

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT  
ON INSEASON ADJUSTMENTS FOR 2024

Washington regulations prohibit the retention of copper rockfish, quillback rockfish, and vermilion rockfish in the coastal recreational groundfish fishery from May 1 through July 31. On July 24, 2024, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) extended the prohibition from July 31, 2024 to October 19, 2024, or the end of the coastal recreational bottomfish fishery season, by state rule. This was a precautionary measure. Preliminary inseason estimates indicated that landings could be tracking higher than anticipated, leading to concern that catch would exceed state specific harvest limits if action were not taken. In particular, estimates available at that time indicated that the harvest limit for vermilion rockfish was exceeded in 2023 and we did not want a repeat in 2024. We included all three species in the inseason action, again out of precaution, and to minimize public confusion over which species could and could not be retained. The angling public was notified via social media posts and signs placed at key points at coastal ports.

Estimating catch—pre-season, inseason, and post-season—involves uncertainty. Adding to the typical uncertainty for our recreational fishery, procedures for estimating catch were reconfigured over the winter to support catch estimates for species that had only been reported as part of a generic species category in the past (e.g. widow rockfish were included as Other). That process was still underway through July as final calibration and validation with RecFIN was completed. In addition, descending device credits were newly applied to the estimates for vermilion (and select other species) for 2023 and 2024. These changes were completed by mid-August.

Once these updates went into effect, the estimates (final for 2023 and preliminary inseason for 2024) in RecFIN indicated that total mortality (metric tons, mt) for these three species is not as high as anticipated. And with updated estimates for 2023, the state specific limit for vermilion rockfish was not exceeded (Table 1). For 2024, we evaluated the actual harvest through July (Table 2) and considered projections for the remainder of the season for all three species. Based on recent year fishery performance, we find that harvest limits likely would not have been exceeded for copper rockfish and quillback rockfish had we allowed retention through the end of the 2024 season. In contrast, catch of vermilion rockfish may have exceeded our target this year had retention been allowed.

Forecasting of catch and effort continues to pose challenges. Our analysis for 2023-24 harvest specifications did indicate that allowing retention of vermilion rockfish would risk exceeding the Washington recreational share of the ACL. Again, however, we treat these estimates as highly uncertain. WDFW has typically used a simple approach for projecting catch and based on the idea that catch rates and effort will remain the same as the year before. The simple approach is backed by the ability of WDFW's Ocean Sampling Program to produce catch estimates and our ability to act quickly through state regulation during the fishing season.

WDFW has sought to continue allowing retention of these nearshore species not because they are highly desired by anglers but instead out of recognition that they are data limited stocks. Fish brought to shore are measured for length and often their weight and age. Without anglers bringing

fish to shore, there will be little prospect of producing improved stock assessments. Our approach, which began in 2023, was to provide for some retention of these species during the recreational bottomfish season, limited to the first six weeks (second Saturday in March through April 30) and the last two and half months (August 1 through the third Saturday in October). These are “shoulder” months with typically low effort in the bottomfish fishery, and retention during these months allows WDFW dockside sampling programs to collect the needed biological data. Although retention of these species is prohibited through October 19, 2024 out of precaution, WDFW will continue to consider this approach for the 2025 recreational bottomfish season.

**Table 1. 2023 Estimates of Total Mortality for Copper, Quillback, and Vermilion rockfishes in the WA recreational fishery. Source: RecFIN 8.22.2024**

<b>Species</b>	<b>2023 Total Mortality (mt)</b>	<b>ACL contribution (mt)</b>
Copper Rockfish	0.90	1.88
Quillback Rockfish	0.80	2.23
Vermilion Rockfish	0.55	0.72

**Table 2. 2024 Preliminary Inseason Estimate of Total Mortality for Copper, Quillback, and Vermilion rockfishes in the WA recreational fishery through July 2024. Source: RecFIN 8.22.2024**

<b>Species</b>	<b>2024 Preliminary Inseason Estimate of Total Mortality through July (mt)</b>	<b>ACL contribution (mt)</b>
Copper Rockfish	0.85	1.88
Quillback Rockfish	0.32	2.23
Vermilion Rockfish	0.32	0.72