

Fact sheet on West Coast fisheries management

The Pacific Fishery Management Council, which is responsible for managing fisheries in the federal ocean waters off Washington, Oregon, and California, has approved several rules to ensure conservation of fish stocks, including those recommended by Drs. Worm and Hilborn, et al:

- Establishing coast-wide closed areas to restrict commercial and recreational fishing and protect overfished species. An area of the ocean that stretches from Mexico to the Canadian border, the Rockfish Conservation Area, is closed to fishing for Pacific groundfish. Most fishing also is prohibited in the Cowcod Conservation Area in California.
- Designating “habitat areas of particular concern” to protect sensitive bottom habitat. These areas are a subset of the greater “essential fish habitat” areas first identified by the council more than a decade ago, in 1998.
- Requiring modifications to trawl gear to avoid sensitive species. Many trawl vessels must use modified fishing gear to allow rockfish to escape the trawl nets. Large “roller gear” on trawl nets also has been banned.
- Following scientific recommendations when setting harvest limits. The Council’s diverse Scientific and Statistical Committee reviews each proposal and provides its scientific recommendations to the Council during each meeting.
- Setting harvest limits based on total catch, so that every fish is accounted for. The total catch includes discards, fish that are discarded at sea but that are monitored by observers on the boats.
- Reducing harvest limits and exploitation rates. The Council sets annual limits on catch and has reduced annual harvests according to ongoing scientific research into particular species of fish, called stock assessments.
- Establishing an on-board observation program and requiring catch monitors at certain fish processing plants. Most of the groundfish vessels in the fleet – both trawl and non-trawl boats – must allow observers to carefully monitor the catches and report to the National Marine Fisheries Service. Some vessels also carry electronic cameras.
- Requiring every vessel harvesting Pacific groundfish to be electronically monitored. Any vessel targeting groundfish must carry a vessel monitoring system, that hooks into the on-board electronics of the boat and transmits, via satellite, the vessel’s position at regular intervals.

Although the Worm/Hilborn data only go up to 2006 for West Coast species, an examination of catch data vs. management targets for commercial fisheries in 2006 through 2008 shows that with one exception in one year (Pacific ocean perch in 2007) total catches have been below the harvest guidelines set by the Council. Thus, the favorable exploitation rate trend observed by Worm and Hilborn for the California Current species is continuing.

According to the National Marine Fisheries Service Office of Sustainable Fisheries:

- “Overfishing” is occurring on only two West Coast stocks: yellowfin tuna and bigeye tuna:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/2009/firstquarter/map_overfishing_stocks_cy_q1_2009.pdf
- Both of these stocks are under international management and are heavily fished by countries other than the U.S.
- Since new rules went into effect in 1997, nine species out of the 100-plus managed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council have been designated as “overfished.” Two of those have been completely recovered and four others are no longer designated but are still steadily rebuilding:
http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/2009/firstquarter/map_overfished_stocks_cy_q1_2009.pdf

Links:

Pacific Fishery Management Council: www.pcouncil.org

National Marine Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

NMFS’ Northwest Region groundfish page: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Groundfish-Halibut/Groundfish-Fishery-Management>

West Coast Seafood Processors Association: <http://www.wcspa.com>