

Small fish eaten by bigger species protected on West Coast

April 4 2016, by Phuong Le

Federal officials finalized rules Monday for a West Coast ban on catching forage fish, the small fish that larger species, seabirds and marine mammals depend on for food.

The ban on new commercial [fisheries](#) will protect little schooling fish that play a critical role in the [marine food web](#) but that are not actively fished or managed, the National Marine Fisheries Service said. It marks the first action under a new approach to fisheries management that considers how one [species](#) affects others in the ecosystem.

The ban does not affect existing fisheries for [forage fish](#), such as sardines and anchovies. It covers species including Pacific sand lance, silversides and certain varieties of herring, smelt and squid. The restrictions apply to [federal waters](#) from 3 to 200 miles off Washington, Oregon and California, and do not affect fishing authorized by tribes.

Fishermen generally do not target forage fish in federal waters, and no West Coast fishing boats are known to be considering efforts do so.

But global demand is increasing for their use in fish meal or oil to feed livestock or farmed fish, which could put pressure on the species, said Paul Shively, who directs West Coast ocean conservation efforts for the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The protections represent a real change in the way ocean resources are managed, conservation groups said.

"Instead of responding to a fishery crisis, they're being proactive," said Ben Enticknap, senior scientist with the conservation group Oceana.

"Too often, fisheries start up and nothing is done to manage them in a sustainable way until the population crashes and by then, it's too late."

The Pacific Fishery Management Council, which oversees fisheries for dozens of species along the West Coast, adopted the ban last March by unanimous vote. The NOAA published final rules Monday to implement the ban, which takes effect May 4.

Shively said he hopes the move clears the way for other regions and state agencies to adopt similar protections.

Under the rules, commercial fishing for the small species cannot be developed until the Pacific Fishery Management Council weighs scientific information and considers potential effects to other fisheries, fishing communities and the marine ecosystem.

The rules limit the amount of forage fish that could be caught incidentally while fishing for other targeted species. It also includes provisions that allow future experiments with targeting forage fish under certain conditions.

Glenn Spain, with the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, said protecting forage fish that are the basis of the food chain is "an obvious no-brainer."

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