

GROUNDFISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON INITIAL HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES ACTIONS FOR 2027-28

The Council directed the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) to explore sub-trip limits for the shelf rockfish complex north of 40° 10' N. lat. and changes to California recreational fishery to remove recreational Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs) in favor of management via sub-bag limits only ([Agenda Item E.8, Motion in Writing, June 2025](#)). The GMT also provides a proposal for limited recreational and commercial harvest of cowcod rockfish for Council consideration. The following discussion scopes those items and notes that the changes proposed in this report may require more thorough analysis than other routine management measures the Council typically considers each cycle (e.g., increases or decreases to existing trip limits or minor modifications to RCA boundaries). Therefore, the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) is providing the Council with early scoping information in this report. This report does not preclude the Council from considering other routine management measure changes for 2027-28.

Removal of California Recreational RCA

Off California, recreational RCA's have been utilized to minimize impacts on overfished shelf, slope, and nearshore rockfishes since the early 2000s. With the anticipated rebuilding of the final two overfished species, yelloweye and quillback rockfishes, RCA boundaries off California are no longer the best management tool to meet but not exceed federal harvest guidelines in portions of the state where quillback and yelloweye rockfish are principally encountered (primarily north of Pt. Conception). Allowing anglers access to all depths and utilizing sub-bag limits only, where feasible, will allow targeting of healthy underattained species occurring in depths which were previously off limits to California anglers. In the 2027-28 harvest specifications analysis, sub-bag limits will be explored without the use of RCA lines for groundfish species. RCA lines may still be employed if deemed beneficial or needed and would still be applicable for use in-season if they appear warranted.

RCA boundaries provide an effective yet broadly applied management tool. RCAs mitigate mortality of species of concern, e.g., quillback rockfish, while also increasing restrictions on anglers targeting under-attained species that co-occur in the same depth range as those species of concern. RCAs were largely implemented to reduce mortality of overfished stocks. Now that those species are rebuilt, there is a recognized need to maintain low mortality of certain species (i.e., cowcod, yelloweye, etc.) while offering recreational anglers more opportunity to target healthy stocks. Sub-bag limits of certain species may be a more surgical method to accomplish this goal. This method is currently being explored with canary rockfish that could be encountered in areas where California quillback rockfish are found.

In response to the 2025 full assessment of quillback rockfish off California, at the June 2025 Council meeting, inseason changes for the 2025-26 biennium were proposed and adopted to:

“Number 1. Restore all-depth fishing in the open season for the Northern, Mendocino, San Francisco, and Central Groundfish Management Areas from April 1st through December

31st. Number 2: Remove the recreational management line at Point Lopez that created two subareas within the Central Groundfish Management Area.”

These changes are to be implemented as soon as possible, contingent upon the outcome of the stock assessment review process. The California Fish and Game Commission (FGC) adopted emergency inseason regulations instituting all-depth recreational fishing seasons for the Northern, Mendocino, San Francisco, and Central Groundfish Management Areas along with a two fish sub-bag limit for canary rockfish statewide to keep catches within the federal California recreational harvest guidelines that will take effect around the start of September, 2025 ([CDFW Press release, August 14, 2025, Item 19 FGC Staff Summary for August 13-14, 2025](#)). Conforming federal regulations are anticipated to occur sometime in mid-September 2025.

The above action 1) allows access to areas closed to recreational fishing and 2) allows for limited harvest of species of concern when anglers are targeting other co-occurring species. This measure could increase the distribution of angling effort, as it is currently concentrated in the nearshore, which would then reduce pressure on nearshore species. Furthermore, this proposed measure is likely to increase angler opportunity for under-attained stocks and could improve socio-economic benefits to port areas where offshore groundfish fishing was once a mainstay. The GMT proposes analyzing this measure under the 2027-28 biennial groundfish process to better understand the impacts on the recreational fishery and how it nests within the goals and objectives of the FMP and MSA. Information from these inseason actions, and other recent all depth fisheries, will help inform the analysis for 2027-28 management measures off California.

Cowcod Retention

Cowcod, at one time, were a highly sought after species. This species was determined to be overfished and subject to a rebuilding plan. As part of rebuilding two large area closures, the Cowcod Conservation Areas (CCA) were developed in addition to a prohibition on retention. These area closures and strict management measures aided in rebuilding this species. Cowcod was declared rebuilt in 2019. Since that time, management has proceeded cautiously, employing a stepwise approach to gradually increase fishing access to deeper depths primarily in the Southern Management area where cowcod are most commonly encountered. In 2024, the CCAs were removed for recreational and commercial non-trawl fisheries. As fisheries move back into the former CCA, increased encounters with cowcod are expected, thus limited retention may be a possibility and would serve to offer the fisheries increased opportunity in the former CCAs.

This proposed management measure would allow limited retention of cowcod in both the recreational and non-trawl commercial sectors off California by evaluating sub-bag limits and trip limits, respectively. The purpose of this management measure is to allow retention of cowcod which has been prohibited for over two decades. The need is to improve both the commercial and recreational sectors' opportunity to access under-attained co-occurring shelf and slope species while simultaneously reducing the regulatory discarding of cowcod.

Allowing limited retention will help to optimize yield by meeting but not exceeding federal harvest guidelines (National Standard (NS) 1), reduce bycatch, notably dead discards (NS 9), and allow retention of desirable “trophy” fish inline with requests from recreational anglers. The key objective is to ensure cowcod mortality remains below established harvest limits in order to not

degrade the status of this recently rebuilt stock. Limited retention may also facilitate the collection of fisheries-dependent data to support future stock assessments. Prior to the overfished declaration, cowcod was equally split between recreational and commercial sectors.

Stock Complex Species Specific Trip Limits

The function of this management measure is to address under-attainment of underutilized groundfish stocks managed in a complex. This request originated from the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) as an inseason request during the November 2024 meeting; however, the GMT was informed by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) that an inseason action was not an appropriate rulemaking vehicle for creating a new sub-trip limit for a species managed within a stock complex ([Agenda Item I.6.a Supplemental GMT Report 1, November 2024](#)). The GMT presents this proposal as a potential routine management measure analysis to be completed in the groundfish biennial process.

At present, shelf and slope rockfish stock complexes are managed by trip limits at the complex level. Meaning, component stocks of the complexes do not have individual trip limits. Therefore, if one stock within the complex is constraining, then the trip limits for the entire complex cannot be increased because there is a risk of overfishing the constraining stock. This results in the under-attainment of other stocks within the complex. Thus, this rigid structure does not afford the industry flexibility in harvesting and reduces access to healthy stocks. For example, in recent years, non-trawl attainment of the shelf complex north of 40° 10' N. latitude allocation has remained below 3 percent, while the California vermilion/sunset rockfish allocation has consistently been met or exceeded ([Agenda Item H.9.a Supplemental CDFW Report 1 March 2025](#)). To increase the shelf complex trip limit and improve access to the underutilized portion of the complex allocation, implementing a sub-trip limit on vermilion/sunset rockfish is necessary. A similar sub-trip limit has already been successfully implemented south of 40° 10' N. lat. and affords more opportunity and flexibility for industry to achieve catch limits.

This action would analyze and provide notice that certain stocks, such as vermilion/sunset rockfish, will be managed with targeted sub-trip limits within the shelf rockfish complex north of 40° 10' N. lat. Implementing commercial non-trawl sub-trip limits for the Open Access and Limited Entry Fixed Gear sectors within a complex will enable the fleets to access underutilized stocks while ensuring that the few constraining stocks remain within their allocated annual catch limit (ACL) contribution to the complex (in accordance with [Objective 9](#) of the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan [FMP]). For clarity, this analysis would not be limited to vermilion/sunset rockfish nor the shelf rockfish complex north of 40°10' N. lat.

PFMC
08/26/25