

PROPOSAL 18

5 AAC 58.022. Waters; seasons; bag, possession, annual, and size limits; and special provisions for Cook Inlet – Resurrection Bay Saltwater Area.

Modify rockfish bag and possession limits as follows:

5 AAC 58.022(a)(6) is amended to read:

(6) rockfish: may be taken from January 1 – December 31; [BAG LIMIT OF FIVE FISH AND 10 IN POSSESSION, OF WHICH ONLY ONE PER DAY AND TWO IN POSSESSION MAY BE NONPELAGIC ROCKFISH] as defined in 5 AAC 75.995; [NO SIZE LIMIT;]

(A) pelagic rockfish: bag and possession limit of three fish; no annual limit, no size limit;

(B) nonpelagic rockfish: bag and possession limit of one fish; no annual limit, no size limit;

Repeal 5 AAC 58.022(b)(3)(C):

[(C) ROCKFISH: IN THE WATERS BETWEEN GORE POINT AND CAPE FAIRFIELD, THE BAG LIMIT IS FOUR FISH AND EIGHT IN POSSESSION, OF WHICH ONLY ONE PER DAY AND TWO IN POSSESSION MAY BE A NONPELAGIC ROCKFISH OF WHICH ONLY ONE PER DAY AND TWO IN POSSESSION MAY BE A NONPELAGIC ROCKFISH AS DEFINED IN 5 AAC 75.995; NO SIZE LIMIT] **Repealed;**

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why?

Currently, sport fish rockfish bag and possession limits are not aligned between North Gulf Coast (NGC), Lower Cook Inlet (LCI), and Prince William Sound (PWS) management areas. The department is currently developing black and yelloweye rockfish stock assessments for these management areas to identify sustainable harvest levels through the Statewide Rockfish Initiative. Currently, the harvest of rockfish in these management areas is increasing and is assumed to be associated with a shifting of effort from Pacific halibut to other species by charter (guided) anglers due to reduced sport fishing opportunities associated with the federal Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan. The anticipated continued shifting of effort and the late-maturing life history strategy of rockfish requires a precautionary management approach.

Although rockfish harvest is increasing in all of these sport fish management areas, the trends are not consistent between the areas and species or assemblages of rockfish. In LCI, on average from 2019 through 2022, the total rockfish harvest was over 50,000 fish, which is more than a 300% increase from the historical (2006–2013) average. Most of the recent rockfish harvest (approximately 70%) has been black rockfish; there have also been simultaneous declines in the age and size compositions of black rockfish, which are a result of a strong cohort of juvenile rockfish that were first detected in the fishery in 2017. In recent years, juvenile black rockfish have comprised 67% to 90% of the total black rockfish harvest. Given the current high harvest levels, the harvest rate of juvenile rockfish may influence the future productivity of the stock.

Similarly, the NGC management area has also observed increased rockfish harvest, specifically black rockfish, however the harvest has not been primarily comprised of juvenile rockfish.

To maintain continuity between areas, the department has determined that a bag and possession limit of three pelagic and one nonpelagic rockfish would still provide harvest opportunities and would better align regulations. Historically, in both NGC and Cook Inlet areas, bag and possession limits provided the option to retain a full bag limit of pelagic rockfish, or to keep one nonpelagic rockfish towards the total bag limit. Regulation complexity will be reduced by specifying an actual number of fish, specific to each assemblage. In addition, many anglers fishing in NGC waters also fish in PWS but return to port in Seward (in NGC). The change in the possession limit for nonpelagic from 2 to 1 in NGC would align with PWS nonpelagic regulations.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game (HQ-F23-020)
