



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

Recreational Abalone Fishery
December 15, 2023

BACKGROUND

The Commission will be asked to adopt a rule continuing the suspension of the recreational abalone fishery. In addition, the department will provide an informational briefing on the recently completed Conservation and Fishery Management Plan (CFMP) for red abalone. The plan describes the conservation actions needed to recover the population and outlines the framework for allowing future harvest of red abalone if conditions improve.

Proposed Rulemaking

The current prohibition for recreational abalone fishing in Oregon expires in March 2024 (commercial fishing is currently prohibited).

Abalones are marine snails, prized for their shells and meat. They are found in low densities along rocky vegetated coastlines in isolated habitat worldwide. Three species of abalone occur in Oregon: red, flat, and pinto. Flat and pinto abalones have not been a part of a directed recreational fishery in Oregon due to their scarcity and sensitivity. Red abalone had been the target of Oregon recreational fisheries until 2018.

Abalones are particularly sensitive to environmental and fishery pressures. Environmental changes since 2014-15 (El Niño, marine heat waves, and sea star wasting syndrome) have resulted in low kelp abundance (what abalones eat) and high densities of purple sea urchins (primary food and space competitor). As a result, abalone populations have declined sharply, requiring conservation actions. In response, the department recommended, and the Commission adopted three-year suspensions of the recreational abalone fishery in 2018 and 2021.

Prior to 2018, Oregon's recreational abalone fishery only targeted red abalone. Red abalone are the largest species of abalone and grow to their largest sizes in Oregon, making it a rare "trophy fishery" for this marine invertebrate. The fishery allowed a small amount of take (one per day, five per year) by special permit occurring primarily at a few small areas near Brookings and Port Orford. Red abalone are historically rare in Oregon and have recently become imperiled. Oregon's recreational red abalone fishery has always been small and boutique within the larger regional fishery. Densities in Oregon have reduced, and California's once robust fishery is now closed. Continued conservation measures are needed for this sensitive and culturally important species.

Conservation and Fishery Management Plan for Red Abalone in Oregon

The department has developed a CFMP for red abalone over the last several years. The concept of that plan is to highlight conservation needs of the species and develop a framework to allow fishing when specific criteria are met. The department worked in collaboration with Oregon Sea Grant and the University of Oregon to support a graduate resource fellow who developed the initial draft of this CFMP in 2023.

The CFMP outlines two simple Limited Reference Points (LRPs) which identify conditions when reopening a recreational red abalone fishery may be considered in the future. The plan proposes that two LRPs must be simultaneously met: (1) a regional fishery (i.e., California) is

active; and (2) red abalone densities in Oregon exceed 0.1 per square meter. These LRPs will avoid exposing our small, data poor stock to the broader regional fishery demand and ensure a suitable level of conservation. If the LRPs are met, the department may propose an amendment to applicable administrative rules to reopen the red abalone recreational fishery.

The CFMP includes a recommendation for staff and OFWC to review the plan in ten years (January 2034).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

In January 2018, the department conducted an extensive survey of recreational abalone permit holders (from 2016-2017) to gain feedback prior to the March 2018 OFWC action.

From 2017-2023, the department delivered several public presentations regarding the sensitive status of abalone in Oregon, including presentations to the: OFWC (2018, 2019, and 2021); US West Coast Abalone Workshop (2020); Elakha Alliance webinar (2020); Cape Perpetua Collaborative (2023); Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (2023); Oregon Sea Otter Science Symposium (2022); University of Oregon / Oregon Institute of Marine Biology (K. Smith M.Sc. thesis, 2023).

In October 2023, the department organized public meetings in Brookings and Port Orford to provide background information about abalone in Oregon, explain current conditions, discuss possible future management issues for abalones, and gather public input.

ISSUE

Suspension of the recreational abalone fishery

ANALYSIS

Monitoring of Oregon red abalone densities in 2015, 2019, and 2022 indicate they are present in low abundance and are declining in numbers (Table 1). The low abundance of abalone is expected, given that Oregon is at the northernmost extent of the range, which is centered in California.

Table 1: Red abalone densities (number per square meter) from index sites in 2015, 2019, and 2022 by port in Oregon.

Year	Port	
	Brookings	Port Orford
2015	0.047	0.030
2019		0.017
2022	0.014	

Consistent with the low abundance of abalone in this part of the range, Oregon’s recreational abalone fishery has historically been a very minor component of coast wide harvest. Average catch rates in Oregon were about 189 red abalone per year by 300 participants (2007-2016) compared to 239,000 red abalone per year harvested by 25,000 participants (2002-2015) in California. Both California and Oregon’s recreational abalone fisheries are currently suspended because of the recent declines and low abundance.

Considering California’s suspension of their robust abalone fishery combined with the low and declining abundance of peripheral stocks in Oregon, continued fishing is not currently prudent.

OPTIONS

1. Adopt staff recommendation to continue suspension of the recreational abalone fishery without a specified sunset date.
2. Reject staff recommendation, and re-open recreational abalone fishery.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

1. Adopt staff recommendation to suspend the recreational abalone fishery without a specified sunset date.

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to amend OAR 635–039-0090 as proposed by staff in Attachment 3.

EFFECTIVE DATE: January 1, 2024.