

MARINE RESOURCES PROGRAM

What is Oregon doing to protect unmanaged forage fish?

Forage Fish

In the last few years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of forage fish and interest in ensuring that the forage base is managed and protected. There is universal agreement that to preserve ocean health, especially in the face of climate change, we must protect those species at the bottom of the food chain. The protection is critical as we develop new natural resource policies. For example, offshore aquaculture, an initiative with national support, threatens to increase harvest of forage species to provide feed for farmed fish. The forage base is an incredibly diverse group; nearly all marine species provide forage during one or more life stages. A few prominent species are directly managed (e.g. sardines, anchovy, and herring) but most fall into the category of “unmanaged forage fish” (e.g. smelts, pelagic squids, and sand lance). The real trick to managing this group is in how the term “forage fish” is defined; as always, the devil is in the details.

Federal Level

Forage fish are vital to Oregon’s fisheries and the state as a whole. Federal protection of currently unmanaged forage fish is critical to address region-wide stocks and impacts, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) staff have been leading the efforts in the federal arena. Rarely, if ever before, have we seen such unity on a single fishery management issue. Constituents from a variety of fields including the fishing industry, environmental organizations, restaurant owners, fish market owners, state and federal agency representatives, tribes, and concerned citizens, have all come together in agreement on the need for federal protections of currently unmanaged forage species.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), the regional body responsible for providing fishery management recommendations to the National Marine Fisheries Service, is in the process of developing and selecting alternatives to recommend prohibition of new directed commercial



"Cranchiidae sp" (Glass Squid) by Edie Widder - NOAA photo library. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons -

fisheries on currently unmanaged forage fish. The Council has defined forage fish as a list of species or species groups that is comprised of: Osmerid smelts (including eulachon; Oregon prohibited commercial harvest of Osmerid smelts in 2011), round herring and thread herring, mesopelagic species such as myctophids, Pacific sand lance, Pacific saury, silversides, and pelagic squids. Species such as Pacific sardine and northern anchovy are managed through the existing federal coastal pelagic species fishery management plan. A complete ban on commercial harvest of krill, a well-

known forage group, was adopted by the Council in 2006 (Oregon prohibited commercial harvest of krill in 2003). At the September 2014 Council meeting, a preliminary preferred alternative was adopted and forwarded for public review. A final recommendation will be selected by the Council in March 2015.

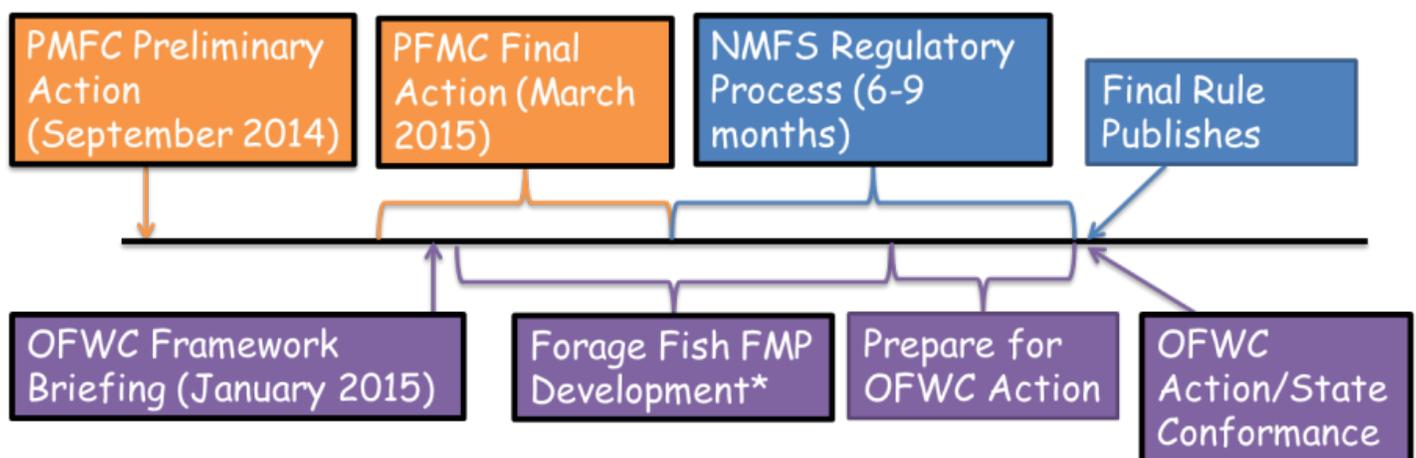
State Level

Simultaneously, ODFW staff have been working to establish guidelines for state Fishery Management Plans (FMPs), and expect to develop the *Unmanaged Forage Fish Plan* as the first one, under these guidelines. Phase one is well underway: completion of state FMP guidelines, in the Marine Fishery Management Plan Framework (Framework), is expected in early 2015. The Framework will be a guiding document for staff to rely on in developing fishery management plans for Oregon’s marine fisheries. When Oregon’s Native Fish Conservation Policy (NFCP) was developed, the capacity required to include a marine component was not available. There was recognition that marine systems, species, and fisheries are vastly different from those in freshwater and developing appropriate guidelines

specific to the needs of the marine ecosystem would need its own directed process. The Framework brings the NFCP into the marine environment and incorporates the same guiding principles. Individual plans will be completed for specific resources and fisheries, comparable to the conservation plans that have been adopted for freshwater systems. A full briefing on the Framework is scheduled for the January 2015 meeting of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. Once in place, the Framework will be implemented over time, as fishery managers have the resources to devote to documenting our current management practices in formal FMPs for each of Oregon’s fisheries.

Phase two, the development of *The Unmanaged Forage Fish Plan* under the Framework guidelines, is expected to be completed later in 2015. The Plan will clearly state Oregon’s commitment to protecting unmanaged forage fish as an important step in sustaining a healthy ocean. The timeline for finalization of Oregon’s Plan is shown here, and is dependent on the complexity of the plan, the species included, and the finalization of the federal plan.

State Forage Fish FMP Timeline



*timeline for development will be dependent on complexity of plan

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