

PROHIBITION ON A DIRECTED FISHERY FOR SHORTBELLY ROCKFISH

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) requested information regarding a measure prohibiting a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish under the Workload and New Management Measure Priorities agenda item (F.8) in March 2023. This item is listed, currently, as item B10 on the new management measure list (Agenda Item H.8, Attachment 1, March 2025). In November 2021, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife submitted an initial scoping document regarding a targeted shortbelly rockfish fishing prohibition ([Agenda Item E.5.a, ODFW Report 1, November 2021](#)) and much of the following information is derived from that report.

Directed Fishery

The term ‘directed fishery’ is not defined in the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) or Federal regulations; however, it can reasonably be interpreted to be equivalent in definition to “targeted fishery” or “target fishing”, which is defined in Federal regulations as “fishing for the primary purpose of catching a particular species or species group (the target species),” ([§660.11](#))

Shortbelly rockfish is currently designated as an Ecosystem Component (EC) species in the FMP. At [§660.11\(10\)](#), Ecosystem component species are defined as species that are included in the FMP but are not “in the fishery.” EC species are not actively managed and do not require harvest specifications. These species are not supposed to be targeted, not generally retained for sale or personal use, and are not determined to be subject to overfishing, approaching an overfished condition, or overfished, nor are they likely to become subject to overfishing or overfished in the absence of conservation and management measures.

Shortbelly rockfish have never been targeted and are recognized as an important forage species in the California Current ecosystem with the center of its population distribution historically on the shelf/slope break off central California ([Agenda Item H.4, Supplemental Revised Attachment 1, November 2019](#), Field et al. 2007). Additionally, as noted by the GAP, the whiting sector takes active measures to avoid shortbelly rockfish and there is a strong incentive to avoid the species ([Agenda Item H.4a, Supplemental GAP Report 1, November 2019](#)). Industry has indicated that shortbelly rockfish is not currently marketable and does not expect it to become so in the near future. The average ex-vessel price per pound between 2021 and 2024 was \$0.02 (PacFIN, GMT 004). Further, industry reports that the fish is primarily used as fishmeal or discarded at-sea ([Agenda Item H.6.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, September 2019](#)), and with such low value even as fishmeal, a targeted fishery is unlikely, as the revenues would be lower than typical operating costs

History

The management history is well described in [Agenda Item H.4, Supplemental Revised Attachment 1, November 2019](#), which is incorporated by reference. Shortbelly rockfish were initially considered for an EC species designation under FMP Amendment 23. Rather than classifying shortbelly rockfish as an EC species, the Council chose to recommend a very restrictive Annual Catch Limit (ACL) of 50 mt, which was below recent catch levels, for the 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 management cycles. The ACL of 500 mt for shortbelly rockfish was set intentionally low

relative to the acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 5,789 mt in recognition of the stock's importance as a forage species in the California Current Ecosystem (CCE). The ACL was increased to 500 mt beginning in 2015 to prevent unavoidable bycatch from closing such fisheries as the at-sea whiting and the midwater trawl EFP fisheries targeting yellowtail and widow rockfishes. The 500 mt ACL was less than 9 percent of the ABC at that time. That amount was set to accommodate unavoidable incidental bycatch of shortbelly rockfish while allowing most of the harvestable surplus of the stock to be available as forage for species in the CCE ([Agenda Item I.7.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, June 2019](#)).

Starting in 2016, increased encounters of shortbelly rockfish in northern midwater trawl fisheries, notably in the Pacific whiting fisheries, began to occur (Table 3). At the June 2019 Council meeting, the GMT informed the Council that the ACL exceeded in 2018 ([Agenda Item I.7.a, Supplemental GMT Report 1, June 2019](#)) The continuing high levels of mortality into 2019, coupled with a highly conservative ACL, could have resulted in fishery closures for entire sectors (e.g. at-sea whiting) of the groundfish fishery. To avoid closures, yet meet conservation objectives, the Council reconsidered the level of ACL relative to the ABC. In November 2019, the Council adopted a mid-biennium change to the ACL, increasing it from 500 mt to 3,000 mt, which was implemented in 2020 ([Agenda Item H.4, Supplemental Revised Attachment 1, November 2019](#)). After 2020, the mortality of shortbelly rockfish has fluctuated, but overall it has steadily decreased from the high of 666 mt in 2019 (Table 3).

The Council directed the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) to investigate management measures for shortbelly rockfish as part of the 2021-22 harvest specifications and management measures process. At the September 2019 Council meeting, there was a request from [the public](#) for the Council to consider a prohibition on development of a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish. The Council did not consider this option in the 2021-22 harvest specifications and management measures process. The GMT provided an analysis for shortbelly rockfish accountability measures in [Agenda Item G.6.a, Supplemental GMT Report 2, April 2020](#) and recommended the Council consider an annual catch target for the species. In June 2020, the Council considered an option for an annual catch target (ACT) for the species and an option to convert the species from a managed species to an EC species.

As background, EC Species are FMP species that are not actively managed in the fishery. These species do not require specification of reference points (i.e., Overfishing Limits [OFLs], Acceptable Biological Catches [ABCs], and Annual Catch Limits [ACLs]) but are monitored to the extent that any new pertinent scientific information becomes available (e.g., catch trends, vulnerability, etc.) to determine changes in their status or their vulnerability to the fishery. EC species are not targeted; are not generally retained for sale or personal use (see FMP § 4.4.4); and are not determined to be subject to overfishing, approaching an overfished condition, or overfished; nor are they likely to become subject to overfishing or overfished in the absence of conservation and management measures. EC species can be converted back to actively managed species.

At the June 2020 meeting, the GMT provided the Council with a detailed analysis using the ten factors found at §600.305(c) in [Agenda Item F.1.a, Supplemental GMT Report 3, June 2020](#), which is incorporated by reference. In brief, the team found that shortbelly rockfish was not a species in need of conservation and management. The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP, [Agenda Item F.1.a, Supplemental GAP Report 1, June 2020](#)) concurred with this finding and recommended it be removed from the list of managed species and classified as an EC species. The Council adopted

the recommendation of the GMT and GAP for shortbelly rockfish as part of the 2021-22 harvest specifications and management measures process, which is reflected in [Amendment 29](#) to the Groundfish FMP.

As part of the 2023-24 harvest specifications and management measures process, the Council considered shortbelly rockfish in terms of its importance as a forage species. The Council did not take any action to change the EC designation of this species; however, given its ecosystem role as forage species for other marine life, the Council adopted a provision in the 2023-24 harvest specifications and management measures process under [Amendment 30](#), whereby

“Shortbelly rockfish is an ecosystem component (EC) species. Shortbelly rockfish is one of the most abundant rockfish species in the California Current Ecosystem (CCE) and is a key forage species for many fish, birds, and marine mammals. The Council has adopted the process to track the bycatch of this species to assess potential fishery impacts on shortbelly stock. The Council shall review fishery-incurred mortality of shortbelly rockfish during the routinely scheduled groundfish inseason agenda item. If the mortality exceeds, or is projected to exceed, 2,000 mt in a calendar year, the Council shall review and investigate all relevant information, including but not limited to, survey abundance trends and other stock status information, changes in fishing behavior, and changes in the market interest for shortbelly rockfish.

In response to the review of the information, the Council will consider voluntary measures taken by the fishing industry to reduce bycatch and consider other management measures including, but not limited to, area closures, gear prohibitions, bycatch limits and seasonal restrictions as deemed necessary to reduce shortbelly rockfish mortality. The Council may also reconsider the EC designation if appropriate.” Amendment 30, FMP §4.4.4

Mortality information.

Table 1 shows the average shortbelly rockfish mortality by sector from 2002 to 2023. Table 2 shows the total shortbelly rockfish mortality from the last five years, by sector.

Table 3 shows shortbelly rockfish mortality relative to its annual harvest specifications between 2011-23. Mortality in 2017 was approximately ten times higher than in 2016. Since 2017, mortality has averaged 436.3 mt, with 2019 as the peak year of 666.7 mt. Since 2011, average mortality has been 3.1 percent of the OFL and 3.8 percent of the ABC. In 2018 and 2019, 101.5 percent and 133.3 percent of the ACL was attained, respectively. The ACL has not been exceeded since 2019. In 2020, the ACL increased to 3,000 mt; however, in the 2021-22 biennial groundfish management measure process, the species was designated as a EC species and does not, therefore, have harvest specifications. As indicated in Table 3, mortality is still well under the 2020 ACL. As reference, the shortbelly rockfish ABCs and OFLs have never been exceeded.

The inseason protocols established under Amendment 30 require the GMT to monitor mortality of this species. The GMT reports on shortbelly rockfish mortality at each inseason agenda item, and the Council could take action inseason to reduce fishery impacts on this species, if necessary, based on that information.

Table 1. Average annual shortbelly rockfish mortality in the groundfish fishery between 2002 and 2023 by sector. Values in metric tons (mt). Source [Agenda Item I.1.b, NWFSC Report 2, September 2024](#)

Sector	Average Mortality 2002-23 (mt)
Pacific Whiting Fishery	116.74
Non-Whiting Trawl	28.42
Fixed Gear	0.01
Research & Incidental	3.80
Sum	148.91

Table 2. Total annual shortbelly rockfish mortality in the groundfish fishery between 2019 and 2023 by sector. Values in metric tons (mt). Source [Agenda Item I.1.b, NWFSC Report 2, September 2024](#)

Sector	2019 (mt)	2020 (mt)	2021(mt)	2022 (mt)	2023 (mt)	Ave (mt)
Pacific Whiting Trawl	597.7	388.0	298.8	335.0	137.8	351.5
Non-Whiting Trawl	67.0	194.5	30.3	105.8	60.9	91.7
Fixed Gear	0.03	0.0	0.03	0.0	0.0	0.01
Research & Incidental	2.0	0.3	4.5	0.9	2.5	2.0
Sum	666.7	582.8	333.6	441.7	201.2	111.2

Table 3. Annual harvest shortbelly rockfish mortality in the groundfish fishery between 2011 and 2024 in relative to its overfishing limit (OFL), acceptable biological catch (ABC), and annual catch limit (ACL) specifications. OFL/ABC/ACL values in metric tons (mt). Shortbelly rockfish was designated as an ecosystem component species starting in the 2021-22 biennium, thus there are no OFL/ABC/ACL values. Source [Agenda Item I.1.b, NWFSC Report 2, September 2024](#) and [GMT00701](#)

Year	Mortality (mt)	OFL (mt)	ABC (mt)	ACL (mt)	% of OFL	% of ABC	% of ACL
2011	12.2	6,950	5,789	50	0.2%	0.2%	24.4%
2012	7.4	6,950	5,789	50	0.1%	0.1%	14.9%
2013	25.1	6,950	5,789	50	0.4%	0.4%	50.2%
2014	17.7	6,950	5,789	50	0.3%	0.3%	35.4%
2015	9.3	6,950	5,789	500	0.1%	0.2%	1.9%
2016	30	6,950	5,789	500	0.4%	0.5%	6.0%
2017	320.2	6,950	5,789	500	4.6%	5.5%	64.0%
2018	507.7	6,950	5,789	500	7.3%	8.8%	101.5%
2019	666.7	6,950	5,789	500	9.6%	11.5%	133.3%
2020	582.8	6,950	5,789	3000	8.4%	10.1%	19.4%
2021	333.6						
2022	441.7						
2023	201.2						
2024 a/	189.4						

a/ preliminary data (GMT00701 2/1/25)