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NOAA's Fisheries Service Proposes Federal Protection for Three Georgia Basin Rockfish Species

NOAA's Fisheries Service today proposed to list three populations of rockfish in Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia for protection under the Endangered Species Act. A final decision on the three will be made a year from now.

The Georgia Basin populations of two of the rockfish species – canary and yelloweye – are proposed for “threatened” status. A third rockfish species – bocaccio – is proposed as “endangered.” An endangered species is at high risk of extinction; a threatened species is vulnerable to extinction in the near future and in need of protection.

Populations of all three rockfish species in the Georgia Basin, which encompasses Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia, have been harvested at high levels, depleting their numbers. Rockfish, which are bottom dwellers, typically live long lives, and mature and reproduce slowly, making them especially vulnerable to overfishing.

Rockfish make up a substantial portion of the federally managed commercial bottomfish harvest off the West Coast, especially off the coast of California. Rockfish harvests in Puget Sound, by contrast, are managed by the state and the commercial catch there has been substantially restricted since the early 1990s, although there is still a small recreational harvest.

According to NOAA scientists, rockfish population growth has also been hampered by other fisheries unintentionally catching the stock and by environmental factors, such as loss of eelgrass beds, pollution and abandoned fishing gear that continues to catch fish.

If these rockfish are listed for Endangered Species Act protection next year, the agency's initial focus would be on fishing practices in Puget Sound. There is currently a broad state and federal effort to improve the sound's water quality and nearshore habitat through the Puget Sound Partnership, which is aimed at conserving all marine life, including rockfish. Resident killer whales, Chinook salmon, chum salmon, steelhead and bull trout are already protected in the sound under the ESA.

Today's proposed listing is in response to a petition from an Olympia resident who asked the agency in 2007 to list Puget Sound populations of five species of rockfish. In addition to the three proposed today, the petition also included greenstriped and redstriped rockfish. Agency scientists have said the greenstriped and redstriped rockfish are at a “low risk” of extinction, and protection under the ESA was not needed at this time.

The agency will take public comment through June 22 on the proposal and gather further scientific information on the species, the reasons for their decline, and possible efforts to restore their numbers before making its final decision within one year.

See the Web at <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Other-Marine-Species/Puget-Sound-Marine-Fishes/esa-PS-rockfish.cfm> for more information on this action.

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