

Blackspotted Rougheye Rockfish Accountability Measure Options

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1 Introduction

The stock-wide annual catch limit (ACL), which is equal to the acceptable biological catch (ABC), for the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) blackspotted and rougheye rockfish (BSRE) complex has been exceeded for three of the past four years. The overfishing limit (OFL) has not been exceeded in any of these years. While accountability measures (AMs) are specified in the BSAI Fishery Management Plan, they have not prevented catch from exceeding the ACL². The National Standard 1 guidelines require that the system of ACLs and AMs be reevaluated and modified if necessary, when an ACL is exceeded more than once in a four-year period. In accordance with the National Standard 1 guidelines, the Council [requested](#) that staff develop a discussion paper to evaluate the effectiveness of the current AMs for the BSAI blackspotted and rougheye rockfish complex (BSRE complex) and explore additional or modified AMs to prevent catch from exceeding the ACL. This more comprehensive discussion paper will be prepared in time for the Fall 2025 groundfish harvest specifications cycle. However, in order to better focus the development of appropriate AMs for the Fall of 2025, staff have provided this paper briefly summarizing the potential AMs that could be explored, preliminary information on their applicability, and the timing required for their development. At this meeting, the Council has the opportunity to streamline which of these measures should be further explored and brought forward for consideration in the Fall.

2 Accountability Measures

The Council's motion listed several accountability measures that could be considered. Some additional detail is provided on what could be possible to explore these measures as well as the relative timing and analytical needs to move forward with them.

2.1 Spatial Closures

The Council could consider explicit area closures for the BSRE complex, which would require an FMP amendment analytical process. One difficulty will be displaying spatial catch information, as nearly all the data will be confidential. If the Council remains interested in pursuing potential area closures (which would require the identification of alternatives and an EA/RIR analysis), the analysts would consider

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² The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires FMPs to specify accountability measures, which are measures to prevent catch from exceeding ACLs and for responding to ACL overages if they occur. Section 3.2.4 of the BSAI Groundfish FMP sets forth the following accountability measures: (1) the North Pacific Observer Program; (2) the catch accounting system; (3) inseason management (described as management of the fisheries to the specified TAC level); and (4) the harvest specifications process that will account for any TAC overages.

aggregating data across years, or other means to show non-confidential areas. It should be noted that BSRE is primarily caught incidentally in other fisheries, so area closures for BSRE would likely have limited effect.

2.2 Seasonal Closures

The Regional office already closes directed fishing for the BSRE complex at the start of the fishing year. Until an OFL is approached, the Regional office does not have the authority to seasonally close other target fisheries for bycatch of BSRE. The Regional Office could consider placing BSRE on PSC status at the beginning of the year, but this does not prohibit catch of the species; it simply requires any species in the complex to be discarded and not retained.

2.3 Modified in-season management authority

If the Council is interested in exploring expanded NMFS in-season management authority (beyond what is currently authorized, such as closing a fishery as an ACL/ABC is being approached,) this would require a regulatory change. The Council would need to develop alternatives, and staff prepare an amendment analysis and subsequent regulatory rulemaking.

2.4 Reducing TAC in fisheries that catch BSRE rockfish

The primary fishery that catches the BSRE complex as bycatch is the Pacific ocean perch (POP) rockfish fishery. One AM that is available to the Council is to decrease the TAC in that fishery, in order to decrease the likelihood of catching BSRE. Council action to reduce TACs in the Aleutian Island would be possible in the 2025 groundfish harvest specifications process, and would not require a regulatory amendment or Council analysis. If the Council is interested in this option, staff could provide a table in the next iteration of this paper (October 2025) which would estimate various levels of TAC reduction and how they might potentially decrease bycatch of the BSRE complex.

2.5 Additional Accountability Measures

The Council requested that staff consider any additional AMs in addition to those listed in the Council motion that could be pursued for this action. Staff have provided the following suggestions. Both of these items would require substantial Council consideration to move forward.

2.5.1 Directed fishery allocations

The Council could establish a directed fishery allocation of the BSRE complex. However, this mechanism may introduce issues of small allocations, equity, and restricted fishing opportunities, with BSRE becoming a choke species for other fisheries. Non-hard capped allocations outside of LAPP programs (A80 and CDQ) may not be effective since the current fishery is primarily incidental catch. Establishing a fishery allocation would require identification of alternatives and a Council amendment analysis.

2.5.2 Sideboards

The BSRE complex could be made a hard-capped sideboard, which would not establish an allocation to the sector but could potentially be pursued as a catch limiting action. As with consideration of the directed fishery allocation this would require identification of alternatives and a Council amendment analysis.

3 Council action at this meeting

The Council will receive a more detailed paper in the fall with all the requested items in the Council's December 2024 motion (review of current AMs, spatial information for BSRE catch by fishery, current stock status and consequences of recent ACL overages, and limitations in assessment information available for evaluating stock status). Staff will also provide the updated information on 2025 catch in relation to the ACL for the complex.

As described in Section 2, the only new AM that is available to the Council during the 2025 specifications cycle is to decrease TAC in fisheries which catch the BSRE complex as incidental catch. Staff will further explore this AM in detail for the fall discussion paper by providing historical tables of TAC for various fisheries, their relative incidental catch of BSRE complex in the AI and potential options for TAC reductions and proportional catch reductions.

All others of the potential AMs require the initiation of an amendment analysis, including a need to identify alternatives for analysis. If the Council is interested in pursuing some of these other AMs, the Council would likely consider initiating an analysis at the October meeting. The standard timeline for implementing amendments is 2 years, so any resulting action would likely not be in effect until the 2027 specifications cycle at the earliest. At this meeting, the Council may wish to streamline which of the identified potential AMs staff should continue to explore, based on this paper's preliminary summary of effectiveness, and in consideration of the best use of staff capacity.