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Questions & Answers:

Removing canary rockfish from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species

Why have Puget Sound/Georgia Basin canary rockfish been removed from the List of Threatened and Endangered Species?

New information demonstrates that canary rockfish from Puget Sound/Georgia Basin are not genetically differentiated from coastal canary rockfish, and therefore are not a “Distinct Population Segment” (DPS). To qualify for ESA protections, a “species” can mean a species, a subspecies, or a Distinct Population Segment. 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 coastal canary rockfish, it does not meet the discreteness criteria that would qualify for the protections under the ESA.

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 NMFS gathered and analyzed biological samples to compare genetic structure within and outside the DPS area.

How did NOAA Fisheries conduct this research?

NOAA’s Northwest Fishery Science Center conducted a study with several Puget Sound recreational fishing guides, Puget Sound Anglers, the Kitsap Pogie Club, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Agency biologists, with the assistance of anglers, collected and analyzed 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 locate a sufficient number of canary rockfish as they are found in low densities in most areas of the region. Work was completed with the necessary permits and rockfish were handled carefully and released using a descending device to limit barotrauma. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiZFghwVOyI>)

What process did NMFS follow for delisting canary rockfish in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin?

A species may be de-listed for a number of reasons including extinction, a determination that they have recovered by meeting specific criteria outlined in a recovery plan, and new evidence regarding population status. In this case, NMFS collected new genetic information showing that canary rockfish in the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin are not distinct from coastal canary rockfish, and therefore are not a DPS. In order to delist the species, NMFS published a proposed rule in the federal register on July 6, 2016 and solicited comments from experts and the public. (www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/publications/frn/2016/81fr43979.pdf) NMFS reviewed these comments and decided to follow through with delisting of canary rockfish in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin. A final rule in the federal register regarding this delisting was published on January 23, 2017. (<http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/publications/frn/2017/82fr7711.pdf>)

Proposed Rule to Delist Canary Rockfish in the Puget Sound

Does this mean abundance of canary rockfish in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin has increased?

This delisting was based on new genetic information showing that canary rockfish found in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin are not distinct from those on the open coast. Though we do not know the abundance of canary rockfish in the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin, the overall population has improved dramatically. (http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries_eco/status_of_fisheries/archive/2015/2015_status_of_stocks_updated.pdf)

How many other species has NMFS delisted from the ESA?

Three other species have been de-listed from the ESA: steller sea lions and the eastern north Pacific gray whale DPS were recovered and Caribbean monk seals went extinct. Canary rockfish in Puget Sound/Georgia Basin are the first marine fish to be delisted.

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

WDFW rockfish regulations that have been in place since 2010 to protect all species of rockfish, including those listed under the ESA, are independent of this change. Recreational anglers currently may not target, possess, or retain any type of rockfish in the Puget Sound, which includes the San Juan Islands area. Also, recreational anglers are not currently permitted to target bottom fish below 120 feet as rockfish accidentally caught from that depth may experience injuries and mortality from barotrauma. There are still no commercial fisheries that may target any species of rockfish in Puget Sound and some commercial fisheries with rockfish bycatch will likely remain closed.

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

There are many ways for citizens in the Puget Sound/Georgia Basin region to assist in recovery of listed rockfish species. Anglers that accidentally catch rockfish should handle them quickly and carefully and release them using a descending device to avoid barotrauma. Further barotrauma prevention information may be found here: http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/publications/fishery_management/recreational_fishing/rec_fish_wcr/bring_that_rockfish_down.pdf.

If rockfish are being consistently caught, we recommend moving to a different location. Also, anglers 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/>.

Other ways to help recovery of listed rockfish include:

- In your home and around your yard, avoid using harmful chemicals that may end up in Puget Sound and adversely affect fish.
- If you are a SCUBA diver, report sightings of juvenile yelloweye rockfish and bocaccio to rockfishID@noaa.gov.
- Take some time and learn about rockfish. They are an amazing group of fishes and the more you learn the more you will want to support recovery!

What's so important about rockfish?

Rockfish are an integral component of Puget Sound/Georgia Basin and research on their ecological role is ongoing. However, rockfish can be an important food source for recreationally and commercially valuable salmon and lingcod during their early life stages. As they grow and mature, rockfish become upper level generalist predators on reef systems and may play a role in regulating herbivore populations. That is, a healthy population of rockfish may actually improve stability of valuable habitats such as kelp forests. When rockfish populations are robust, they may support a sustainable fishery that contributes to local economies. Therefore, recovery of rockfish in Puget Sound is beneficial for the animals and vegetation of Puget Sound as well as the human inhabitants of the region.



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