

PROPOSAL 27

5 AAC 55.022. General provisions for seasons, bag, possession, annual, and size limits, and methods and means for the Prince William Sound Area.

Modify rockfish bag and possession limits, as follows:

5 AAC 55.022(a)(9)(A) is amended to read:

...

(9) rockfish:

(A) may be taken from January 1 – December 31; bag limit of **three** [FOUR] fish; possession limit of **six** [EIGHT] fish, of which only one per day and in possession may be nonpelagic rockfish; no size limit; **yelloweye rockfish may only be retained from July 1 – December 31;**

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? The harvest of rockfish in many areas of Alaska has been increasing and is assumed to be associated with a shifting of effort from Pacific halibut to other species by charter (guided) anglers due to reduced sport fishing opportunities associated with the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan. The anticipated continued shifting of effort and the late-maturing life history strategy of rockfish requires a precautionary management approach until better information is available.

Recognizing the increasing statewide harvest trends in rockfish, the department formed the Statewide Rockfish Initiative in September 2017 with a goal of developing strategies that will support long-term adaptive management for rockfish. Work towards stock assessments that include data from all fisheries has been ongoing. Most recently, stock assessments on yelloweye rockfish for Prince William Sound Inside waters have neared completion and management staff are working towards final development of sustainable harvest levels and are considering additional management tools to help manage these fish at a sustainable level.

In addition, sport fish rockfish bag and possession limits are not aligned between Prince William Sound (PWS) and Cook Inlet–Resurrection Bay saltwater areas due to changes that took place at the November 2023 Lower Cook Inlet Board of Fisheries meeting. During the Lower Cook Inlet Board of Fisheries meeting the board took up multiple proposals to address the increasing rockfish harvest trends and declines in biological compositions, with a focus on pelagic species such as black rockfish. The board adopted Proposal 19 and reduced bag limits to three fish and possession limits to six fish, of which only one per day and two in possession could be a nonpelagic rockfish. To maintain continuity between areas and taking proactive conservation measures, the department has determined that a bag limit of three and possession limit of six rockfish is necessary in Prince William Sound as well. Currently the possession limit for nonpelagic rockfish is only one, which should stay the same considering the higher harvest of nonpelagic rockfish, mainly yelloweye rockfish, in the PWS area. However, the Cook Inlet–Resurrection Bay saltwaters do not have a seasonal closure for yelloweye rockfish due to lower harvest and no stock assessment information available. By adding a seasonal retention period for yelloweye rockfish that aligns with the lingcod open season in PWS, there will not only be an overall reduction of harvest of yelloweye rockfish, but also the timeframe would be considered a spawning closure. This closure time period is when yelloweye rockfish copulate, gestate, and majority release their larvae, based on studies conducted by the department for yelloweye rockfish in PWS. These proposed regulatory changes were put in place by emergency order during the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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