

## WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2021 AND 2022 GROUNDFISH MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) met with stakeholders on January 17, March 20, and again on April 24, 2024 to review and discuss management measures for the 2025-2026 groundfish biennial cycle. At the April 24<sup>th</sup> meeting we reviewed the range of alternatives, and preliminary preferred alternative (PPA) adopted by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) for public review. The alternatives are fully described and analyzed in [Agenda Item F.5.a, Supp. WDFW Report 1, April 2024](#).

Based on stakeholder input, WDFW recommends the following management measures as the final preferred alternatives (FPA) for Washington recreational bottomfish in 2025-2026:

### *Marine Areas 1 – 4*

Maintain the status quo regulatory structure for recreational bottomfish as described under No Action ( [Agenda Item F.5, Revised Attachment 2, April 2024](#)), except implement a 5 fish canary rockfish sub-bag limit.

### **Summary**

This recommended FPA differs from the PPA only in regard to the measures used to reduce canary rockfish mortality. The need for action specific to canary arises because absent additional measures projected mortality for 2025 is expected to exceed the preliminary state recreational harvest guideline (HG) of 17.3 mt. Projected mortality for the Washington recreational fishery in 2025 under the FPA is summarized in Table 1.

The PPA for canary rockfish contemplated a four canary rockfish bag limit. Based on stakeholder input at the Council's April meeting and received at the April 24<sup>th</sup> WDFW public meeting, a sub-bag limit of five canary rockfish is now proposed. The proposed five fish limit for canary rockfish is intended to minimize economic impacts, particularly for charter operations, some of whom have added deepwater fishing opportunities to their offerings. The business dynamics are uncertain and from their recent experience in marketing these deeper water trips, charter business are concerned that four fish would not be enough to entice customers to pay the fees needed to make these trips profitable. If so, demand could drop substantially and a four fish allowance would effectively be a bag limit of zero. The impact to private vessel anglers is likely neutral between a four or five fish bag limit although bag limit reductions may lead to the perception of less opportunity in general which could translate into fewer angling trips.

During this biennial specification process, we have closely examined the dynamics of recreational canary rockfish catch. Our analysis indicates that canary rockfish mortality under this bag limit could exceed the state HG of 17.3 mt in 2025 ([Agenda Item F.5.a, Supp. WDFW Report 1, April 2024](#)). However, with stability in regulations only achieved starting in 2021, the time series of fishing effort and catch rates for canary is too variable and too short to confidently predict catch for 2025 and 2026. In dropping the bag limit for canary rockfish, the Council would be taking action to manage the fishery consistent with the state share of the non-trawl recreational sector in light of this uncertainty. We appreciate the Council and states' long-standing approach to sharing

and recognize action is not required if a sector-specific share is expected to be or is exceeded and will coordinate with other states to collectively keep total non-trawl mortality within the total non-trawl allocation.

This FPA does rest on our ability to take prompt inseason action if necessary. WDFW’s regulatory processes can react quickly through state emergency rule procedures to implement additional depth restrictions, area closures, groundfish retention restrictions, or changes to seasons if inseason catch reports indicate that recreational harvests may exceed pre-season projections and risk exceeding catch limits (e.g., HGs, ACT, ACLs). Before the 2025 season begins, we will seek stakeholder input regarding preferred courses of action should any be necessary to reduce catch and share these publicly. Following routine practice, we will closely monitor catch inseason.

Finally, the FPA recommended in this report reflects the continued interest by both WDFW and Washington stakeholders to consider measures that maintain access to fishing areas and healthy groundfish stocks in a precautionary manner that recognizes uncertainty in projected catch.

**Table 1. Washington recreational mortality 2023 estimates, 2025-26 harvest guidelines, and 2025 projected mortality.**

Stock	2023 Estimated Mortality (mt)	Harvest Guideline (mt)		2025 Projected Mortality (mt)
		2025 (mt)	2026 (mt)	
Canary Rockfish	22.1	17.3	17.4	<del>22.1</del> 18.8
YELLOWEYE ROCKFISH	4.3	10.4 (ACT = 8.2)	10.6 (ACT = 8.3)	4.3
Black Rockfish	158.6	226.0	222.6	158.6
Nearshore Rockfish North of 40° 10' N. lat.	5.6	17.0	16.5	5.6
Vermilion Rockfish	0.87	0.6	0.6	0.9
Washington Cabezon/Kelp Greenling	9.9	17.4	14.7	9.9
Yellowtail Rockfish	88.1			88.1
Lingcod	186.9			186.9