

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON PHASE 2 STOCK DEFINITIONS – FINAL ACTION

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) recommends the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) preliminary preferred alternative (PPA) as its final preferred alternative (FPA), with the exception of quillback rockfish off California, rosethorn and stripetail rockfish. While there were some differences between our recommendation in our June 2025 Phase 2 Stock Definitions statement ([Agenda Item E.6.a, Supplemental REVISED GAP Report 1](#)) and the Council's PPA, the GAP provides rationale here on the change.

Recommendation for Quillback Rockfish off California

The GAP continues to recommend removal of quillback rockfish off California from the groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP; Alternative 2). This would align with the Council's PPA for all other nearshore stocks off California to not manage actively in the groundfish FMP. California managers prefer to retain nearshore rockfish-cabezon-greenling complex species under management together.

Recommendation for Rosethorn and Stripetail Rockfishes

The GAP reviewed the 10-factor analysis in the [Appendix in Agenda Item G.2., Attachment 1, September 2025](#) and based on that analysis as well as our discussion in June, we recommend that the Council adopt Alternative 3 (designate as an ecosystem component, EC, species) instead of Alternative 1 (keep in the FMP) as the FPA. In brief, both of these species have low ecosystem importance, low value, little retained catch in the fishery, and are not targeted. Nevertheless, given that these species are still encountered in the fishery, managing these two stocks as EC species seems most appropriate. The current practice of managing them to obtain optimum sustainable yield foregoes capacity is needed to support the management of other species important to the fishery, communities and the nation.

Overarching Comments

Since the inception of the Council's Groundfish FMP and other FMPs, the Council process has greatly facilitated the conservation and management of stocks and/or fisheries that occur primarily within the waters of the three West Coast contiguous United States – Washington, Oregon and California. These fisheries and stocks include those within the nearshore rockfish complex. Within the 10-factor analysis, one of the primary factors is factor (iii): Whether an FMP can improve or maintain the condition of the stock. The GAP maintains that this characteristic is not explicitly restricted to that portion of the stock or its fishery that occurs within exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters. Rather, this section allows delegation of management of that portion of a stock that does occur in the EEZ to the states under certain conditions.

Federal management of nearshore species does have a conservation impact on the stocks as a whole. Through a coordinated management effort, the States also contribute greatly to the Council

management process and have adopted policies for concurrence with the Council process outcome/federal management measures for the EEZ, within their state managed waters.

The states also contribute in a very significant way to catch accounting, biological sampling, age reading, stock assessments, and management. The GAP would ask: if the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is going to walk away from the partnership they have had with the states in managing species primarily caught in state waters, then why should the states continue to contribute to the same degree they have in the past managing species primarily caught in federal waters? Keeping in mind the significant role the states play in managing stocks that are primarily caught in federal waters, the GAP would encourage NMFS and the Council to continue that partnership.

In general, the GAP concurs with the [Agenda Item G.2.a, Supplemental WDFW Report 1, September 2025](#) broadly but also notes the following points:

1. The stock definitions discussion has overemphasized questions of jurisdictions while under-emphasizing the value of the current collaborative process between states and the Council. This cooperative effort provides conservation and management benefits well into state waters for our nearshore rockfish species.
2. The NS3 Guidelines speak to the need for transboundary cooperation. When stocks are co-managed by Federal, state, tribal, and/or territorial fishery managers, the goal should be to develop collaborative conservation and management strategies, and scientific capacity to support such strategies (including AMs for state or territorial and Federal waters), to prevent overfishing of shared stocks and ensure their sustainability. The GAP also notes that this is connected to Factor vii - the need to resolve competing interests between user groups - and should be more thoroughly considered in the analysis.
3. Stocks that are primarily caught in state waters can be highly connected to that portion of the stock that is in federal waters, as well as across state boundaries, through movement of the fish and fisheries operating across jurisdictional lines. [Agenda Item G.2.a, ODFW Report 1, September 2025](#) describes how regulations can shift more effort into federal waters and vice versa.

The West Coast has a long and highly respected history of working collaboratively on conservation and management strategies and on the scientific capacity to support them. This Council should be proud of this accomplishment and resist efforts that would seek to undermine and disrupt the cooperative approach that has proved to be successful for over 40 years.

Rationale for Alternative 1 Species to remain actively managed within the Groundfish FMP

NMFS has expressed concern with maintaining the following stocks shown in Table 1 which the Council currently has listed in its PPA for continued conservation and management (Alternative 1). NMFS staff has indicated that additional rationale is needed to support keeping these stocks in the FMP and specifically on how future catches of these species might be spatially distributed out into the EEZ given full spatial access to waters of all depths – those currently closed to support the rebuilding of yelloweye rockfish. The current full assessment ([Agenda Item G.3.a, Attachment 6, September 2025](#)) shows the yelloweye stock as rebuilt to target.

Table 1. Nearshore stocks selected for Alt 1 as the Council’s PPA, of particular concern to NMFS based on their catch in state waters

Stock	Area
Black rockfish	Oregon
Blue/Deacon rockfish	Oregon
Blue/Deacon rockfish	Washington
Cabazon	Washington
Copper rockfish	Oregon
Copper rockfish	Washington
Kelp greenling	Washington
Quillback rockfish	Oregon
Quillback rockfish	California

The spatial distribution of access to rockfish and therefore, of the catch of these species, has been greatly impacted by management measures like depth restrictions and closed areas. In general, effort and catch have been restricted shoreward, biasing catch data into the nearshore waters of the respective states (as described in Agenda Item G.2.a, ODFW Report 1, September 2025). If these measures had not been in place the GAP thinks a much greater percentage of the catch would have occurred within the EEZ.

Washington blue/deacon and copper rockfish, cabezon and kelp greenling: Washington GAP representatives noted, as does Supplemental WDFW Report 1 under this agenda item, that management measures have resulted in restricting fisheries access to those waters that are predominantly in state waters and this has in turn biased the catch data. Figure 1 in that report illustrates that for black rockfish, a representative nearshore species, their presence extends well into the EEZ, beyond state waters. As a proxy for nearshore rockfish habitat in general, their presence in the EEZ illustrates the likely distribution of nearshore complex rockfish catches, given equal access across all depths. Washington GAP members note that the fraction of rocky-bottom habitat within state waters is minimal between Copalis rock and the Columbia River mouth, a distance of approximately 45 miles. In this portion of the coast nearly all the recreational catch of groundfish occurs in federal waters.

These four species are taken coincidentally to other species in both tribal and recreational fisheries that are proposed to be retained in the FMP off Washington such as black and quillback rockfish. They are important components of a complex of species that are the economic backbone of recreational fisheries as well as being important to tribal fisheries both from an economic and subsistence perspective.

Oregon Black and Blue/Deacon rockfish: The GAP initially recommended Alternative 2 (remove from the FMP) for both of these species in June as the PPA as most catch was in state waters and state management was already occurring. However, as described in Agenda Item G.2.a, ODFW Report 1, ODFW notes that black rockfish are relatively mobile with individuals showing movement across management boundaries including state lines. Further, GAP representatives noted that both black and blue rockfish presence in EEZ waters is likely underrepresented in catch data due to conservation measures implemented to protect yelloweye rockfish during rebuilding which restricted access inshore. In the future the EEZ catch of these species is likely to increase

substantially with renewed access to fish these waters. In addition, when there has been access to deeper waters, the gear that was typically fished targeted the larger-mouthed species present with larger hook and bait sizes that don't catch blues well and therefore catch does not represent the full distribution of the stock.

As noted in our June 2025 report, Oregon black rockfish is a critical economic driver for both commercial and recreational fisheries, and blue/deacon are typically caught within the same fishery as black rockfish (and they are managed as a complex). Compared to other nearshore species recommended for removal from the FMP, these species, along with copper and quillback below, these provide significant economic benefits.

Oregon copper and quillback rockfish: As with black and blue/deacon, the GAP had recommended Alternative 2 as the PPA in June, as the majority of catch was in state waters and that there is a limited commercial live fish fishery for both species. Oregon GAP representatives noted both the tendency to fish long-leader gear in EEZ waters, and when fishing along the bottom, extremely large lures are used to target lingcod, reducing encounter rates with copper and quillback in EEZ waters. Therefore, the presence of these fish within the EEZ is likely under-represented within fisheries dependent data.

As noted above, copper and quillback rockfish off Oregon are caught in the same fishery as black and blue/deacon rockfish and can be a critical economic driver for both commercial and recreational fisheries. With respect to quillback rockfish, it remains a key commercial species for the live fish market and therefore underscores its economic importance to the fishery and should remain in the FMP.

In summary, the GAP, in considering the 10-factor analysis for these species and the conservation and management for these stocks, believes they would be better under Alternative 1 (keeping in the FMP) compared to other nearshore species. The coordination of management via the Council process provides synergistic conservation benefits that transcend the actual regulatory authorities of the participating state and federal fisheries constituents. The GAP feels this cooperative synergy should not be discarded.

Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 FPA Stocks

In June, the GAP recommended a different PPA than the Council's PPA for 11 stocks (Table 2). For those stocks that the GAP has changed their position, supporting the Council's PPA as the FPA, rationale is provided below.

Table 2. Stocks where the Council’s PPA (GAP FPA) differed from GAP’s PPA in June and rationale for the change.

Stock	Council PPA and GAP September FPA	GAP June PPA	Rationale for GAP Change from PPA to FPA
Copper rockfish (California)	Alt 2	Alt 1	This would align with the other nearshore rockfish species off California to remove from the FMP
Half-banded rockfish	Alt 2	Alt 3	The amount of catch is still relatively minimal and therefore, the GAP no longer agrees that we need the monitoring associated with an EC species.
Honeycomb rockfish	Alt 2	Alt 3	
Bronzespotted rockfish	Alt 3	Alt 2	<p><u>Bronzespotted and tiger rockfish</u>: There is limited catch of bronzespotted and tiger rockfish currently, but the GAP is supportive of keeping these in the FMP as an EC species. The GAP recognizes the potential for increased catches of bronzespotted to occur as the CCA has been opened. Tiger rockfish are incidentally caught in waters north of Pt. Conception and may also benefit from continued catch monitoring.</p> <p><u>Greenblotched, speckled, and Mexican rockfish</u>: There are catches of these fish as noted in June. Monitoring these as EC species will allow the Council to track catches and if catches become substantial given greater access to their primary habitat or increased abundance, it will allow for limited management measures Active management could then be reconsidered.</p> <p><u>Rock sole, sand sole, and Starry flounder</u>: As noted in June, these species are not targeted or economically viable at the moment. However, making these an EC species will allow monitoring in case markets develop.</p>
Greenblotched rockfish	Alt 3	Alt 1	
Speckled rockfish	Alt 3	Alt 1	
Tiger rockfish	Alt 3	Alt 2	
Mexican Rockfish	Alt 3	Alt 1	
Rock sole	Alt 3	Alt 1	
Sand sole	Alt 3	Alt 1	
Starry flounder	Alt 3	Alt 1	