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CLIMATE CRISIS

November 20, 2023

Dr. Richard Spinrad, Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Dr. Spinrad:

I am writing to ask for your urgent assistance regarding a stock assessment for the Northern California coast that prompted the closure of a vital fishery and cause significant harm to coastal communities for years to come. Following the November 2023 Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC) meeting, I would ask that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) postpone issuing an "overfished" determination for quillback rockfish, the species at the heart of the closure, until the assessment can be reviewed.

NMFS' 2021 assessment of quillback rockfish was used to conclude that the species is overfished and a rebuilding plan should be adopted. That conclusion prompted the mid-season closure of the nearshore rockfish fishery in Northern California in 2023, which has had devastating consequences. The assessment is considered "data moderate," which in this case means that there was no direct information from the fishery used to draw the conclusion. Instead, data was borrowed from other fisheries and extrapolated. The California coastline in my congressional district is remote and contains vast areas of quillback rockfish habitat that is never fished, but the assessment nonetheless suggested that this stock is overfished.

Understandably, the PFMC and many stakeholders expressed concern that the assessment would be used to adopt an overfished designation for quillback rockfish with no independent review. Two experts the PFMC called to review the assessment raised significant questions about the assessment and its use to develop fisheries regulations. The council asked its Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) – including NMFS' Science Center – to review the assessment for consideration at the PFMC's March meeting. NMFS, however, has indicated that it will continue to complete its overfished stock determination, which would force the PFMC to adopt a rebuilding plan that would trigger severe restrictions to the nearshore rockfish fishery for years.

My request is twofold:

- 1) Pause the development of the overfished determination until the SCC and NMFS can reevaluate its assessment of quillback rockfish and the PFMC can hear the results of that review in March. No harm can be done to the species in the meantime, as the season for the fishery does not start until later in Spring.
- 2) Immediately begin developing plans to assist the state of California in collecting data from the fishery being impacted. This should include hook-and-line surveys in rocky nearshore habitat where quillback are most abundant, and where rockfish associated with the stock are caught by sport, charter, and commercial fishers. Rigorous data is critical to understanding when and how regulations are written to protect fish stocks from overexploitation, and in allowing sustainable, economically beneficial use of fisheries as called for in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

I ask that you consider this request urgently to allow the PFMC to make an informed decision on the potential for adoption of a rebuilding analysis for quillback rockfish. It is critical to consider all available information and analysis when the stakes are so high for coastal communities. Please contact my Senior District Representative John Driscoll at (707) 407-3585 with any questions.

Sincerely,


JARED HUFFMAN
Member of Congress

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