

San Juan Journal

Would-be rockfish protection zone spans 1,700 square miles of Puget Sound

August 12, 2013

Most shorelines in the San Juan Islands are proposed to be included in a 1,700 square mile Puget Sound rockfish protection zone proposed by the National Marine Fisheries Service on Aug. 6.

The NMFS proposal designates 1,184 square miles for canary rockfish and bocaccio protection, and 574 square miles to protect yelloweye rockfish. In 2010, NMFS listed the Puget Sound/Georgia basin populations of yelloweye rockfish and canary rockfish as threatened, and bocaccio rockfish as endangered, under the Endangered Species Act.

Those listings required NMFS to designate critical habitat for the affected species and to research and develop plans for recovery. Research has shown that species with protected critical habitat are twice as likely to be recovering as species without.

In a press release announcing NMFS listing, the Center for Biological Diversity notes rockfish populations are badly depleted by decades of overfishing.



Contributed photo / Tippy Jackson, NOAA
Canary rockfish, above, along with yelloweye rockfish, were listed as threatened under federal law in 2010. Bocaccio rockfish are listed as endangered.

“Rockfish are an ancient and important part of the Puget Sound ecosystem,” said Catherine Kilduff, staff attorney at the Center, which filed a notice of intent to sue over the overdue critical habitat designation in July. “Protecting their habitat means that Puget Sound will be better for rockfish and lots of other wildlife that depend on near-shore waters and kelp forests.”

The government analysis is the first study to identify important rockfish habitat in Puget Sound. The marine waters in the proposal include near-shore kelp forests that are essential to rearing juveniles and adjacent deeper waters used by adults for shelter, foraging and reproduction, according to Kilduff.

Although thousands of abandoned nets, pots and traps were removed between 2002 and 2011, an estimated 1,000 abandoned nets remain in Puget Sound. These nets kill more than 16,000 fish every year, 10 percent of which are rockfish, a species that is often brightly colored and can live more than 100 years.

In addition to lost gear and active fishing, other potential threats to rockfish include contaminants (because of their long lives as predators of smaller fish, rockfish accumulate toxins); shoreline development; and nonnative seaweeds and sea squirts, according to the CBD.

While rockfish live from Baja California to Alaska, the currents in Puget Sound prevent dispersal, making Puget Sound populations distinct and significant. NMFS, a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is soliciting comments on its proposal. The comment period ends Monday, Nov. 4, at 5 p.m