NOAA FISHERIES

WEST COAST REGION

Questions & Answers:

Proposed rule to delist canary rockfish from the List of Threatened and Endangered Species

Why is it being proposed that Puget Sound/Georgia Basin canary rockfish be removed from the List of Threatened and Endangered Species?

New information indicates that canary rockfish from Puget Sound/Georgia Basin are not genetically differentiated from coastal canary rockfish. Detailed genetics results and other new information about rockfish listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) can be found here: http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/publications/protected_species/other/rockfish/5.5.2016_5yr_review_report_rockfish.pdf.

Why does canary rockfish from Puget Sound/Georgia Basin have to be different from coastal populations to get protection under the Endangered Species Act?

To qualify for ESA protections, a "species" can mean a species, a subspecies, or a Distinct Population Segment (DPS). Canary rockfish of the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin were determined to be a DPS in 2010. To be a DPS, the species must be discrete from the remainder of the species, and genetics information can be used to determine discreteness. Because the new information found Puget Sound/Georgia Basin canary rockfish population is not discrete from coast, it does not meet the discreteness criteria that would qualify it for the protections under the ESA.

Photo: Creative Commons

Why did NOAA Fisheries conduct this research?

As NOAA Fisheries initiated recovery planning for the listed rockfish, priority research items to better understand the species' current abundance and population structure were identified. When yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish, and bocaccio were listed under the ESA it was noted that there was a lack of genetic information from these fish populations within the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin. Thus, to better understand these populations we gathered and analyzed biological samples from these fish to compare genetic structure within and outside the DPS area.

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How did NOAA Fisheries conduct this research?

NOAA's Northwest Fishery Science Center initiated a study with several Puget Sound recreational fishing guides, anglers, including many from the Puget Sound Anglers and the Kitsap Pogie Club, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to collect and analyze fin clips samples of listed rockfish. Without the expertise of experienced fishing guides, anglers, and WDFW's rockfish survey data, it would have been difficult to find the canary rockfish and yelloweye rockfish to collect the fin clips needed for the study. A research permit was obtained, and caught rockfish were handled carefully and released using a descending device to limit barotrauma that often occurs due to the change in pressure when a fish is brought from deep water to the surface, causing injury or death. The scientists and anglers were not able to find enough bocaccio for a comprehensive analysis and are pursuing gathering additional bocaccio fin clip samples.

What will delisting canary rockfish in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin from the protections of the ESA mean for fishing in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin?

WDFW rockfish regulations that have been in place since 2010 to protect yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish, and bocaccio are unlikely to change. Yelloweye rockfish and bocaccio still remain listed under the ESA, and recreational anglers currently may not allowed to target, possess, or retain any type of rockfish in the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin, which includes the San Juan Islands area. Also, recreational anglers are currently not allowed to fish below 120 ft. while bottomfishing in the same areas to protect yelloweye rockfish and bocaccio and to limit barotrauma injuries and mortality to these fish. There are still no commercial fisheries that may target any species of rockfish in Puget Sound and some commercial fisheries with rockfish bycatch will remain closed.

What can I do to help recovery of the other species of rockfish that are listed under the Endangered Species Act?

If you accidentally catch a rockfish, handle them quickly and carefully and release them using a descending device to avoid barotrauma (where the gas in a rockfish's swim bladder expands and causes the fish harm or death). Further barotrauma prevention information can be found here: http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/publications/fishery_management/recreational_fishing/rec_fish_wcr/bring_that_rockfish_down.pdf. If you keep catching rockfish, we recommend that you move to a different area. Also, fishers of all kinds can take steps to prevent the loss of their fishing gear, which can persist in the water and kill rockfish and many other marine species for years after gear is lost. For example, the Northwest Straits Foundation estimates that approximately 12,000 crab pots are lost each year in Puget Sound. They have outlined steps to prevent loss here: http://nwstraitsfoundation.org/project/recreational-crabbing-resources/. Also, in your home and around your yard, avoid using harmful chemicals that may end up in Puget Sound and affect fish.

What's so important about rockfish?

Rockfish compose a significant portion of all fish in the Puget Sound ecosystem, and we do not yet understand the possible consequences of their sharp decline. Rockfish are part of the food chain in Puget Sound. For example, larval rockfish can be an important food source for juvenile salmon and larger juvenile rockfish are prey of lingcod. The recovery of all rockfish species could benefit the recovery of other depressed species, such as salmon, in the Puget Sound.