

Yelloweye rockfish report causes quite a stir

By Susan Chambers, Staff Writer, Worldlink.com

SEATTLE - The Klamath River fall Chinook salmon have attracted most of the attention with regard to curtailing fishing seasons, but another species could similarly affect commercial and recreational fishing in Washington, Oregon and California in 2007 and beyond.

Federal fishery managers meeting in Seattle this week heard reports that the spawning population of yelloweye rockfish, one of the groundfish species considered overfished and one often sold as red snapper, is lower than expected.

When translated to how much fish is available for catch, it could have meant a drop by more than half for upcoming fishing seasons.

That was the case until the Pacific Fishery Management Council approved an alternative plan.

Last year, the amount of the bright orange rockfish fishermen could catch was 26 metric tons, or about 57,300 pounds. In 2006, they can catch 27 metric tons, or about 59,500 pounds.

Under the new stock assessment, the reports translate into catchable amounts of 12.6 metric tons in 2007 - about 28,000 pounds - and 12.9 metric tons in 2008.

And, like salmon, the low numbers could cut across several fisheries since yelloweye is caught with other fish, such as halibut and salmon.

[“It could potentially put charters out of business in Oregon,” said Groundfish Advisory Panel member John Holloway, who also is a member of the Recreational Fishing Alliance. \(AND OREGON ANGLERS' OCEAN CO-CHAIR\)](#)

The stock assessment noted that trawl vessels likely never targeted yelloweye and it also wasn't often caught as bycatch. Longline fisheries caught some yelloweye as well, but the rockfish was generally prized in the recreational fishery due to its size, color and quality. It also fetched a good price for commercial fishermen.

Prowler Charters owner Wayne Butler, also a member of the Groundfish Advisory Panel, read the panel's report Tuesday that indicated just how far-reaching a drop in yelloweye catch could be.

Trawl fishermen, particularly in Washington, could face further cuts in summer flatfish and arrowtooth fisheries because some yelloweye is caught as bycatch, Butler said. Sablefish longliners could experience cost increases associated with lower catch rates and higher fuel costs if the fishery is pushed offshore to avoid contact with yelloweye. Halibut fisheries in Oregon could be closed, too, and recreational fisheries in Washington and Oregon could be pushed further inshore, to waters shallower than 120 feet. Sport fishermen, too, could lose their halibut fishing opportunity, Butler reported.

“All sectors are concerned about the potential gear conflicts that may occur as the industry is constrained to fishing in smaller and smaller geographic areas,” Butler added.

Since yelloweye rockfish was added to the overfished list in 2002, the Pacific Fishery Management Council and National Marine Fisheries Service instituted several measures to protect the species and enhance its opportunity to rebuild to successful populations.

Managers set restrictive trip limits for commercial fishermen, lower bag limits for sport fishermen and established Rockfish Conservation Areas, closed areas intended to protect various species of rockfish, in 2002. Sport seasons for rockfish were limited in 2002 in California and by 2004, all three states prohibited recreational yelloweye retention.

Scientists, fishery managers and fishermen also reported another concern: Would there be enough fish available for research?

The stock assessment already relies on sparse data.

“We simply don't have the data” for an accurate assessment, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Phil Anderson said during the council meeting. “We're asking people to do the impossible.”

The council's groundfish management team proposed an idea, a suggestion the council later adopted, to phase in the drop in allowable catch limits over several years.

By slowly implementing the limits, fisheries could be sustained and managers could find ways to collect more data, said team chairwoman Susan Ashcraft, an associate marine biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game. It also would give fishermen and processors more time to consider the impacts.

The team's plan would allow the following catch limits:

€ 2007: about 25 metric tons

€ 2008: about 23 metric tons

€ 2009: about 21 metric tons; and so on, for the next few years.

The real advantage, Ashcraft said, is that this plan wouldn't extend the mandated stock rebuilding time by more than a few months.

The current plan estimates the time for rebuilding by 2083; the team's plan would extend that time to 2083 plus a few months.

“Given the level of uncertainty of the assessment, there is virtually no difference between these two time periods,” Ashcraft said.

Fishermen were relieved.

“We always had other fish to fall back on - salmon,” Holloway said. But now that salmon fishing in much of Oregon and northern California also faces restrictions, it's no longer available as a dependable option.

Phasing in the cuts over years - “that was just brilliant,” Holloway said.

Holloway also said that it gives sport fishermen time to consider ways to identify yelloweye hotspots and to stay away from them. They also will be able to do more gear research, finding ways to not attract yelloweye to hooks. And they'll be able to take a closer look at rockfish mortality rates and how to return the fish to deep waters without killing them.