

# Fishing business gutted

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## Regulations proposed to protect species

*Fish & Fishing*

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The Central Coast fishing fleet braced for lost jobs and economic pain this week as federal regulators imposed a drastic curtailment on three key commercial and sport species caught off the California, Oregon and Washington coasts.

"We're all pretty much looking around at each other and asking, 'What are we going to do?'" said Ken Stagnaro, a Santa Cruz fisherman who operates Stagnaro Fishing charters.

"It's a very, very severe blow to the fisherman," agreed Mike Stiller, president of the Santa Cruz Commercial Fisherman's Association. "It's going to be very tough."

The federal Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting in Sacramento this week, ratcheted down by as much as 60 percent the amount of bocaccio, lingcod and Pacific Ocean perch that can be harvested in 2000 by commercial fishermen and sport anglers. The change does not apply to surf perch commonly caught off the Santa Cruz coast.

The three affected species have declined so dramatically that they meet the federal definition of being "overfished," mandating protection. That means cutting back the catch of economically valuable rockfish — what the consumer buys as snapper — because the fish mingle and are harvested together.

The shrunken quota will be divided among trawlers, hook-and-line fishermen, charter boat operators and "live fish" fishermen who, in a relatively new industry, catch live rockfish to be sold in restaurant tanks at premium prices.

The harvest restrictions will mean a multimillion-dollar loss to a \$66 million West Coast groundfish industry, which includes rockfish and the whiting that are processed into fish sticks. The groundfish industry is among the five most valuable fisheries in the state. The impact will reverberate throughout the coastal economy in towns such as Crescent City, Eureka and Half Moon Bay.

Some representatives of commercial fishermen called the move necessary to protect the industry in the long-term. But individual fishermen say the cutbacks could mean a 30 percent or greater loss of income.

"It's a big hit for us," Stagnaro



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

When new fishing regulations take effect in January, Ken Stagnaro's party boats won't be able to leave the Santa Cruz docks for a two-month period.

said.

Barbara Stickel, who fishes out of Half Moon Bay on the *Regina* with her husband, Tom, said the new limits would take a deep bite from her income.

"My husband and I might be able to eke it out this winter because we sell directly to the public off the boat. But it's going to be a long, hard winter. There's going to be a lot of people looking for

jobs." Stickel said she agrees that some species have been overfished. But she said less severe

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# Fishy

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limits should have been imposed years ago, instead of in a drastic measure.

Environmentalists fear that California's estimated 500 "live fish" fishermen — who do not target the dwindling species of concern — and sport anglers will suffer at the expense of trawlers. Long trawl nets, dragged across the bottom of the ocean, bring most groundfish to market. Trawlers throw overboard millions of pounds of fish each year — called "bycatch" — because the fish are either unmarketable, too small or in excess of a legal limit. Scientists do not have good estimates of the amount of discarded fish because there has been no widespread monitoring.

This year commercial fishermen could not target bocaccio because the entire allowable catch — 100 metric tons — was at least as much as what federal regulators assumed would be discarded as bycatch. The species, they determined, could not sustain a greater harvest.

Stagnaro argued that recreational fisherman, who take only a small percentage of the fish caught, shouldn't have the same cutbacks as commercial fishermen. "We feel that we've had such low impact, that we're having unjust penalties placed on us."

Fishermen also criticized the data used to justify the lower limits. "I'm not arguing that the population (isn't dwindling), but what they're saying and what we see on our boats doesn't correlate," Stagnaro said. "It's pretty shabby to determine someone's future and livelihood when it's not very good data at all."

Groundfish are susceptible to overfishing because of their slow growth and late sexual maturity, said Chris Harrold, director of conservation research for the Monterey Bay Aquarium. National Marine Fisheries data indicate some stocks are 2 to 4 percent of what they were.

"The picture I see is one of concern. I do believe that lowering of quotas is warranted, and it's a tough one because it's going to really impact the fishermen and the fishermen aren't as convinced the data warrant a cutback," he said.

Federal scientists estimate it could take as many as six decades to restore some populations.

"The West Coast groundfish fishery is in crisis," concluded National Marine Fisheries Service scientists in a research plan drafted this week. "The fishery is overcapitalized and at least several stocks have been depleted by a combination of natural and man-made factors, pushing their allowable catches down to levels that cannot economically sustain present fishery harvest levels."

Even the fishermen agree that there are too many boats seeking too few fish.

"We could remove a third of the fleet and still catch what we're allowed to catch," said Joe Easley, administrator of the Oregon Trawling Commission, who estimates that 220 trawl boats catch West Coast groundfish.

But a similar program used on the East Coast to protect cod, under which the federal government buys fishing boats, is still only a proposal from fishermen on the West Coast.

As a way to meet the coming cutbacks, trawlers have offered to stop fishing close to shore with "roller gear" — big tires attached to their nets — that allow them to sweep through rocky areas where their nets would otherwise get snagged.

By avoiding rock piles and reefs, trawlers will in effect create sanctuaries for the big, spiny, long-lived rockfish, he said.

In anticipation of the cutbacks, Gov. Gray Davis asked the federal government to declare a federal disaster.

"Thousands of fishermen and a like number of fish plant workers in California will be affected by the impending regulations," Davis wrote to William Daley, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, on Oct. 28.

*Scripps-McClatchy wire service contributed to this report.*