WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2027 AND 2028 GROUNDFISH MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) met with stakeholders on December 10, 2025, February 17 and March 23, 2026, to review and discuss proposed recreational management measures for 2027 and 2028. In this report, we summarize key points from the analysis of the proposed management measures and present the full range of alternatives for the Council's consideration for the 2027-28 biennium.

Recreational Bottomfish Management Measures

The harvest specification alternatives that require consideration of changes to management measures for the Washington recreational fishery in 2027 and 2028 are the annual catch limit (ACL) alternatives for canary rockfish and yelloweye rockfish. The need to reduce encounters with and keep mortality low for those two species as they were rebuilding resulted in enacting several depth restrictions along the Washington coast. These restrictions have been relaxed over time as canary and yelloweye recovered, and WDFW is proposing additional actions for the 2027-28 biennium to loosen them further. WDFW has also had extensive exchange with stakeholders about canary rockfish and yelloweye rockfish management. WDFW, based on stakeholder and law enforcement input, offers the management measures listed below as alternatives to No Action for the Washington recreational fishery in 2027-28.

Depth Restrictions

North Coast (Marine Area 4)

1. Modify the 20-fathom line depth restriction currently in place June–July to exclude Duntze and Duncan Rocks from the depth-restricted area. These rocks are located just west of the Bonilla-Tatoosh Line; the exclusion would be achieved by extending the existing 20-fathom line seaward to 48° 25.000' N. lat., 124° 45.222′ W. long. (Figure 1).

South Coast (Marine Area 2)

1. Remove the 30-fathom lingcod restriction line which is currently in place in May.

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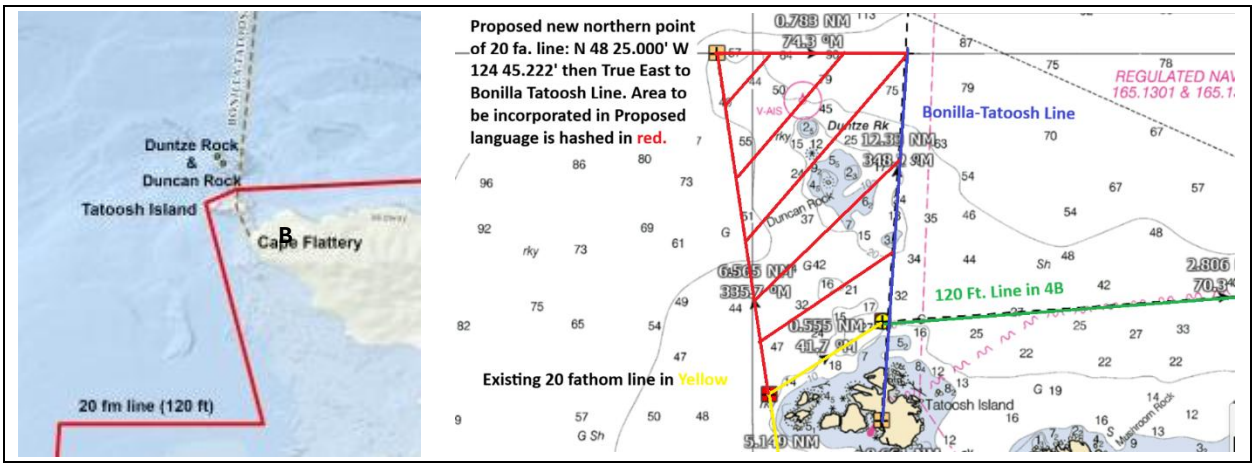

Figure 1. Panel A shows the current 20-fm depth restriction in Marine Area 4A west of the Bonilla-Tatoosh line which becomes the 120-ft depth restriction east of that line in Marine Area 4B. Duntze and Duncan Rock are just seaward of the 20-fm line in Marine Area 4A. Panel B shows the proposed modification of the 20-fm line in the shaded red area. Anglers currently cannot fish in this area in June–July but would be allowed to fish there during that time under the proposal.

Columbia River and South Coast (Marine Areas 1 and 2)

1. Modify the deepwater lingcod restriction in Marine Area 1, so that the closure in both Marine Areas 1 and 2 would be described by a line extending from 47°31.70'N. lat., 124°45.00'W. long to 46° 33.00' N. lat., 124° 28.55′ W. long (Figure 2).
2. Modify the open dates for deepwater lingcod from September 1–30 to September 1–15.

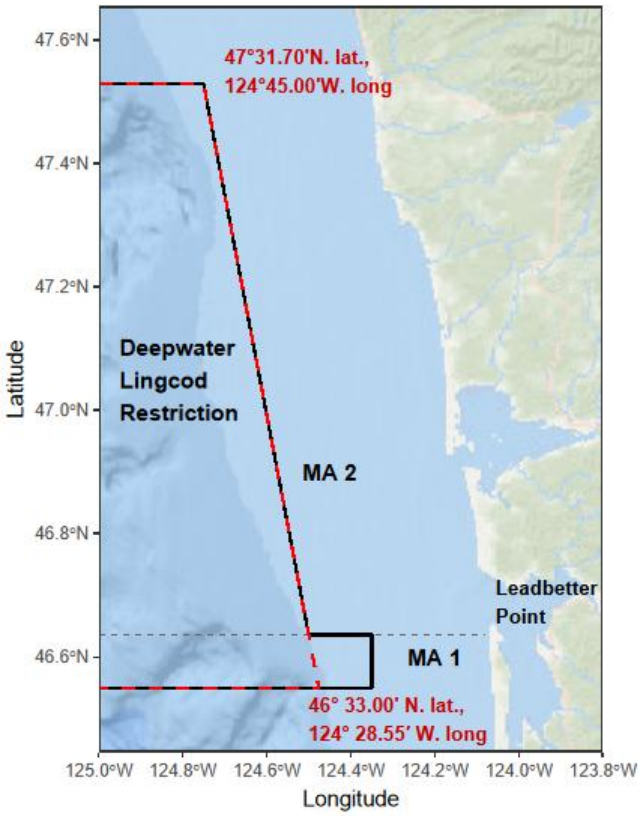

Figure 2. The current extent of the deepwater lingcod restrictions in Marine Areas 1 and 2 (black line) with the proposed new extent shown by the dashed red line.

Discussion

The modifications to the spatial and temporal extent of the depth restrictions in Marine Areas 1 and 2 serve to simplify the regulations and provide additional fishing opportunities for deeper water species like lingcod and yellowtail rockfish while also limiting canary rockfish mortality. WDFW estimates that modifying the spatial extent of the deepwater lingcod closure in Marine Area 1 would have minimal effects on canary mortality because only a small portion of canary mortality occurs there. Stakeholders in the Columbia River and South Coast areas have proposed harmonizing the shape of the deepwater closure due to the compliance challenges when fishing on the line between the two areas.

WDFW estimates an approximately zero net effect on canary mortality of removing the Marine Area 2 May 30-fathom closure and shortening the time during which the deepwater lingcod closure is open in September. However, the exact impact depends on fishing effort in May and September which can be weather-dependent and therefore hard to predict. South Coast stakeholders have stated a preference for the removal of the 30-fathom closure over the ability to fish for lingcod in the deepwater area in the last two weeks of September.

Modifying the shape of the 20-fathom closure in the North Coast area was identified as a priority by WDFW law enforcement to address the situation that fishermen are frequently encountered at Duntze and Duncan Rocks in June and July fishing for or in possession of rockfish outside the 20-fathom line. Extending the 20-fathom line would bring Duntze and Duncan Rocks within the area where anglers are allowed to fish in June and July. This would reduce complexity for anglers and the enforcement challenge created by the current configuration. The 20-fm line has been a major tool in the rebuilding of canary and yelloweye and keeps anglers from targeting lingcod in deeper waters where those species are likely to be encountered as bycatch. Extending the line for June–July in this relatively small area would not be expected to affect yelloweye or canary catch rates substantially. Catch rates would be monitored inseason and the effect of the line change could be evaluated in the next cycle. The Bonilla-Tatoosh line marks the boundary between the Juan de Fuca Strait and the Pacific Ocean and is the line that WDFW has used to separate Marine Areas 4A and 4B and Council from state management.

Sub-limits and Seasons

Yelloweye Rockfish

The 2025 Yelloweye rockfish stock assessment estimates that the stock's spawning output is now 40.1 percent of unfished levels and exceeds the management target of 40 percent (Johnston et al., 2025). Yelloweye mortality for the Washington recreational fishery has been well below the harvest guideline (HG) in recent years, with attainment between 2021 and 2025 ranging from 21 to 41%. Under the Council preferred Alternative 2, the Washington HG would increase by 43%, to 17.1 mt. As with canary when it was declared rebuilt, WDFW and Washington stakeholders see reason to relax restrictions carefully. We did not hear support for anything larger than a one fish daily sub-bag limit. There is considerable uncertainty in how fishing behavior might change if retention is allowed. Yelloweye and canary are connected. Catch rates could increase rapidly if anglers' attitudes toward keeping these "red" rockfish changes. While rebuilt, the ACLs are still low enough to be limiting across the sectors that have interest in retaining yelloweye. For these reasons, WDFW does not recommend analyzing a limit higher than that for this cycle.

WDFW offers the following options for allowing limited take of yelloweye in the Washington recreational fishery under a 1-fish daily bag sub-limit, from least to most conservative.

Allow yelloweye rockfish retention under a 1-fish daily sub-bag limit

a) for the entire bottomfish fishing season
b) only in May
c) only on halibut fishing days in May

Discussion

It is difficult to project yelloweye mortality under limited take because the species has been prohibited for over 20 years and anglers avoid catching them. It is unknown to what extent and

how quickly avoidance behavior will end and targeting will start once the regulations change. An additional factor increasing uncertainty is a lack of information about recent average weights. With anglers not allowed to retain yelloweye, data on average weight has been very limited. WDFW data suggests average weights of 6 lbs or less, but we have received feedback from stakeholders that they feel this is too low. If anglers stop avoiding yelloweye and instead seek them out, the average weight might increase. WDFW solicited stakeholder feedback on angler success (the proportion of angler trips that would keep a yelloweye) by region and trip type, and applying those rates to recent total effort, we can project estimated landings for the above retention options (Table 1). We note that historic (1970-2000) yelloweye rockfish landings in the Washington recreational fishery never exceeded 20 mt annually, even with few restrictions on the fishery.

As noted above, we heard concerns at our public meetings over allowing anglers to keep more than one yelloweye. We received a proposal to even limit retention to the month of May out of caution over the large amount of uncertainty on total mortality due to angler behavior change. We project that the likely total mortality for retention in May only would range from 10 to 15 mt (Table 1). Allowing anglers to keep yelloweye would allow data collection for stock assessments (e.g., lengths, weights, ages), improving future stock status estimates. Additionally, allowing retention in only one month would allow estimating angler targeting behavior change for that month that could inform projections for other parts of the season.

Table 1. Projected yelloweye rockfish total annual mortality for the above options, under different assumptions of effort (high, medium, and low, based on the last five years) and fish average weight (6 or 8 lbs), under assumed per-angler-trip retention rates informed by stakeholder input.

	Projected Mortality (mt)					
	Full season		May only		May, only on halibut days	
Effort	6 lbs	8 lbs	6 lbs	8 lbs	6 lbs	8 lbs
High	35.8	47.7	14.6	19.4	11.3	15.1
Med	34.4	45.9	12.9	17.1	9.9	13.2
Low	33.8	45.1	10.5	14.0	7.1	9.4

Canary Rockfish

Canary rockfish continues to constrain the Washington recreational fishery. When the ACL for canary was reduced by over 50% in 2025, WDFW recommended to the Council that additional restrictions were needed to keep the fishery from exceeding its HG. WDFW had initially proposed a four fish sub-bag limit (Agenda Item F.5.a, Supplemental WDFW Report 1), but revised this to five fish after additional stakeholder meetings that indicated a four fish sub-bag limit would result in economic harm to the charter fleet (Agenda Item F.6, Supplemental REVISED WDFW Report 1). Ultimately, the Council adopted the five fish sub-bag limit, even though the WDFW analysis

at the time indicated the HG would likely be exceeded, potentially by as much as 7 mt. In 2025, the 17.3 mt Washington HG for canary was indeed exceeded, by 5.4 mt.

We present here options for reducing canary rockfish mortality for the 2027-28 biennium.

a) Reduce the daily sub-bag limit to 4 fish for the entire bottomfish season
b) Reduce the daily sub-bag limit to 4 fish in May

Table 2. Canary rockfish projected total mortality in mt under various sub-bag limit options. The current daily sub-bag limit is five. Status quo mortality is 2025 total mortality.

	Status Quo	**4 fish sub-bag limit**	**4 fish sub-bag limit in May**
Projected Mortality (mt)	22.7	20.7	22.3

Discussion

The majority of canary total mortality (50-60%) in the Washington recreational fishery currently occurs in the charter sector. The business dynamics for charter operators have been and continue to be uncertain. Fishing success on deepwater halibut trips can be variable, and canary rockfish has become an important target for charter operators, particularly on the South Coast, on halibut and deepwater lingcod trips. Based on stakeholder feedback WDFW has received, the charter sector is still concerned that a bag limit reduction could lead to less demand for charter trips. Effort data show a declining trend in the number of charter angler trips, especially on the South Coast. Concurrently, the number of registered charters has declined, from around 60 per year ten years ago to around 40 per year now, indicating that operators are exiting the fishery. WDFW is concerned about these trends, as a healthy sport fishing industry is a vital component of the coastal economy, generating revenue for many sectors by drawing tourists to the coast (Taylor et al., 2015).

An alternative to the year-round reduction in the canary sub-bag limit is to reduce it only in May. Stakeholders have identified this as an acceptable option due to the prospect of being able to retain 1 yelloweye in May. WDFW estimates that the mortality reduction for a 4 fish sub-bag limit only in May would be negligible (~0.5 mt; Table 2). This is because few angler trips are currently hitting their 5-fish cap in May.

Catch projections suggest that canary rockfish mortality reductions of 2-3 mt would be needed for the Washington recreational fishery to remain below its 20.0/20.7.3 mt HG under Alternative 2 for 2027-28. While lowering the daily sub-bag limit to 4 fish per angler would achieve this reduction, the expected conservation benefit at the stock level would be minimal given that catch overall appears very unlikely to reach the ACL Even though the stock is currently in the precautionary zone, with estimated relative spawning output below the $B_{40\%}$ target, coastwide canary rockfish mortality has remained well below the ACL in recent years. Total mortality in 2025 was over 150

mt below the ACL, indicating a substantial conservation buffer. Additionally, the 2023 canary rockfish stock assessment estimated that 49% of the canary rockfish population occurred in Washington waters during 2017–2022. Given this large biomass and the relatively small magnitude of Washington recreational removals, the Washington recreational fishery represents a small component of total coastwide fishing mortality. As a result, additional restrictions in this fishery would have a negligible impact on coastwide stock status.

We note that under the WDFW report on canary ACL flexibility (Agenda Item C.7.a, WDFW Report 1), the planning amounts under Alternative 2 for the Washington recreational fishery for canary would be 25.0 and 25.9 mt in 2027 and 2028, respectively. WDFW does not expect additional restrictions from status quo would be needed under those planning amounts.

References

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Taylor, M. L., Baker, J. R., Waters, E. C., Wegge, T. C., & Wellman, K. (2015, June 30). *Economic analysis to support marine spatial planning in Washington*. Cascade Economics LLC; TCW Economics; Northern Economics, Inc. Prepared for the Washington Coastal Marine Advisory Council. https://ecology.wa.gov/getattachment/7c4576f8-8946-4f53-b7fd-241b193176a4/WMSP_2015_small.pdf