



# Backgrounder: Groundfish

The groundfish covered by the Council's groundfish fishery management plan (FMP) include over 90 different species that, with a few exceptions, live on or near the bottom of the ocean. These are made up of the following species:

- **Rockfish.** The plan covers 64 different species of rockfish, including widow, yellowtail, canary, shortbelly, and vermilion rockfish; bocaccio, chilipepper, cowcod, yelloweye, thornyheads, and Pacific Ocean perch.
- **Flatfish.** The plan covers 12 species of flatfish, including various soles, starry flounder, turbot, and sanddab.



*A lingcod guarding his nest*

- **Roundfish.** The six species of roundfish included in the fishery management plan are lingcod, cabezon, kelp greenling, Pacific cod, Pacific whiting (hake), and sablefish.
- **Sharks and skates.** The six species of sharks and skates are leopard shark, soupfin shark,

spiny dogfish, big skate, California skate, and longnose skate.

- **Other species.** These include ratfish, finescale codling, and Pacific rattail grenadier.

## The Fishery and Gear

Many different gear types are used to target groundfish. While the trawl fishery harvests most groundfish, they can also be caught with troll, longline, hook and line, pots, gillnets, and other gear.

The West Coast groundfish fishery described in the FMP has four components:

- **Limited entry.** Any limited entry program limits the number of vessels allowed to participate in a fishery. In this case, the groundfish limited entry fishery is comprised of trawlers and fixed gear fishermen with limited entry permits. Fixed gear includes longlines, traps, and pots.
- **Open access.** A portion of the groundfish harvest is allocated to fishermen targeting groundfish without limited entry permits, and those who incidentally catch groundfish while pursuing non-groundfish fisheries (like salmon). Trawl gear may not be used in this fishery, except for those targeting state-managed fisheries for pink shrimp, California halibut, ridgeback prawns, and sea cucumbers.
- **Recreational.** The recreational sector includes anglers targeting groundfish species and others who incidentally take groundfish while fishing for non-groundfish species.

- Tribal. This component is made up of tribal commercial fishers who have a federally recognized treaty right to fish for federally managed groundfish in their “usual and accustomed” fishing areas. These tribes, all located in Washington state, include the Quinault, Hoh, Quileute, and Makah. Formal allocations to these tribes exist for sablefish and Pacific whiting. Other groundfish species’ allocations for this sector are decided by annual Council action.

## The Management Context

Groundfish are managed through a number of measures including harvest guidelines, quotas, trip and landing limits, area restrictions, seasonal closures, and gear restrictions. Gear restrictions include minimum mesh sizes for nets, and small trawl footrope requirements for trawlers fishing shoreward of the trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCAs are areas where fishing is prohibited to specific gears or sectors). The groundfish trawl sector is currently being rationalized – that is, it is shifting to an individual fishing quota (IFQ) and harvest co-operative program that is scheduled for implementation in 2011. This program is expected to reduce harvest capacity in the fishery, to make the fishery more efficient, and to lower bycatch (the incidental harvest of non-target species).

All sectors of the groundfish fishery are currently constrained by the need to rebuild groundfish species that have been declared overfished (widow rockfish, canary rockfish, yelloweye rockfish, darkblotched rockfish, bocaccio, Pacific ocean perch, and cowcod). Rebuilding plans have been developed to help these species recover. Because of the low available harvest of species managed under rebuilding plans, the overall groundfish harvest has been significantly reduced.

The Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) contains the rules for managing the groundfish fishery. It outlines the areas, species, regulations, and methods that the Council and the Federal government must follow to make changes to the fishery. The plan also creates guidelines for the biennial process of setting harvest levels. As of October 2009,

19 amendments to the FMP have been implemented and three are being developed. In short, the amendments made the following changes:

- Amendment 1-3 were replaced by Amendment 4, which completely rewrote the original document.
- Amendment 5 established a framework for specification and apportionment of harvest levels.
- Amendment 6 established a limited entry permit system for the trawl and fixed gear sectors.
- Amendment 7 established a provision for Exempted Fishing Permits to allow experimental fisheries.
- Amendment 8 considered establishing a fixed gear sablefish ITQ system, but was never adopted.
- Amendment 9 created a sablefish endorsement for limited entry fixed gear vessels.
- Amendment 10 established provisions for the retention and disposition of salmon caught incidentally in groundfish trawl fisheries.
- Amendment 11 incorporated provisions of the Sustainable Fisheries Act into the FMP, including defining essential fish habitat, optimum yield, and overfishing rates and thresholds.
- Amendment 12 created a framework for rebuilding plan development and content.
- Amendment 13 incorporated Magnuson-Stevens Act provisions for bycatch.
- Amendment 14 established a permit stacking system for the limited entry fixed gear sablefish fishery.
- Amendment 15 established a limited entry program for the three non-tribal sectors of the Pacific Whiting fishery.
- Amendment 16-1 through 16-4 created a sys-

tem of rebuilding plans for overfished groundfish species.

- Amendment 17 created a framework for a multi-year management process.
- Amendment 18 described policy and program direction for bycatch monitoring and mitigation.
- Amendment 19 designated essential fish habitat for groundfish.
- Amendment 20 (proposed and in development) creates a trawl rationalization and individual fishing quota program.
- Amendment 21 (proposed and in development) will describe formal allocations of groundfish species and species' complexes for sectors of the groundfish fishery.
- Amendment 22 proposed limiting the open access groundfish fishery, but the Council chose not to follow up on this proposal.
- Amendment 23 (proposed and in development) will incorporate new National Standard 1 guidelines in the FMP.

Below are three general processes used to regulate groundfish harvests. Since these processes can take up to six months, they may be streamlined for some decisions.

- The process for controversial or complex issues takes at least three Council meetings. Proposals for management measures may come from the public, from participating management agencies, from advisory groups, or from Council members. If the Council wants to pursue these proposals, it asks for other possible solutions to the problem being addressed and then directs the Groundfish Management Team (GMT), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and/or Council staff to prepare an analysis. At the next meeting when such a proposal is on the agenda, the Council reviews the analysis and chooses a range of alternatives and possibly a preliminary preferred

alternative. The analysis is then made available for public review, and the Council makes a final decision at the next meeting the item is scheduled.

- The biennial management process was implemented in 2003 under Amendment 17 to the groundfish FMP. With a biennial cycle, management measures are implemented for a two-year period, rather than just for one year. Separate harvest specifications (ABCs and OYs) are identified for each year in the two-year period. Under Amendment 23, the Council would also specify overfishing limits, annual catch limits, and possibly annual catch targets, in addition to ABCs and OYs, as part of this cycle. The biennial process provides more time for the Council and NMFS to work on other critical groundfish issues, and more time for public comment.

At least a three-meeting process (November, possibly March, April, and June) is used to develop biennial harvest specifications and management measures:

- o November: the Council decides on a preliminary range of harvest levels and management measures
- o March: additional analysis can be considered
- o April: the Council decides on final harvest levels, and chooses a range of management measures for detailed analysis
- o June: the Council decides on final management measures

The Council reviews management performance (i.e., total fishing-related mortality, including landings plus discard mortalities) and socioeconomic impacts relative to management objectives (e.g., rebuilding plans) during the two-year management period in order to consider modifying harvest specifications and management measures in the next biennial management period. New assessment results are also considered when developing biennial harvest specifications and management measures. Pacific whiting will still be managed annually, with harvest levels set each year

under the terms of the U.S.-Canada Pacific Whiting treaty.

After considering Council recommendations and public comments, NMFS publishes the adopted regulations, thereby putting them into effect. For non-routine and annual management decisions, NMFS publishes a Federal Register notice and provides a public comment period before finalizing the recommendations.

The GMT is involved throughout the decision-making process. The team is made up of staff from the three state fishery management agencies (Washington, Oregon, and California), NMFS, and representatives from tribes with a treaty right to take federally managed groundfish. Traditionally, the GMT monitors catch rates, recommends harvest regulations and annual limits, and analyzes the impacts of various management measures. GMT members present informa-

tion to the Council, Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP), and other Council advisory bodies. GMT meetings are open to the public and public comment is generally accepted during the meetings.

The GAP advises the Council on policies and management decisions that affect the groundfish fishery and the public. The panel includes industry representatives of commercial and recreational groundfish sectors, tribal representatives, charterboat owners and operators, fishing organization representatives, processors, environmental organization representatives, and a public at-large representative. Each major commercial gear group is represented. Meetings are held at most Council meetings. The GAP operates by consensus and through majority and minority position statements that are offered as advice to the Council. GAP meetings are open to the public and public comment is generally accepted during the meetings.