

PROPOSED REVISIONS TO 2025 STOCK ASSESSMENT PLAN AND SCHEDULE

At the June 2024 Pacific Fishery Management Council (the Council) meeting, the final selection for groundfish species to be assessed in 2025 was made. Benchmark assessments were selected for chilipepper rockfish, quillback rockfish in California, redbanded rockfish, roughey and blackspotted rockfish, sablefish, and yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N. latitude, with update assessments for widow rockfish and yelloweye rockfish. Following the June Council meeting, the Science Centers and ageing labs (State and Federal) reviewed the existing collection of unread otoliths by data source and year for all species selected for assessment. This examination identified a mismatch between the ageing workload and ageing capacity. As a result of this mismatch, **the Science Centers recommend removing the benchmark assessment of redbanded rockfish for 2025, and postponing it to a future assessment cycle (e.g., 2027 or later).** The additional information that led to this recommendation are provided below.

The preliminary Stock Assessment Review (STAR) panel schedule paired the assessments for yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N. latitude and redbanded rockfish into the first panel. If an assessment for redbanded rockfish in 2025 were postponed, **the Science Centers propose that the first panel move forward with only yellowtail rockfish north of 40° 10' N. latitude and the schedule for the panel be adjusted to cover half-days only.**

Finally, the Science Centers discussed with ageing labs how best to capture the potential ageing workload for each species considered in assessment prioritization. Adding a metric or other associated material that would support advisory bodies and the Council in evaluating the anticipated workload with various species combinations will support improved decision-making for assessments in future cycles.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Redbanded rockfish is a long-lived shelf rockfish distributed off the U.S. West Coast from central California northward. To date, redbanded rockfish off the West Coast has only been assessed using category-3 methods. Redbanded rockfish was not included in the preliminary list of species for assessment at the March Council meeting and was added to the final selection at the June Council meeting. Due to the late addition of redbanded rockfish, the Science Centers did not have time to thoroughly review the available data and age reading needed to support an assessment for redbanded rockfish until after the June Council meeting. A review of redbanded rockfish otolith collections determined that since 2016, more than 16,000 unread otoliths have been collected from commercial fishery and survey collections. The only existing ages (a total of 278 ages) for this species were read in 2015 by the Oregon Department of Fisheries and Wildlife (ODFW) to inform a limited growth study. Since that effort, no additional ageing work for redbanded rockfish has been conducted and the ager who led that initial effort is no longer with the department. This means that none of the current eight age-reading specialists working at the State or Federal labs have any experience reading redbanded rockfish.

Initial estimates of ageing targets identified 6,000 age reads (including double-reads), distributed between the fishery and survey since 2016, that should be conducted to support a 2025 assessment. To begin ageing work for redbanded rockfish, an ageing protocol would need to be developed to ensure ageing standards

and consistency across age readers and labs. After obtaining agreement on an ageing protocol, the estimated time to read 6,000 otoliths for redbanded rockfish, a long-lived rockfish, is approximately ten months for a single age-reader. Also of note, this 6,000-age target would leave an assessment with few usable ages prior to 2016, even though more than 11,000 unread otoliths are available for the 2003-15 period. When the ageing time associated with redbanded rockfish was considered in conjunction with the estimated workload to support other 2025 assessments, producing the needed ages for all 2025 assessments was determined to be infeasible by the data deadlines.