

# California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)

## Quillback Rockfish Inseason Informational Briefing

### Northern, Mendocino, San Francisco, Central Groundfish Management Areas

August 21, 2023

#### **Background information:**

- Stock (or population) assessments are conducted by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) scientific staff using data collected from state and federal surveys and fishery monitoring efforts. The assessments determine how healthy the population is for a given species in a specific geographic area.
- The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) reviews and approves these assessments and uses them to recommend harvest limits to NMFS. The approval process includes significant public input as well as review by both scientific and fishing industry advisory bodies.
- The 2021 quillback rockfish stock assessment concluded that the population status of quillback rockfish in California is in severe decline, and the population is estimated at only 14 percent of the unfished population, resulting in very low federal harvest limits in 2023 and 2024. These restrictive limits are needed to prevent overfishing.
  - Quillback rockfish are one of approximately 90 species of federal groundfish that are managed under a federal Fishery Management Plan and are important to both recreational and commercial fisheries in California.
  - When recreational anglers go fishing for nearshore rockfish, it is impossible to know which species might be caught. Minimizing catch of one species, like quillback, often requires closing fishing in areas and depths where other groundfish are found. In this case, closing nearshore waters inside of the 50 fathom (fm) boundary line and prohibiting the take of nearshore groundfish is necessary to minimize catch of quillback rockfish.
- NMFS is currently in the process of formally declaring the California stock of quillback rockfish as overfished and is developing a rebuilding plan for the species.
- While the 2021 quillback rockfish stock assessment was conducted on the entire stock in California, separate harvest limits were established for the areas north and south of 40°10' N lat. (near Cape Mendocino) based on the estimated quillback biomass in those areas.
- The Overfishing Limit (OFL) is the estimate of the maximum amount of a stock than can be caught in a year without further depleting the stock. A harvest target or an 'annual catch limit' (ACL/ACT) is set below the OFL; these numbers are specified in federal regulations to guide management.
- Catches are tracked during the season by looking at commercial fish landings, and through surveys of actual/observed and reported recreational catch. This includes dockside sampling of recreational anglers by CDFW staff.
- Current catch to date (combined commercial and recreational) north of 40°10' N lat. and south of 40°10' N lat. indicated an overage to the OFLs which required immediate action to significantly reduce all fisheries impacts to quillback rockfish.



illustration by  
Amadeo Bachar



- At the time the northern nearshore closure was announced, North of 40°10' N lat. catch was estimated at approximately 150 percent of the OFL (1.05 metric tons or 2,315 pounds).
- At the time the southern nearshore closure was announced, South of 40°10' N lat. catch was estimated at approximately 111 percent of the OFL (1.06 metric tons or 2,337 pounds).

**Current in-season information:**

- CDFW actively monitors groundfish catch throughout the year for both recreational and commercial fisheries statewide, and in late July determined that the harvest limits for quillback rockfish both north and south of the 40°10' N. lat. management line were at risk of being exceeded. In response to this, retention of quillback rockfish was prohibited in both the recreational and commercial fisheries statewide beginning August 7, 2023.
- CDFW met with California fishing industry representatives on August 1, 2023 to discuss the action taken to prohibit retention of quillback rockfish, catch data to date, and the potential need to take further action to reduce catch, particularly for the Northern Groundfish Management Area (GMA). It was noted that the area south of 40°10' N. lat. could potentially need further action as well.
- In the Northern GMA (OR/CA border to 40°10' N. lat. near Cape Mendocino), recreational catch of quillback rockfish continued and both the ACT/ACL and the OFL for the area north of 40°10' N. lat. were projected to have been exceeded, with more catch expected if additional closures were not implemented. The same situation occurred with catch in the southern area just a few weeks later.
  - 84 percent of the total catch in the northern area is from the recreational sector and 76 percent in the southern area, which is why additional action to restrict fishing was taken for the recreational sector.
  - Commercial retention has been prohibited and any further consideration of closures or depth changes for commercial fisheries will take place at the upcoming September Council meeting.
- Quillback rockfish are a deeper nearshore rockfish species and are almost always encountered in water depths shallower than 50 fm (300 ft.). CDFW took action to move the recreational boat-based fishery to “offshore only” in the Northern GMA starting August 21, allowing only take of shelf rockfish, slope rockfish, and lingcod seaward (away from land) of the 50 fm boundary line, defined by waypoints in federal regulations. Catch of nearshore rockfish (including quillback rockfish), cabezon, and greenlings is prohibited in all depths during an offshore-only fishery.
- Newly available recreational data in the second week of August revealed that recreational catch of quillback rockfish south of 40°10' N. lat. doubled the estimated recreational catch for the year and it was projected that the OFL specified in federal regulations had been exceeded in this area, requiring immediate in-season action.
- In the Mendocino, San Francisco, and Central GMAs (Cape Mendocino to Point Conception), CDFW took action to move the recreational boat-based fishery to “offshore only” starting September 1, which only allows catch of shelf rockfish, slope rockfish, and lingcod seaward (away from land) of the 50 fm boundary line, defined by waypoints in federal regulations. Catch of nearshore rockfish (including quillback rockfish), cabezon, and greenlings is prohibited in all depths during an offshore-only fishery.
- Quillback rockfish are generally not caught south of Point Conception. The Southern GMA (Point Conception to the US/Mexico Border) is scheduled to begin its planned offshore-only fishery on September 16, at which time all five GMAs in California will be offshore-only fisheries.



- The intent of these inseason closures and depth changes is to limit or prevent catch of quillback rockfish. Allowing fishing in nearshore waters for any nearshore species (even healthy species) increases quillback rockfish catch and increases incidental mortality, further exceeding the OFL overage.
- Additional actions may be needed for 2023 and 2024.

**Season setting process:**

- Regulations for the 2023 fishing season were developed through the Council's public process with input from California recreational fishery representatives. The California Fish and Game Commission adopts sport fishing regulations for state waters that mirror the federal regulations, to ensure consistency between state and federal waters. For the GMAs north of Point Conception, these 2023 regulations included a 1-fish sub-bag limit for quillback rockfish, a shortened season length, and allowing fishing at deeper depths for the first time in two decades in an effort to spread fishing effort away from the nearshore waters where quillback rockfish are most commonly found. These measures (in combination) were intended to reduce the overall catch of quillback while still allowing for fishing opportunities for other species of groundfish.
- In 2022 the implementation of the 1-fish quillback sub-bag limit was shown to reduce quillback catch. Recommendations for the 2023 season needed to be finalized by the Council in June of 2022. At that time it was unknown how effective the combined suite of actions (shorter nearshore seasons, new offshore groundfish opportunities and the 1-fish limit) would be on reducing quillback catch in 2023. Even if the 2023 season started with no retention of quillback rockfish, release mortality would still occur and fishery closures still would be needed. Allowing some retention of quillback rockfish did not significantly increase projected catch compared to no retention, and enabled the collection of additional biological data which will be critical in future quillback stock assessments. While 2023 in-season monitoring showed continued reductions in quillback catch compared to the 2022 season, the reductions were not enough to stay under federal harvest limits.
- These in-season actions were not planned in advance of the start of the season. Staff monitor catch in near real-time based on fisheries data from each management area. The initial season structures and stepwise actions to first prohibit quillback retention and then close nearshore waters in the necessary GMAs allowed for the longest seasons possible.

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