

Data is Imperative to Retain Fishing in Del Norte

April 13, 2024



The balance between a healthy, robust fishing industry and the multitude of agencies and governance overseeing vibrant and healthy fish is a delicate one.

Last Wednesday, the Del Norte Natural Resources and Environmental Coordination Committee chaired by Supervisor Chris Howard hosted a presentation and discussion regarding fish stock assessment, data needs and current data collection programs by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries. The purpose of the meeting was for information sharing between the public and NOAA Fisheries staff regarding nearshore rockfish species. Besides an audience of local commercial and recreational anglers, four members of the Board of Supervisors, a Crescent City Councilor and City Manager Eric Wier were in attendance, observing.

Here's the background:

Last August, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) shockingly and abruptly shut down ocean fishing on the Northcoast. The remainder of the ocean fishing season was now over. The cause for the closure was attributed to the ubiquitous Quillback Rockfish no one seems to want or even care about. The charge was the Quillback was in danger of being overfished.

Is the Quillback in danger? Very debatable, according to local anglers.

Crescent City's fishermen were dumbfounded and bewildered by the closure. Shutting down and wreaking havoc on an entire commercial and recreational local fishing industry is devastating to the economy. The visitor-based local economy was in deep trouble. The cancellation upset and altered plans for both commercial and recreational anglers and their families. This CDFW announcement was nothing short of chaos.

Apparently, the agencies overseeing the fishing industry were using unconventional methods to acquire relevant data to determine the population of the Quillback Rockfish.

The Community came together and spoke up forcefully.

Good news was on the ocean horizon.

The local Crescent City / Del Norte Fishing group on FaceBook organized and sent a representative to attend the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC) meeting in Garden Grove, late last year. The PFMC meets monthly and oversees fishing regulations in Washington, Oregon and California. Last week's meeting was conducted in Fresno. Fishermen claimed the protocol for acquiring data to justify its decision on shutting down the balance of ocean fishing season was flawed. Local Vessel owners Steve Huber and Harry Adams attended and addressed PFMC commissioners and recommended updating the method to acquire imperative data to accurately determine the population of the Quillback and five other rockfish species by heading out on the ocean and conducting "Hook and Line" practices, with the intention of acquiring the vital data to develop a model in re-establishing commercial and recreational ocean fishing along California's coast. The City and Board of Supervisors also sent representatives to this PFMC meeting. The effort worked.

Last week, captains Huber and Adams escorted six NOAA scientists (three on each vessel) to go fishing and acquire accurate data to justify keeping a valuable part of the Del Norte economy functioning.

Results of last week's two day data search were promising and encouraging. This first data step begins a three year survey of at least six of the 90 plus Rockfish species.

The scientists have begun the survey data search and will report its findings to the PFMC via its Groundfish team.

"Without valid data, the future of a viable fishing industry is gloomy," says Captain Huber. "It's mandatory all anglers use an approved descending device to adhere to NOAA groundfish restrictions on fathom depth," continued Huber.

- Effective in April, commercial and recreational fisherman may fish at 50 fathoms or more, about 300 ft. CDFW met March 26 and will announce the exact date for its April opening.
- May through September the depth reverts to 20 fathoms, about 120 ft.
- October, the depth moves back to 50 fathoms.
- November through the end of the year, it's 20 fathoms.

The new rules for ocean fishing are a bit complicated but doable. The descending device is absolutely essential, especially when anglers return fish to their depth zone. Any additional assistance or the purchase of the descending device is available at Englund Marine in the Harbor. Huber emphasized anglers should avoid fishing for any of the color rockfish. Captain Huber advises anglers to... “stick with the black and blue colors.

NOAA and the PFMC Groundfish team’s mission is to gather as much valid data as possible and submit its data to the PFMC for final recommendations to CDFW, and overseeing governance in Washington and Oregon.

Huber and the fishermen’s goal is to keep a viable fishing industry open and productive along the Northcoast.

NOAA scientists will be back on the water acquiring more data, in May with regular intervals of data research over the next several months.

It’s a very delicate balance.