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Pacific Fishery Management Council

The Pacific Fishery Management Council manages fisheries for salmon, groundfish, coastal pelagic species (sardines, anchovies, and mackerel), and highly migratory species (tunas, sharks, and swordfish) off the coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California. The Pacific Council also works with the International Pacific Halibut Commission, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission to manage fisheries on internationally commingled stocks.

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Opportunities & Challenges



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In recent years, the Pacific Council has been successful at rebuilding overfished groundfish stocks, rationalizing the West Coast groundfish trawl fishery, protecting habitat, and managing ocean salmon seasons. However, challenges remain in the management of West Coast marine fisheries, together with opportunities for improvement.

Developing an Ecosystem-based Management Plan

The Pacific Council has a demonstrated need to develop and implement an ecosystem-based fishery management plan (FMP). The Council has successfully employed spatial management concepts for years and has recommended closed areas to rebuild overfished species, minimize bycatch, and preserve essential fish habitat. Further, the Council has set aside otherwise harvestable amounts of sardine and krill for ecosystem needs as prey species, and has taken other ecosystem-based actions. However, Council management can be enhanced under the auspices of a formal ecosystem FMP.

The authority to manage fishery-related impacts across all living marine resources is fundamental to achieving broad ecosystem-based protective measures. An ecosystem FMP will play an important, long-term role in coordinating our efforts to protect habitat, regulate fisheries, establish marine protected areas and marine reserves, and minimize bycatch.



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A National Marine Fisheries Service (or NOAA Fisheries) biologist measures a sole during a trawl survey off the West Coast.

The Pacific Council is poised to begin active ecosystem-based fishery management as soon as proper funding is provided. The Council has adopted an approach for developing an ecosystem-based FMP that would serve as an “umbrella” plan over the four existing FMPs, helping with coast-wide research planning and policy guidance, and creating a framework for status reports on the health of the West Coast’s California Current ecosystem that would influence active fishery management. The plan would not displace existing FMPs, but would advance management by introducing new science and new authorities to the current process.

Managing Salmon Fisheries

In recent years, West Coast salmon management has been especially challenging due to low salmon returns in the Klamath River and Sacramento River systems, which have traditionally supported the fishery for a large part of the West Coast. Since the Pacific Council does not have jurisdiction over habitat, water withdrawals, urbanization and other activities that impact salmon, the only available response is to provide comments to agencies with jurisdiction in those areas, and to cut back commercial and recreational harvest limits. Notably, the Council took the unprecedented action of closing all ocean Chinook salmon fisheries off California and most of Oregon in 2008 and 2009.

However, there are new opportunities in salmon management. In 2009, for the first time, the Pacific Council considered managing northern ocean salmon fisheries to selectively catch hatchery-produced Chinook salmon only. This would be done by allowing fishermen to retain only adipose fin-clipped fish, and requiring them to release wild, non fin-clipped fish. This type of fishery management has been successfully used in freshwater fisheries for salmon and steelhead, and coho salmon in the ocean fisheries. Additionally, emerging technologies such as tissue-based genetic stock identification may also provide new information that helps us protect fish stocks at risk while focusing fisheries on healthy stocks.



Rebuilding Overfished Groundfish

The Pacific Council manages over 92 groundfish species, some of which are actively fished, and some of which are not. Of the species subject to active fishing, 30 species have been assessed; more assessments of new species are planned. Of these 30 species, 19 are at healthy levels of abundance; four are at a precautionary level of abundance; and seven are designated overfished (cowcod, bocaccio, yelloweye rockfish, canary rockfish, darkblotched rockfish, Pacific ocean perch, and widow rockfish). Two species previously designated as overfished, lingcod and whiting, were rebuilt during the last decade. Of the currently overfished species, all are under rebuilding plans, and show an improving trend. Widow rockfish are expected to be rebuilt in 2009, and Pacific ocean perch in 2011.

Assessing the state of rebuilding overfished groundfish is challenged by a lack of essential research data and associated stock assessments. Existing fishery-independent surveys do not adequately collect data on some species, such as yelloweye rockfish and cowcod. There are emerging opportunities for non-lethal surveys for these species using acoustics, sonar, and submersible vehicles. The Council encourages additional population data collection using these new, more sophisticated methods.



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Coordinating with Marine Sanctuaries and Marine Protected Areas

There are five National Marine Sanctuaries on the West Coast, comprising a greater percentage of the coastline than in any other Council area. The Pacific Council and five National Marine Sanctuaries share goals, and have successfully worked together on many activities. However, there are challenges to implementing fishing regulations across Sanctuary boundaries. The Council has extensive scientific expertise and infrastructure in place for active fishery management and is charged under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to manage fish stocks throughout their range. The National Marine Sanctuaries Act is expected to be reauthorized in the near future; as a part of this process, jurisdictional clarification is needed. In addition, the Pacific Council's ecosystem FMP will be an effective tool in achieving the shared goals of the Council, NMFS, the National Ocean Service, and the Sanctuaries.

Evaluating Wave Energy and Competing Uses of the Ocean

Since 2005, interest in renewable energy (including wave, tidal, and offshore wind energy) has surged, driven by efforts to develop energy alternatives in order to reduce fossil fuel consumption and carbon emissions. The coast of the Pacific Northwest is believed to be among the best locations in the world for wave energy. However, little is known about the environmental impacts of these activities.

As of March 2009, 23 projects are proposed off the West Coast. Some of these are in the very early planning stages, and may not continue to move forward; others are further along and appear to be a real possibility. Wave energy development is being promoted by universities, by the Federal government, and by state and municipal governments.

Commercial and recreational fishing communities are concerned about the potential impacts of wave energy in terms of area closures and impacts on fish stocks and habitat. Many wave energy developments have been proposed in prime fishing areas. Since this technology is new to the Pacific coast, a great deal of information still needs to be gathered on its environmental, biological, and fisheries impacts. The Council will need resources to formulate a response to these developments.

