



## Frequently Asked Questions About the Rockfish Sub-Bag Limits

### **Why do we need a sub-bag limit for copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes?**

New stock assessments for copper and quillback rockfishes completed in 2021 indicate severe population declines for these species. Additionally, unsustainably high catches of vermilion rockfish have been occurring since 2015. For these reasons, [sub-bag limits for copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes](#) are needed to slow catches.

### **When do the new sub-bag limits for copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes go into effect?**

Beginning January 6, 2022, there is a one-fish sub-bag limit for both copper rockfish and quillback rockfish, and a four-fish sub-bag limit for vermilion rockfish.

### **How high have catches of vermilion rockfish been compared to recent historical catch?**

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) tracks recreational catch of all groundfish species each year. Vermilion rockfish catch has been increasing recently, with significant increases to catch seen during the last five years. A recent stock assessment indicated that the current catches are not sustainable, so fishery managers determined that a further decrease to the vermilion rockfish sub-bag limit was needed.

### **What can I do to help?**

After you return from fishing you may be contacted by CDFW samplers interested in collecting biological information from some of your catch. The sampler may cut open the belly of the fish to determine its sex and cut into the fish's head to remove otoliths (a fish's ear bones) which are used to determine the age of the fish. If you will be filleting your catch, the sampler may want to collect the carcass. By supporting the Department's data collection activities, future stock assessments can incorporate additional information and ultimately will provide a more complete understanding of the fish's population.

Additionally, being able to accurately [identify](#) caught and released fish, as well as reporting this information to California Recreational Fishery Survey samplers, will ensure accurate estimates of catch and mortality are calculated. By participating in these two sampling efforts, anglers can help increase the essential fishery information needed to assess stocks that support our fisheries.

### **What is the RCG complex?**

Present regulations establish recreational bag limits which vary by species or species groups and are designed to keep catch within legally allowable harvest limits. The Rockfish, Cabezon, and Greenling (RCG) complex has a 10-fish daily bag limit meaning that each angler's catch can be composed of any combination of rockfish, cabezon, or greenling as long as total catch does not exceed 10 fish. Recreational regulations for the RCG complex, and other groundfish species can vary by geographic area. For more detailed information on recreational groundfish regulations and to stay informed of in-season changes, please visit CDFW's [summary of recreational groundfish fishing regulations for 2022](#) or call the Recreational Groundfish Hotline at (831) 649-2801.

### **What does a sub-bag limit mean?**

Sub-bag limits are implemented when harvest limits can't accommodate the 10-fish RCG complex daily bag limit being comprised of a single species. Beginning in 2022, changes to recreational regulations in California resulted in implementation of a new one-fish sub-bag limit for copper and quillback rockfishes, and a reduction to the vermilion rockfish sub-bag limit from five to four fish. That means that anglers are now limited to no more than one copper rockfish, one quillback rockfish, and four vermilion rockfish per day within the 10-fish RCG complex daily bag limit. In past years, there have been sub-bag limits on other RCG complex species including canary, black, gopher and bocaccio rockfishes, cabezon and greenling. However, those sub-bag limits are no longer needed to keep catches of those species within allowable levels.

### **Why are sub-bag limits even needed?**

For many groundfish species, a population or stock assessment is conducted to inform fishery managers how much can be sustainably taken of a single species, or in some cases a combination of species. Stock assessment information may also indicate catch of a particular species needs to be reduced to avoid overharvesting the population. A sub-bag limit for species within the RCG complex can help achieve that goal without having to reduce the entire 10-fish daily bag limit. In past years, there have been sub-bag limits on various species such as canary rockfish, black rockfish, bocaccio and cabezon. To stay up to date on groundfish regulations see CDFW's [summary of groundfish regulations webpage](#) or call the Recreational Groundfish Hotline at (831) 649-2801.

### **What about lingcod?**

Lingcod are not part of the RCG complex and have a separate bag limit. If an angler caught their daily bag limits for lingcod and RCG complex species, they would have 12 fish: two lingcod plus 10 RCG complex species.

**I caught my sub-bag limit but would like to continue fishing because I haven't yet reached the 10-fish RCG complex limit. What do I do if I catch more copper, quillback or vermilion rockfishes?**

If you find yourself catching copper, quillback or vermilion rockfishes after you've reached your sub-bag limit for any of those species, the best fishing practice would include relocating to different fishing grounds or switching targets to non-rockfish species to continue your trip. Other options include use of descending devices to return fish exhibiting signs of [barotrauma](#) back to the seafloor safely to minimize mortality.

**Why was a sub-bag limit chosen over other possible regulation changes like size limits or changes to seasons?**

Regulations for groundfish (which includes all rockfish, lingcod, and some flatfish) are revised biennially, and sometimes inseason, through a public federal process. CDFW participates in this federal process and recommends changes to these types of regulations and other management measures for California's fisheries.

While the addition of new sub-bag limits does make the already complex regulations more complicated, it was the simplest and likely most effective way to slow catches of copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes while minimizing impacts to other target species. Due to bycatch concerns, establishing a shorter season for copper, quillback or vermilion rockfishes is not desirable if boat-based seasons for other rockfish and bottomfish species remain open. A minimum size limit for rockfish species is generally not a preferred method to reduce catch, since release mortality can be significant.

**Does the sub-bag limit for "vermilion rockfish" include the recently discovered sunset rockfish since they are too difficult to tell apart?**

Yes, they both count toward the four fish "vermilion rockfish" sub-bag limit. Some of you might have heard of a newly discovered rockfish that is closely related to vermilion rockfish and found predominately in Southern California. Both species are nearly identical in appearance and were thought to be a single species of vermilion rockfish for decades. Recent genetic analysis identified sunset rockfish as a separate species from vermilion rockfish. Despite that, you can keep calling them all vermilion rockfish since it's very difficult to figure out which is which, and as a result, they are considered the same in terms of management.

**How do I know if I caught a copper, quillback or vermilion rockfish?**

While it can be challenging to identify rockfish, anglers are responsible for properly identifying the species they catch to ensure regulations for those species are followed.

There are numerous fish [identification resources](#) developed by CDFW available to anglers, including flyers to help distinguish copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes from similar looking species.

- [Copper rockfish, canary rockfish and gopher rockfish identification](#)
- [Quillback rockfish, China rockfish and black-and-yellow rockfish identification](#)

- [Vermilion rockfish, canary rockfish, and yelloweye rockfish identification](#)

The Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission's [RecFIN website](#) has additional fish identification materials that anglers may find helpful.

**Where can I find more information about copper, quillback and vermilion rockfishes?**

You can find more information about many of the species that inhabit California's ocean waters on CDFW's [Marine Species Portal](#), including:

- [Copper Rockfish](#)
- [Quillback rockfish](#)
- [Vermilion Rockfish](#)

**How do I voice my opinion or comment on proposals to groundfish regulations?**

Public engagement in the regulation process is vital for fisheries management and to maintaining thriving fishing communities. Visit the [Pacific Fishery Management Councils website](#) to read about ways to get involved, including learning who your representatives are on [stakeholder advisory panels](#) such as the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel.