

Department of Fish and Game

Current Issues

Fall 2010

Recreational Groundfish Closures Yelloweye, Canary and Cowcod

In 2000, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce declared the West Coast Groundfish fishery a disaster due to a number of stocks considered in decline or overfished. Since then, recreational fishing seasons and allowable fishing depths have been increasingly constrained to minimize impacts on species declared to be overfished by the federal government. Currently, the species of primary concern are yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish and cowcod, and take of any of these fish is prohibited. If these fish are inadvertently caught (known as “bycatch”), which is not particularly unusual, they are to be released. Because these fish are often caught while fishing for other, allowable species, take of the allowable species is often restricted to minimize bycatch of the three prohibited fish species, often resulting in dramatically shortened fishing seasons. At times, these restrictions still are not enough to keep bycatch within acceptable limits, and in-season emergency closures have been implemented by the state.

The critical efforts to rebuild the depleted populations of yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish and cowcod will, unfortunately, necessitate subsequent shortened fishing seasons, take restrictions and emergency fishery closures. The state is acutely aware of the impacts to public use and local economies dependent on income from recreational fishing-related businesses caused by these actions. It also is cognizant of the long-term sustainability of the state’s vital marine resources, and the obligation to not be only responsible but act in accordance with the Marine Life Management Act, which recognizes that the way we fish for one species, may affect other species or their habitats in ways that harm entire marine ecosystems.

While it is widely accepted that the conservation of California’s rich and diverse natural resources is vital for sustained environmental and economical health, there are concerns that the information used by the federal government to determine overfished status, and the ensuing protective actions, is flawed. It even has been suggested the information is not based on actual fish abundance in California and better data are needed before applying restrictions that have generated severe economic consequences to some California communities. While it is acknowledged that the best available science is employed, more information on fish stocks is needed from research surveys to assess these species and track their recovery. It is believed these results would allow for additional fishing opportunity.

At this time, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) emphasizes its education of the public on ways to minimize the take of overfished species and relies on critical recreational monitoring to estimate take. Through improved compliance, better accounting of catches and the use of visual surveys in conjunction with monitoring of marine protected areas, it is expected more pertinent data will be obtained. These long-term activities are extremely expensive and federal assistance has been minimal. DFG will continue to identify and employ all available resources for this important work.