United States of America

Report on Groundfish Activities by California Department of Fish and Wildlife in 2025

April 2026

Prepared for the
Canada-United States Groundfish Technical Committee

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1. Executive Summary (1 - 2 paragraphs)

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) conducted a new benchmark assessment of quillback rockfish off California in the summer of 2025. The benchmark assessment utilized additional data, including Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) surveys, which were not available for use in the previous data-moderate assessment. As a result, the new assessment found the quillback rockfish population status to be healthy and not in an overfished state as indicated by the previous assessment. The new understanding of the stock's status allowed the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to undertake several regulatory rulemakings to remove constraints that were placed on recreational and commercial fisheries when the stock was thought to be overfished. CDFW is continuing efforts to increase collection of age data and explore further use of Remote Operated Vehicle (ROV) surveys in stock assessments.

The CDFW has recently undergone a change in Director. Charlton Bonham served his last full year as the Director of CDFW in 2025. On February 17, 2026, Meghan Hertel was sworn in to succeed Mr. Bonham as CDFW's new Director.

2. Surveys and Monitoring (1 - 2 paragraphs for each program/survey)

A lack of California specific age data has been identified in several stock assessments as part of the Pacific Fishery Management Council Research and Data Needs. To that end, CDFW has made dedicated efforts to increase age data collection from the recreational groundfish fishery utilizing different data collection programs.

The California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS) collects angler surrendered copper, quillback and yelloweye rockfishes that were kept/retained by anglers erroneously due to species misidentification or inaccurate interpretation of authorized take regulations. This began with yelloweye rockfish, a prohibited species, and was subsequently expanded to include copper and quillback rockfishes. These CRFS angler surrendered fish are part of standardized CRFS sampling procedures and can be associated with raw sample data. In the case of species kept in excess of a bag or sub-bag limit, it is up to angler discretion to determine which fish to surrender.

The Rockfish Biological Groundfish sampling project is conducted by CDFW's groundfish project staff, began in 2021 and is the largest and most species diverse set of biological data from California's recreational fishery. Sampling design and protocols were subsequently refined in 2022, in consultation with NMFS science center staff to address potential bias issues and be more representative of the fishery.

Since 2021, a federally issued Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) has allowed CDFW to collect age and maturity data from cowcod incidentally encountered by participating recreational charter vessels during their routine fishing activities. The species collected under CDFW's EFP were expanded in 2025 to include yelloweye and quillback rockfishes, in addition to cowcod.

3. Research (1 paragraph for each project)

In recognition of more than 20 years of large-scale Rockfish Conservation Area closures combined with California's Marine Protected Area Network, CDFW has been working on incorporating ROV data collected inside and outside closed areas into stock assessments.

Recently, ROV surveys were endorsed for potential use to inform stock assessments, particularly for abundance. For California, potential relative indices of abundance and estimates of absolute abundance (with expansion) were identified for brown, China, copper, gopher, quillback, and vermilion rockfishes and kelp greenling as indicated by the Pacific Fishery Management Council's Science and Statistical Committee's Methodology Review of ROV Survey Design.

4. Stock Assessments and Management by Species/Group (1 – 3 paragraphs for each species/group)

The 2025 benchmark assessment of quillback rockfish off California used remotely ROV survey data to derive indices of relative abundance, with documentation of metadata and methods currently in progress. Additionally, design-based estimates of absolute abundance were produced using fish density (fish/square meter) from ROV observations and stratified by latitude and depth. Length observations from stereo-camera systems were converted into weights using established length-weight relationships and then expanded by strata. However, estimates of absolute abundance using the ROV methodology differed from those utilized in the stock assessment by nearly an order of magnitude greater. Efforts are ongoing to provide a model-based estimate of abundance using Species Distribution Modeling in Template Model Builder (SDM-TMB).

Several transboundary stocks – including yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish, sablefish and petrale sole – were assessed in 2025. The yelloweye rockfish assessment indicated the stock has rebuilt, continuing a consistent increasing population trend with previous assessment results. However, the 2025 assessments for canary rockfish, sablefish and petrale sole found the scale of these species' population to be less than previously thought. This divergence between the scale of the population between assessments is most pronounced in sablefish. The scale of the sablefish population decreased by roughly 50 percent when compared to the assessment done in 2023. Given the importance of these transboundary species to Canadian and U.S. groundfish fisheries, it may be helpful to increase discussion on the approach and framework for transboundary stock assessments.

5. Reserves (1 – 3 paragraphs)

Approximately 50 miles northwest of San Francisco, California, is a productive area known as Cordell Bank. Over the past several decades in the area surrounding Cordell Bank, several overlapping area-based management measures were implemented for various purposes including protecting formally overfished stocks, while others limited the type of gear that could be utilized or where fish may be taken. This resulted in complex and burdensome regulations and did not adequately meet conservation or fishery management objectives.

With input from the fishing industry and the environmental non-governmental organization community, CDFW developed a proposal to simplify and reduce the regulatory complexity in the area surrounding Cordell Bank. The proposal was thoroughly analyzed by CDFW and NMFS, and utilized habitat data from multiple sources, including data from the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, coral observations and substrate classification. This multiyear process culminated with the Pacific Fishery Management Council recently recommending the changes reflected in

the proposal. Once implemented by NMFS, an outdated area-based management measure will be removed and habitat protections over the core of the Bank will be strengthened.

6. Data Management (1- 3 paragraphs)

CDFW is in the initial stages of addressing data modernization challenges surrounding contracted commercial biological sample data, state mandated logbooks and other commercial data streams.

7. Upcoming Work, Emerging Needs, and Challenges (3 paragraphs)

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is currently examining defining groundfish stocks off the West Coast. While these efforts are still ongoing, the Council has recommended to remove several nearshore rockfish stocks from the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP). While the Council's recommendation has not yet been implemented by NMFS, it is expected that the jurisdiction for these stocks will be assumed by California, resulting in substantial regulatory modifications and emerging sampling and data collection program design restructuring needs for CDFW.

8. Other Publications (list)

None.

9. Agency Contact List (1-2 pages)

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