

## Summary

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**Meeting dates:** December 6, 2013, Commission Meeting

**Agenda item #11:** Using Descending Devices to Improve the Survivability of Released Rockfish – Briefing

**Presenter(s):** Heather Reed, Coastal Marine Policy Coordinator and;  
Ron Garner, Washington State Board President, Puget Sound Anglers

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### **Background summary:**

Six species of West Coast rockfish are currently declared as overfished by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC). They include bocaccio, canary, cowcod, darkblotched, Pacific Ocean perch and yelloweye rockfish. Rockfish are long lived, late maturing, and slow growing species. These traits make them particularly vulnerable to becoming overfished. Once a stock is declared overfished, measures must be taken to rebuild stock abundance to a level that supports maximum sustainable yield; for most West Coast groundfish stocks that level is defined as 40 percent of the stock's virgin, unfished abundance. Given the life history characteristics of rockfish, rebuilding an overfished stock to at least 40 percent of its unfished state could take somewhere in the neighborhood of 50+ years.

Harvest limits specified under rebuilding plans for canary and yelloweye rockfish have severely constrained Washington and Oregon's recreational bottomfish fisheries. Recreational fisheries in California are constrained by small harvest limits for cowcod. The primary tool used all along the West Coast to keep recreational catch within the small harvest limits for overfished species is to prohibit retention. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to target healthy species like lingcod, halibut, and other rockfish without occasionally catching a yelloweye or canary rockfish. When this happens anglers are required to release these rockfish.

Unfortunately, the biology of rockfish can make it difficult for released rockfish to survive. Rockfish have swim bladders to regulate their position in the water column; when rockfish are brought to the surface, the gasses in their swim bladder and other areas expands, causing bulging eyes and possibly forcing the stomach to extrude from the fish's mouth. This is called barotrauma. The expanded gasses make the rockfish buoyant, making it difficult for the rockfish to swim back down to the depth of capture; often these released rockfish are referred to as "floaters". Many of these rockfish do not survive being caught and released and as a result high mortality rates are applied to rockfish that are released at the surface.

One way to reduce rockfish mortality is to use a descending device to release rockfish that anglers can't or don't want to keep. Descending devices are tools that anglers can use to help rockfish get back down to the depth of capture. A descending device is a simple weighted tool that attaches to the rockfish and allows anglers to release fish back to the depth of capture. As the fish is being released with a descending device, the expanded gasses recompress as the rockfish is lowered back to the depth of capture. Recent studies on the West Coast have shown that for many rockfish, survivability is higher when they are released back to the depth of capture compared to rockfish that are released at the surface.

In 2012, in light of these studies, the PFMC tasked the Groundfish Management Team (GMT), an advisory body to the Council, to explore the recent research and report back on how the information might be used to mitigate the effects of barotrauma starting with the most constraining species to recreational fisheries on the West Coast; yelloweye, canary, and cowcod rockfish. In April 2013, the Council adopted depth-based mortality rates for these species associated with the use of descending devices as recommended by the GMT with

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some minor changes. The GMT is currently working with the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee to refine the rates. The Council is scheduled to consider the new information at their meeting in March 2014.

Beginning in the fall of 2012, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) staff began working to improve awareness within the recreational fishing community on the benefits of using descending devices to release rockfish. The goal was to reach out to as many recreational anglers as possible prior to the opening of recreational fishing for lingcod and halibut in the spring of 2013. To aid in the outreach effort, WDFW produced a brochure titled "Protect Washington's Rockfish", a brief summary of why it's important to protect rockfish in Washington, how using descending devices to release rockfish back to the depth of capture improves their survival, and why it's important to accurately report rockfish catch and release to WDFW port samplers. The information in the brochure was replicated on laminated posters and incorporated into one of WDFW's [web pages](#) dedicated to information on protecting Washington's rockfish. The outreach materials were distributed to Charter offices, fishing tackle stores, and port offices.

WDFW staff worked closely with Ron Garner, the President of the Washington State Board of Puget Sound Anglers (PSA) to maximize the impacts of our outreach efforts. With Ron's coordination, WDFW was able to present information at several PSA Chapter meetings throughout the Puget Sound Region during the winter and spring. PSA, with Ron's leadership, took on an outreach effort of their own, working with WDFW to ensure the outreach materials they produced complemented those produced by WDFW.

Together with PSA, outreach events included PSA Chapter meetings, coastal Charter Boat Association meetings, the Puyallup Sportsman show, the Seattle Boat Show and WDFW staffed information booths at the ports of Neah Bay and La Push during the recreational season openings for lingcod and halibut in April and May. Inexpensive descending devices purchased by both WDFW and PSA were provided to recreational anglers at all of these events along with information and demonstration of other types of descending devices. WDFW looks forward to continuing to partner with PSA and others along the West Coast to increase awareness on the benefits of using descending devices to release rockfish.

This year, the WDFW Ocean Sampling Program revised their dockside interview questions to include asking coastal anglers if a descending device was used to release yelloweye or canary rockfish. This information will provide the proportion of anglers using descending devices in our coastal recreational bottomfish and halibut fisheries and is critical to producing mortality estimates that reflects the use of descending devices.

Recreational estimates that incorporates mortality rates associated with the use of descending devices by recreational anglers not only increases the survivability of released rockfish and contributes to the rebuilding effort of overfished species it results in lower estimates of mortality for these species. This will help WDFW offer recreational fishing seasons that are less vulnerable to emergency action needed to keep catch within small harvest limits and may, in the future, increase recreational fishing opportunities for coastal bottomfish and halibut.

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**Policy issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:**

None

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**Public involvement process used and what you learned:**

N/A

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**Action requested:**

Briefing only, no action required

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**Draft motion language:**

N/A

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**Justification for Commission action:**

N/A

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**Communications Plan:**

N/A

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