

Big changes to sport groundfish regulations coming

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Significant changes to California's groundfish sport fishing regulations are expected starting next year, in response to recent scientific information suggesting some nearshore groundfish species are in decline. To reduce pressure on these stocks, fishing seasons will be shorter in nearshore waters, but new opportunities in deeper water are anticipated.

The upcoming changes were developed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) over the past year and reflect outcomes of a public decision-making process where the California Department of Fish and Wildlife worked with fishing industry representatives, non-governmental organizations, and state, federal and tribal governments to balance the need for fishing season closures in nearshore waters with the needs of these communities and industries. The PFMC approved the recommendations for 2023 and 2024 at its June meeting.

Based on these recommendations, the National Marine Fisheries Service has begun the process of amending federal regulations, which are expected to take effect in January 2023. The California Fish and Game Commission is considering the same changes to ocean sport fishing regulations for state waters.

California's sport groundfish regulations divide the state into five "Groundfish Management Areas" – in which the fishing seasons, Rockfish Conservation Areas or depth constraints, and bag limits may differ. In 2022, nearshore groundfish fishing season lengths ranged from eight to 10 months, but in 2023, they are expected to shrink to not more than five and a half months in all areas.

Within the 10-fish daily combined rockfish, cabezon and greenling bag limit, the sub-bag limits of one fish each for quillback and copper rockfish, and four fish for vermilion rockfish will continue in 2023. These sub-bag limits have been in effect since January 2022 and were necessary because new information in 2021 indicated severe declines in the populations of quillback and copper rockfish off California, and recreational vermilion rockfish catch continued to be greater than sustainable harvest limits.

Both the sub-bag limits and shortened fishing seasons are expected to achieve necessary reductions in copper, vermilion and quillback rockfish catch.

While groundfish fishing seasons will be shorter for nearshore waters and some bag limits are reduced, new opportunities to fish in deeper water beginning in 2023 will allow anglers to target healthy populations of shelf and slope rockfish in deeper waters, like schooling mid-water widow and yellowtail rockfish, or bottom-dwelling blackgill rockfish. Additionally, the sport fishing seasons for some other federally managed groundfish species like sablefish (sometimes called "black cod" or "butterfish") will be open year-round without depth constraints. Access to these previously closed depths means new experiences for anglers as they explore new habitats, new fishing locations, new target species, and new gear configurations to assemble and deploy.

"Next year is expected to bring a momentous shift in the sport groundfish fishery as all but one of the overfished shelf species that drove management decisions for the better part of the past two decades are now healthy," said CDFW Environmental Program Manager Marci Yaremko. "While concerns for quillback and copper rockfish will impact the nearshore fishery in the coming years, there are also a number of new opportunities for anglers, and CDFW looks forward to supporting their development."

To stay informed of in-season regulatory changes, please call the Recreational Groundfish Hotline at (831) 649-2801 or visit CDFW's summary of recreational groundfish fishing regulations.