly opened Yelloweye Rockfish Conservation Areas (YRCAs) and fishing with fewer depth (Deepwater Lingcod Closure line, 30 fm line) restrictions in place. The South Coast YRCA and Westport Offshore YRCA were established in the early and mid- 2000's to reduce yelloweye encounters where they were known to exist; the thinking at that time was these areas might also reduce canary rockfish impacts (Agenda Item F.2.e WDFW Motion, June 2006); Agenda Item F.1.a Supplement GMT Report 4, June 2020). The Deepwater Lingcod line and 30 fm line depth restrictions were also implemented to reduce encounters with yelloweye rockfish. After the YRCAs were opened in 2021 and with depth restrictions relaxed, stakeholders described encountering an abundance of canary rockfish, and this drew substantial effort (Figure 5). Anecdotal observations noted large numbers of charter and private vessel-based anglers fishing in these deeper water locations. In contrast, stakeholder input from other regions indicated canary rockfish are not as prevalent elsewhere (i.e., Columbia River [MA 1] or north coast [MA 3,4]) or as specifically targeted. The potential for higher catches and similar targeting in other areas remains uncertain. One commenter from the north coast expressed reluctance to catch canary rockfish even though the stock was declared rebuilt.

Canary rockfish catch data reflect these regulations and characterization of the recreational bottomfish fishery. The WDFW Ocean Sampling Program (OSP) collects target fishing strategy during dockside angler intercept surveys: bottomfish, salmon, halibut, etc. Canary rockfish total mortality from 2017 through 2023 occurred predominantly on bottomfish trips. In particular, in Marine Area 2 (MA 2) deepwater charter bottomfish trips targeting lingcod encountered and were able to also target canary rockfish. Bottomfish trips in deep water saw almost tenfold increases in the rate of retained fish per angler compared to standard bottomfish trips in Marine Area 2 (Figure 6).This corresponds with regulations and seasonal target strategies by charter operators who scheduled recreational bottomfish trips in late May to June and September, months preceding and following salmon fishing seasons, and when depth restrictions are relaxed from June 1-15 and in September to allow access to lingcod. This targeted harvest behavior was also noted during initial sub-bag limit option development which used OSP angler intercept interview data. In 2022, 84 percent of canary rockfish mortality was attributed to 28 percent of angler trips at 5, 6 and 7 fish bag limits; in 2023, 71 percent of canary rockfish mortality was attributed to 26 percent of angler trips of 5, 6 and 7 fish bag limits (Figures 7 and 8). The decline of 13 percentage points between the 2022 percentage (84) and 2023 percentage (71) in canary rockfish taken in bag limits of five or greater mirrors other general declines in recreational bottomfish effort generally and the number of deepwater trips.

As noted above, the initial management measure analysis used the average of 2022-2023 projected mortality, or 29.1 mt, to evaluate sub-bag limit options. The corresponding mortality for canary

sub-bag limits 1-6 are presented in Table 2. Using a projected mortality of 29.1 mt for 2025 would necessitate at most a three canary rockfish sub-bag limit to keep the estimated total mortality below the HG of 17.3 mt (Table 2). In contrast, by using 22.1 mt for the projection, which is equivalent to 2023 total mortality, a four canary rockfish bag limit could be considered.

To balance impacts to the recreational fishery that is deemed more likely to resemble 2023 in the future than 2021 or 2022 and the uncertainties in projecting future catches based on a limited time series, we propose implementing an ACT for canary rockfish management as a backstop. The ACT would be informed by monthly estimates from OSP which are produced and available inseason with a month time lag. Typically, about 53-55 percent of the annual canary rockfish total mortality is achieved by June 30 and under the current area and depth regulation structure we continue to expect June and September to be the primary months when canary rockfish are targeted. Inseason estimates from March through June would be available either in late July or early August, providing sufficient time to respond with a pre-determined management action should catches be tracking higher than expected. For example, if estimated inseason catch through June 30 reaches an ACT set equal to 60 percent of the HG, then the September bag limit would be reduced to one or two canary rockfish. A threshold could also be set where if inseason estimates through June exceed the ACT, retention of canary rockfish could be prohibited in September. The ACT could also be conditioned on whether the canary rockfish annual catch limit (ACL) was at risk of being exceeded.

Per NMFS guidance, implementation of an ACT to manage canary rockfish can be accomplished without putting in regulation the specific actions or responses that would be triggered by attaining or exceeding the ACT as long as potential actions have been fully analyzed and noticed to the public. The concept that we envision for an ACT is consistent with these requirements. WDFW will further analyze (and seek stakeholder input at a public meeting in May) options to inform setting an ACT and the potential responses should it be attained or exceeded for final management measure action at the June 2024 Council meeting.

Summary of Alternatives and Recommendation

In summary, WDFW is proposing to use 2023 estimated catch as the numerical basis for projecting total canary rockfish mortality instead of the average of 2022 and 2023 when analyzing management measure options for 2025-2026. And WDFW further recommends implementing a four fish sub-bag limit for canary rockfish and annual catch target (ACT) as the PPA along with the full range of alternatives for public review.

Table 1. Washington recreational canary rockfish harvest guidelines and total mortality (mt) and bottomfish regulations, 2017-2023.

Year		2017	2018	2019	2020[a/]	2021[b/]	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
WA Rec. HG (mt)		50.0	50.0	47.0	44.0	43.0	42.0	41.0	40.8	17.3	17.2
WA Rec. Total Mortality (mt)		5.0	4.5	13.7	7.8	39.5	37.1	22.1	*29.6*[c/]		
Daily limit		1[d/]	2[d/]	No sublimit; subject to 7 rockfish daily limit							
Marine Area 1	Deep-water lingcod closure	Closed			Closed except June 1-15 and Sept 1-30						
Marine Area 2	YRCAs[e/]	Closed				Open					
	30 fm line Closure*	Closed	March 15-June 15		March 9-May 31	May 1-31					
	Deep-water line Closure*	Year-round	Closed except June 1-15 and Sept 1-15		Closed except June 1-15 and Sept 1-30						
Marine Areas 3 and 4[f/]		C-Shaped YRCA closed 20 fm line – closure period varied by months across years									

a/ North coast (Marine areas 3 and 4) ports at La Push and Neah Bay were closed entirely in 2020.
b/ La Push opened to the public July 19, 2021; Neah Bay remained closed.
c/ Projected estimate used for initial analysis. Proposal here is to use 22.1.
d/Canary rockfish were only added to the daily bag limit for Marine areas 1 and 2 (Columbia River and south coast, respectively).
e/South Coast YRCA and Westport Offshore YRCA These two YRCAs were opened to recreational fishing in 2021 as part of the progression to increase canary rockfish opportunity. The South Coast YRCA was first analyzed during the 2007-2008 specifications process and implemented in 2007, while the Westport Offshore YRCA was analyzed during the 2009-2010 specifications process and implemented in 2009. Although closed to recreational anglers, the YRCAs were "voluntary areas to be avoided" for commercial limited entry fixed gear fishermen. The YRCAs are described in federal rule at § 660 subpart G and coordinates defined at §660.70, subpart C.
f/Specific provisions varied across years modifying period in effect and species retention.

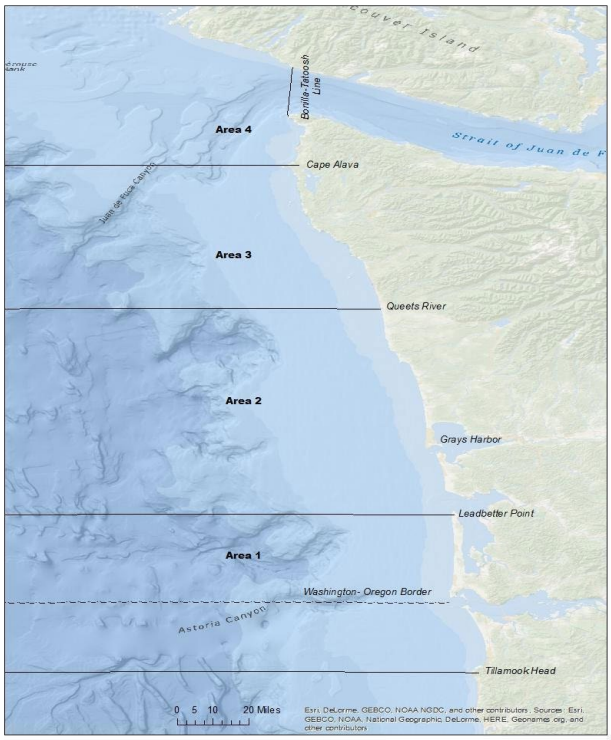

Figure 1. Washington Recreational Marine Catch Areas, 1- 4.

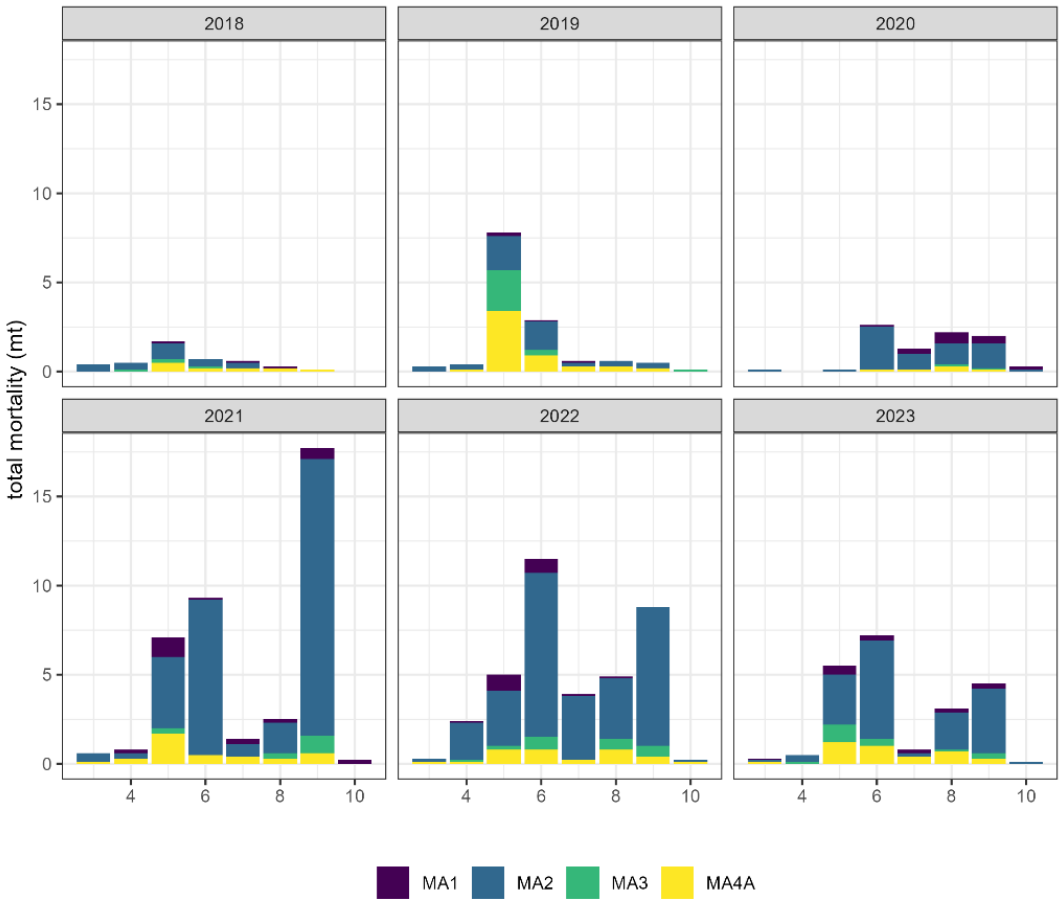

Figure 2. Canary rockfish mortality by year and month, and Marine Area, 2018-2023.

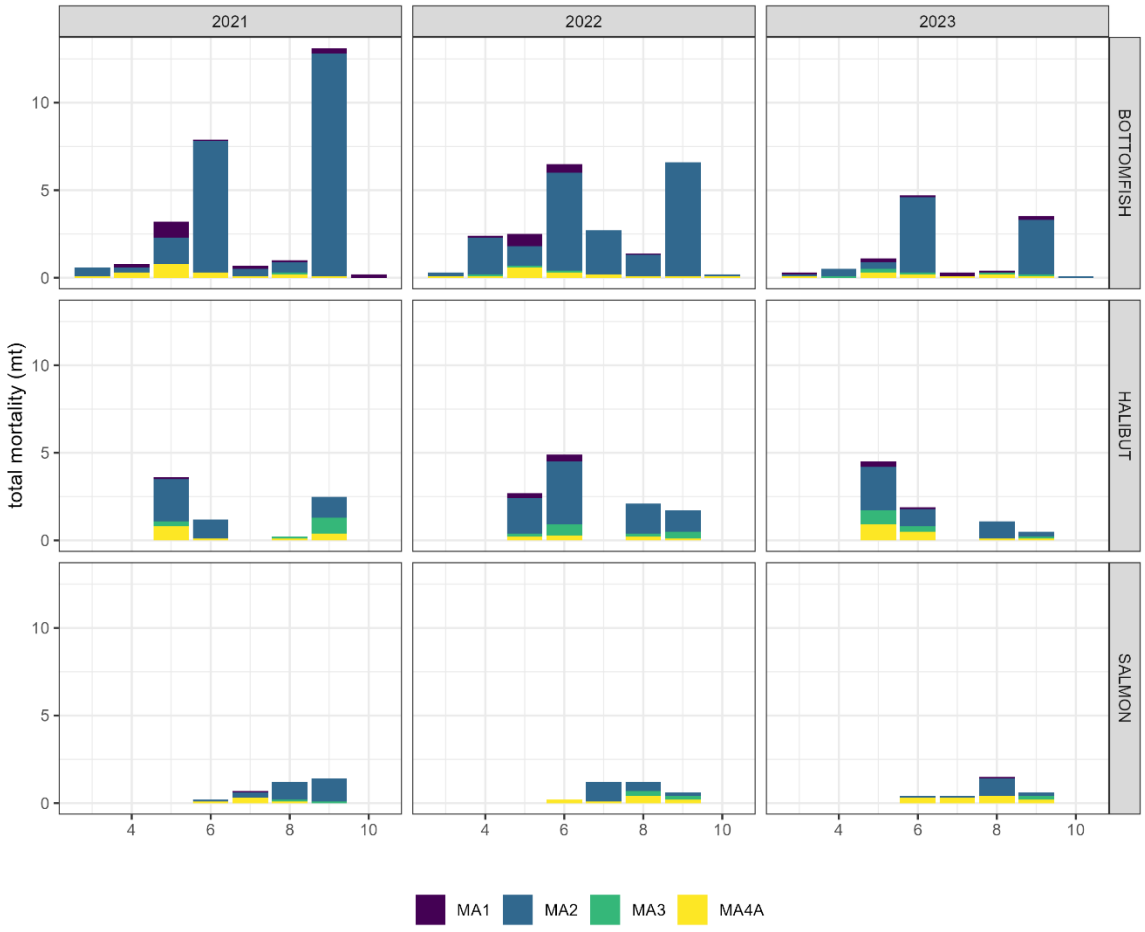

Figure 3. Canary rockfish total mortality by target fishery type (Bottomfish, Halibut, Salmon) and Marine Area 1- 4, 2021-2023.

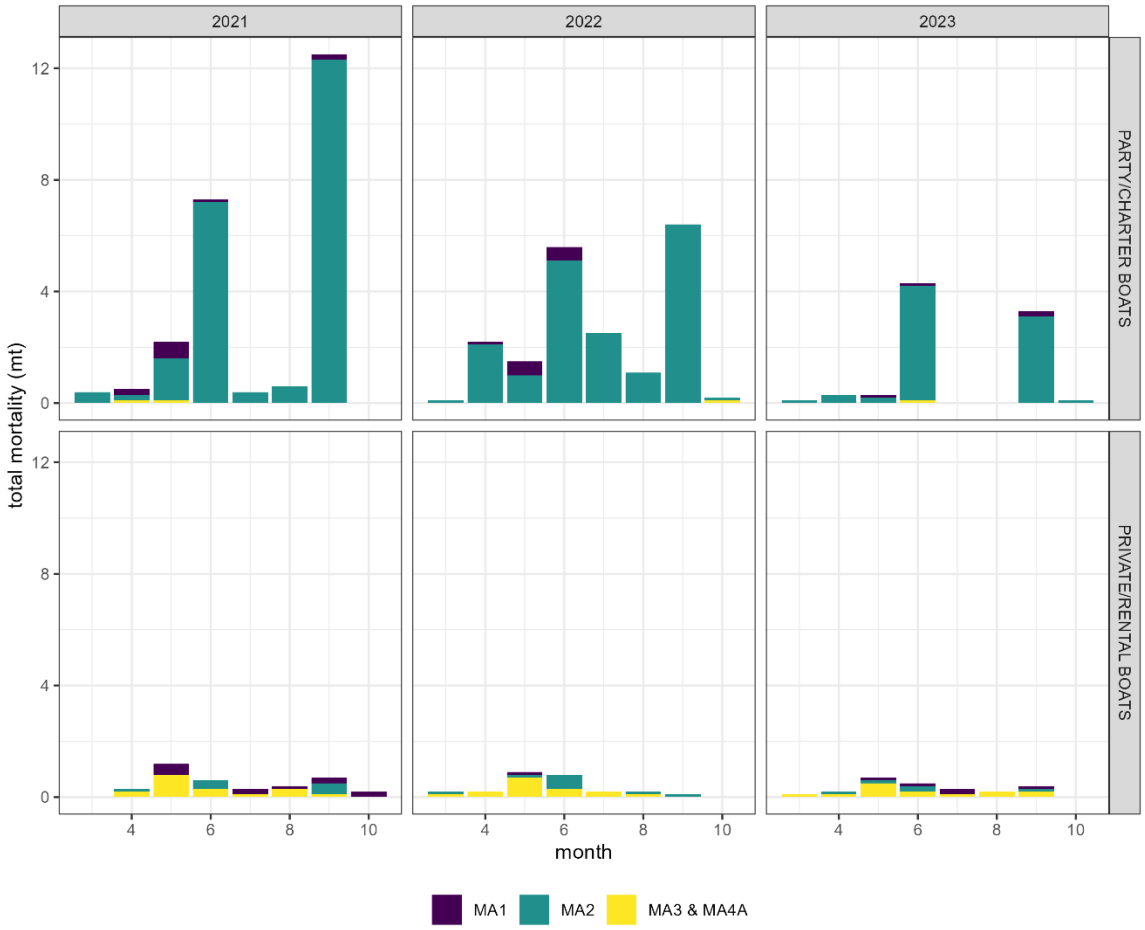

Figure 4. Canary rockfish total mortality, 2021-2023, by month, Marine Area, and mode (Party/Charter Boats, Private/Rental Boats) with Marine Areas 3 and 4B combined.

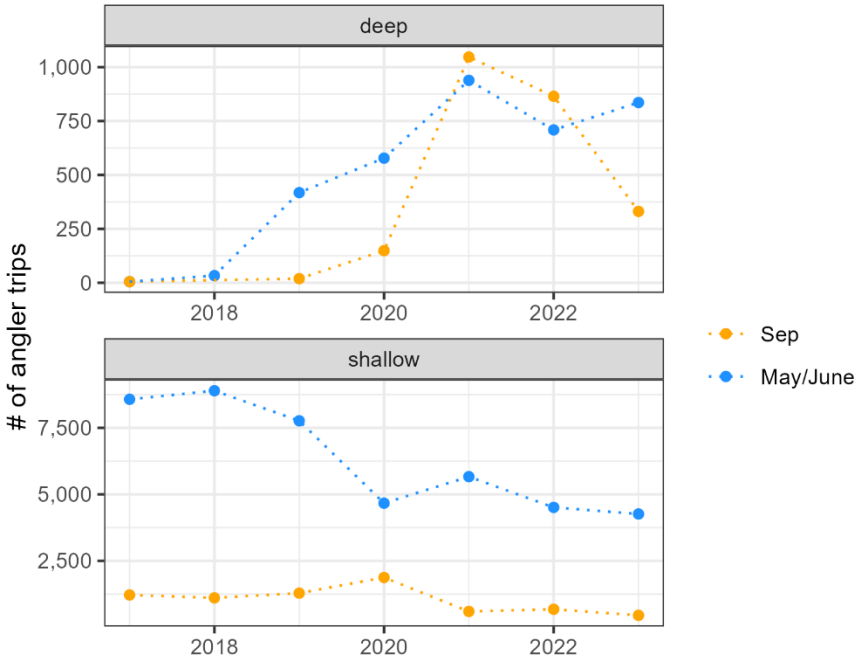

Figure 5. Marine Area 2 effort by depth (shallower and deeper than 55 fm) in the months of May and June combined and September, 2017-2023.

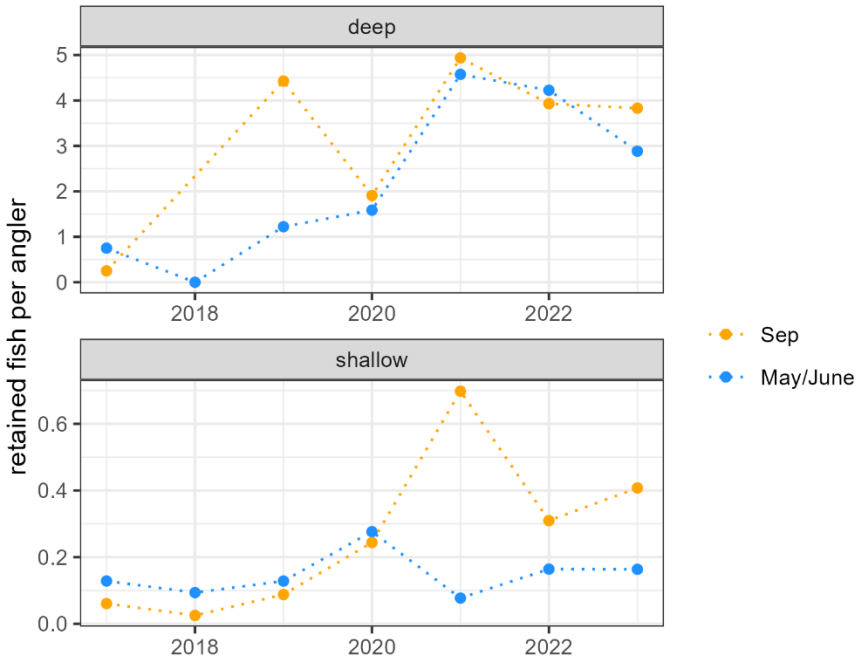

Figure 6. Marine Area 2 retained canary per anglers by depth (shallower and deeper than 55 fm) in the months of May and June combined and September, 2017-2023.

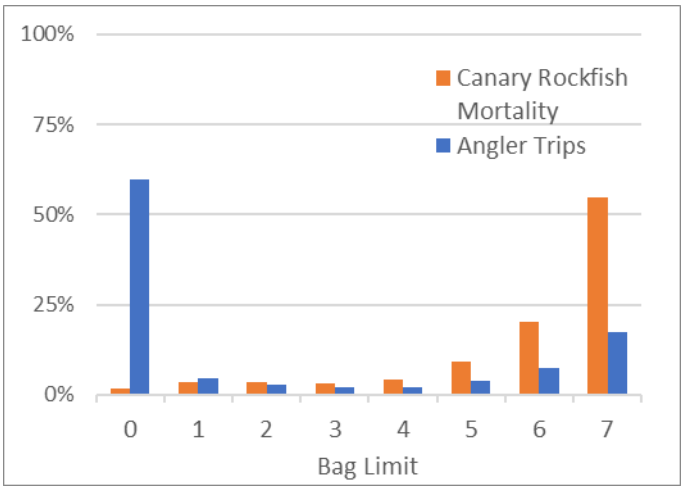

Figure 7. Percent canary rockfish mortality and percent angler trips by bag limit, 2022.

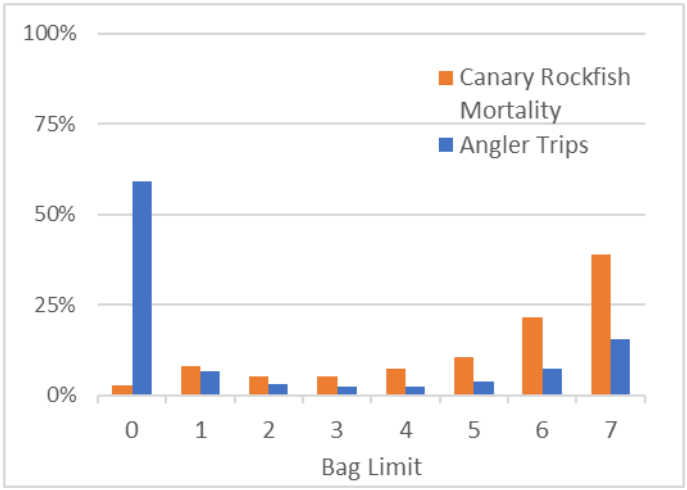

Figure 8. Percent canary rockfish mortality and percent angler trips by bag limit, 2023.

Table 2. Canary rockfish projected mortality under status quo (No Action 2023) harvest specifications using an average of 2022 and 2023 estimated mortality, and each year separately to evaluate sub-bag limit options.

Years	**Average of 2022 and 2023**	**2022**	**2023**
Estimated Mortality (mt) under status quo	**29.6**	**37.1**	**22.1**
Canary Rockfish Sub-bag Options and Projected Mortality (mt)			
6	27.5	34.1	20.9
5	24.4	29.9	18.8
4	20.7	25.0	16.4
3	16.6	19.8	13.5
2	12.2	14.2	10.2
1	7.1	7.9	6.4