

September 1, 2022

Mr. Marc Gorelnik, Chair
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Pl # 101
Portland, OR 97220

RE: Agenda Item G.2: Groundfish Work Planning – Shortbelly Rockfish Directed Fishing Prohibition

Dear Chair Gorelnik and Council Members:

Oceana requests the Council prioritize and schedule at this meeting a Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP) amendment to prohibit directed fishing on shortbelly rockfish. Shortbelly rockfish are widely recognized by the Council and its scientific advisors to be an important forage species in the California Current Ecosystem. The Council's Fishery Ecosystem Plan¹ describes shortbelly rockfish as among the most abundant larvae encountered in the CalCOFI survey, a forage species for several Council-managed species, and a species affected by climate shifts. The Council recognizes the absence of targeted fishing, and the industry has repeatedly confirmed that it is not interested in developing a targeted fishery. In the past, the FEP recognized that low catch limits were a mechanism to prevent directed fishing.

In 2020 the Council reclassified shortbelly rockfish as an ecosystem component species, which removed key protections for this species provided by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Those protections include the requirements to prevent overfishing and set annual catch limits. As a result, there are no management measures in place to prevent directed fishing or minimize incidental shortbelly catch.

We appreciate the Council's final action in June 2022 that included a 2,000 metric ton incidental catch threshold in the Groundfish FMP. Reaching that threshold would initiate a review process to reconsider the stock's designation as an ecosystem component species. This is an important first step to ensure the Council is responsive to major increases in shortbelly rockfish incidental catch but that measure alone does not prevent directed fishing for shortbelly rockfish.

The Council has repeatedly stated its support for a policy preventing targeted shortbelly rockfish fishing but has not yet initiated a process to implement this policy. The Council previously indicated that a shortbelly rockfish directed fishing prohibition would be included in the 2023-24 groundfish harvest specifications and management measures process. But it was removed from that package in November 2021 with the understanding that it would move forward as a stand-alone FMP amendment.

¹ PFMC. Agenda Item H.1. Attachment 1. March 2022. Pacific Coast Fishery Ecosystem Plan (Final Draft for Public Review, November 2021). <https://www.pcouncil.org/documents/2022/02/h-1-attachment-1-pacific-coast-fishery-ecosystem-plan-final-draft-for-public-review-november-2021.pdf/>

The Council would not be starting from scratch on such an FMP amendment. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife produced a comprehensive document in November 2021² that scopes out the issues to be addressed. It describes a path forward, beginning with considering and establishing a process under this agenda item. The report contains a detailed appendix with important information for the consideration of a shortbelly rockfish directed fishery prohibition, including alternative definitions and regulatory approaches. In addition to this initial scoping, the ODFW Report recommended:

- consideration of a stand-alone pathway dedicated solely to a targeted shortbelly rockfish fishing prohibition; and
- that the Council consider when to schedule such a stand-alone process as part of its discussion of the Groundfish Workload and New Management Measures agenda item in March 2022.

We concur with the ODFW recommendation that a Groundfish FMP amendment is the best course of action to accomplish the Council’s long-standing goal of preventing directed fishing for shortbelly. We request that the Council schedule and initiate a Groundfish FMP amendment to prohibit directed fishing for shortbelly rockfish using the ODFW November 2021 report as the basis for a scoping document.

Thank you for considering this request. We look forward to engaging with the Council and stakeholders to craft a thoughtful long-term solution that implements a durable prohibition on shortbelly rockfish fishing without unnecessarily constraining existing fisheries.

Sincerely,



Geoffrey Shester, Ph.D.

California Campaign Director & Senior Scientist

² PFMC Agenda Item E.5.a. ODFW Report 1. November 2021. ODFW Report on 2023-2024 Groundfish Management Measures: Targeted shortbelly rockfish fishing prohibition.
<https://www.pcouncil.org/documents/2021/10/e-5-odfw-report-1-oregon-department-of-fish-and-wildlife-report-on-2023-2024-groundfish-management-measures-targeted-shortbelly-rockfish-fishing-prohibition.pdf/>