



FORAGE FISH: PACIFIC HAKE

BACKGROUND

Pacific hake (*Merluccius productus*), also known by its market name, whiting, is the most abundant groundfish species in the California Current ecosystem and serves as a major forage fish to other fish as well as many fish-eating seabirds and marine mammals such as the California sea lion, Steller sea lion, northern fur seal, elephant seal, harbor seal, as well as dolphins, porpoises, and some whales.

PACIFIC HAKE FISHERY

The hake fishery is the largest fishery on the west coast, reaching a record high of more than 360,000 tons (~794 million lbs.) in 2005, despite concerns about the low abundance of the breeding stock and fears that the fishery could crash like the California sardine fishery of old.

PACIFIC HAKE MANAGEMENT

Whiting was declared overfished as recently as 2002. Pacific whiting is managed annually, with harvest levels set every year. It is assessed annually in a collaborative effort by U.S. and Canadian scientists. In 2007, the council set a catch limit that could result in the stock being overfished again by 2009. Scientists cautioned that even catches below the maximum limit set by the council would result in an overfished condition.

The council manages the whiting fishery under hard bycatch caps, which set a maximum limit for the amount of overfished or rebuilding species that can be incidentally caught with the targeted whiting. Council rules require that the fishery be closed when the bycatch caps are reached. The whiting fishery has hard bycatch caps on several species including widow, canary, and dark blotched rockfish, and salmon.

CURRENT PACIFIC HAKE POLICY ISSUES

In July 2007, the whiting fishery was closed after it had exceeded the widow rockfish bycatch cap by more than 21 metric (mt). State enforcement officials found a whiting boat had disabled its monitoring camera and dumped a large widow rockfish catch at sea. A processing plant was discovered attempting to grind up another substantial rockfish catch that it had not reported.

Even more alarming, the council's enforcement team seized the cameras from several whiting boats and reported that 40 percent of the cameras they analyzed had also been off during fish hauls. One of these is the camera from the boat which dumped the widow rockfish catch at sea. Investigations are ongoing, but the amount of overfished rockfish and other rare species that were caught by unmonitored boats remains unknown. If all or even some of these boats with "camera-off" events had hauls similar to the boat caught dumping fish, many overfished species may be in trouble.

Council: Pacific Fishery Management Council

Links to Resources: <http://www.foragefish.org/hake.html> for fishery management area map and historical catch data.

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The Marine Fish Conservation Network is the largest national coalition solely dedicated to promoting sustainable management of marine fish and wildlife, and our oceans. The Network, made up of almost 200 environmental groups, commercial and recreational fishing associations, aquariums, and marine science organizations, uses its distinct voice and the best available science to educate policymakers, the fishing industry, and the public about the need for sound marine conservation and best marine management practices.