



Province of British Columbia 2018 IPHC Annual Report

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CONTRACTING PARTY: CANADA

AGENCY:

The Province of British Columbia represented by the Ministry of Agriculture.

CONTACTS:

Mike Turner, Senior Policy Analyst, Michael.R.Turner@gov.bc.ca

Kevin Romanin, Senior Seafood Analyst, Kevin.Romanin@gov.bc.ca

FISHERY SECTORS

All sectors within British Columbia.

IPHC REGULATORY AREA

IPHC Regulatory Area 2B (Canada: British Columbia)

DISCUSSION

The Province of British Columbia (B.C.) has a long history of involvement with the Pacific halibut fishery and the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC). B.C recognizes the importance of Canada working bilaterally with the United States through the Pacific Halibut Treaty as well as the work done by the IPHC to develop and conserve Pacific halibut stocks. The significant history of this Treaty as one of the first Canadian international agreements and the near-century of mutual benefit to both countries serves as a tremendous example to the fisheries management world. Thousands of jobs rely on this level of cooperation and it is critical that this history of collaboration continue into the future. Ensuring a bilateral agreement is reached through the Treaty is of the great importance to British Columbians in the fishing industry and the broader fisheries and seafood economy within the Province.

The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for collection and reporting of data and statistics for B.C.'s agri-food sector. An important part of that mandate is to analyze the impact of various sectors, including fisheries and seafood, to the broader provincial economy. Historically Pacific halibut has B.C.'s most valuable groundfish commodity. The Pacific halibut fishery supports significant commercial harvests in Canada's waters and provides many fishing and processing jobs in B.C.'s coastal communities. The commercial halibut industry is significantly important to small coastal communities and First Nations across the B.C. coast. In the commercial halibut fishery, approximately 23% of licenses are held by B.C. First Nations. In 2016, there were 85 processing plants that reported processing halibut and generated 319 jobs with an estimated \$14M paid in wages. An average of 50 companies annually has reported wholesale sales of halibut products within the last three years¹.

In addition, the recreational halibut fishery supports the hundreds of fishing lodges, charter companies, and individuals that also contribute tremendously to the economies of coastal communities. First Nations are entitled to a Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) allocation of the TAC, and many jobs within the halibut fishery and halibut processing facilities are held by members of First Nations in British Columbia.

B.C. has an integrated groundfish fishery with 100 per cent monitoring and 100 per cent bycatch accountability. This well-developed monitoring program, which includes at-sea observers and electronic monitoring solutions, is regarded as one of the best managed fisheries in the world. In September 2009, the fishery earned Marine Stewardship Council certification for being a sustainable and well-managed fishery. These extensive fisheries monitoring programs come at a direct cost to fishermen and license holders as they are entirely funded by industry. While the program was met with initial resistance, west coast Canadian fishers now appreciate the level of accuracy coming from their catch data and have an overall greater confidence that fishery management processes are based on a foundation of reliable data. They respect that the monitoring programs level the playing field by keeping all fishery participants compliant with the rules that help to ensure sustainable stocks and the future of their industry.

One of the most impactful decisions for B.C. fishers made annually by the IPHC is the total allowable catch which determines the livelihood of many coastal B.C. residents and local economies. With the extensive and costly efforts of accounting for all halibut bycatch in place, B.C. expect that all fishers who share access to the Pacific halibut stocks should be held to similar standards of catch accounting to ensure that fishery decisions are made fairly and are based on sound data. B.C. needs to be assured that the decisions made by the IPHC regarding coast-wide TAC and the portion allocated to B.C. are based on the best data and science possible by ensuring that all contributing data sources are as thorough and reliable as what they contribute. Fishers deserve a return on the investment they put in to the detailed and reliable data that provide full accounting of nearly every fish pulled from B.C. waters.

Under the federal Pacific fisheries management regime, halibut bycatch from all harvesters is accounted for and subtracted from the total allowable catch in any given year, and juvenile halibut must be released unharmed where possible. In contrast, in Alaska for example, bycatch is accounted for well within the dedicated halibut fisheries and segments of the trawl fleet (e.g. Amendment 80 fleet), but perhaps not in other industrial trawl fisheries that may intercept halibut. Many halibut caught in industrial trawl nets do not survive release, resulting in thousands of pounds of juvenile halibut that might otherwise grow and become available for other areas, including 2A and 2B. The amount of halibut bycatch caught by the IPHC Regulatory Area 3 trawl fleets is estimated to total nearly 80-100 per cent of what Canada annually harvested in legal sized halibut through its entire commercial and recreational fisheries.²

Historic research indicates there is a net southeasterly migration of juvenile halibut from the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska into B.C. This pattern allows Alaskan fisheries to intercept the halibut stocks prior to them entering B.C. and southern US state waters. Incomplete monitoring and Alaskan bycatch of halibut in trawl fisheries impact recruitment of juvenile halibut to the fishery, which reduces available stock to Areas 2A and 2B. Uncertainty regarding post-release mortality rates and implication for total removals adds to these concerns. Bycatch and discard estimates based on limited observer monitoring in the Alaska groundfish fisheries, particularly in Area 3B, remain incomplete and are an issue of concern. The 2018 IPHC Fishery Statistics report confirms low observer coverage and poor bycatch mortality estimates in this area.²

Increasing monitoring requirements and other data initiatives on juvenile halibut bycatch mortality in fisheries where data is lacking or insufficient will contribute to a far better understanding of the impacts of bycatch from other fisheries. This ensures data are more reliable when making important decisions regarding Pacific halibut stock levels and total allowable catches. Increased monitoring initiatives will also help the IPHC to uphold its functions and responsibilities including regulating incidental catch by vessels fishing for other species of fish, and potentially closing halibut nursery areas.

RECOMMENDATION

The Government of British Columbia's position is that the IPHC must: 1) communicate its authority over issues that affect coast-wide stocks, and 2) take a more active role in exercising its authority to regulate the incidental catch of Pacific Halibut in all regulatory areas.

REFERENCES

1. British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture. (2018). The B.C. Seafood Industry Year in Review. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/statistics/industry-and-sector-profiles>
2. Erikson, L. (2018). IPHC-2018-IM094-05 Rev_1, Fishery statistics.