

2018 California Department of Fish and Wildlife Report to the International Pacific Halibut Commission

Date: December 29, 2018

Contracting Party: United States of America

Agency: California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)

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Fishery Sectors: Commercial and Recreational

IPHC Regulatory Area: IPHC Regulatory 2A (California)

Discussion:

California Commercial Fisheries

Directed 2A Fishery: There continues to be interest and participation in the 2A Directed Commercial fishery off the coast of Northern California. In 2018, four vessels successfully participated in the fishery from Northern California ports during the three days the fishery was open.

Incidental to Salmon 2A Fishery: In most years, the open season dates for the California commercial salmon fishery and the Pacific halibut incidental to salmon troll fishery do not align in locations where Pacific halibut would most likely be caught. Generally, the incidental Pacific halibut quota is attained prior to the opening of the California commercial salmon fishery (usually in September), precluding the participation of California vessels in the incidental fishery in most years. However, the salmon season opened earlier in far-Northern California in 2018, providing the opportunity for five licensed participants in California to retain Pacific halibut caught incidentally in the commercial salmon troll fishery.

California Recreational Fishery

The recreational fishery in California was open 93 days and was closed on September 21. Estimated catch in this fishery was 31,156 net pounds, or 100.7 percent of the quota. The average estimated weight per fish was 24 net pounds, an increase compared to recent years. See appendix for additional details.

Recommendations:

Future of Directed Commercial Fishery in 2A and California

In 2017, the IPHC requested the PFMC consider options to transition from the current derby-style fishery to one that provides more flexibility and safety to the fleet. Again, in 2018, the IPHC indicated to the PFMC its intent to make modifications to the directed commercial fishery in Area 2A, and suggested lengthening the time the fishery period is open from the current 10-hour time period to a season ranging from two to ten days.

CDFW views the 2019 IPHC proposal to increase the Area 2A Directed Commercial fishery season length as a measure that could eliminate or reduce the derby nature of the fishery.

Directed commercial fishery constituents in California expressed support for maintaining open access Pacific halibut fishery opportunities on the west coast, and the desire to continue participating in a coastwide fishery under the same terms as participants in Oregon and Washington. They also indicated that although directed commercial fishery participation in California is relatively new, and involves only a handful of individuals, catches have increased since 2015, and it is important to maintain fishing opportunity for this species as part of their fishing portfolios.

CDFW does not support efforts to develop a restricted access or Individual Quota fishery as an alternative to the current directed fishery. Traditionally, such management programs rely on past fishery participation levels to determine qualification or allocation of shares. Because Californians have had only minor and inconsistent participation in the directed fishery, CDFW expects there would be few if any California qualifiers in any future program that limited entry based on past participation levels. California participation in the directed fishery has been extremely limited in the past for a variety of reasons; but primarily because there has been limited financial incentive for vessels to pursue the 10-hour fishery off the coast of California, where catch rates are comparatively low and existing trip limits are highly unlikely to be attained. CDFW would not want future participation in this fishery sector to be precluded simply because under past management, fish could not be harvested quickly enough off our coast to make participation viable for most people.

CDFW is supportive of eliminating the derby nature of the fishery and would support investigating options over the coming years to find a long-term solution for this fishery. CDFW would support work through the IPHC and PFMC processes to analyze restructuring the directed commercial fishery into one that is incidental to groundfish fisheries. This alternative would offer the two-fold goal of providing minor harvest opportunity over a longer season while reducing regulatory discards that occur in groundfish fisheries when the directed commercial Pacific halibut fishery is closed (e.g., most of the time). An incidental-only fishery might potentially allow for a broader distribution of commercial catch across space and time, and across markets and participants, and consequently, might better serve the needs of buyers, commercial harvesters and local communities.

CDFW is aware of regulatory discards of Pacific halibut in the longline sablefish fishery off California. Transitioning the directed commercial fishery to a small volume opportunity incidental to groundfish fisheries that lasts over a longer time period could eliminate at least some of the regulatory discard currently occurring in that fishery. Moreover, the existing management framework for commercial west coast groundfish fisheries would offer a number of benefits that would carry over to commercial halibut harvests; namely – groundfish fishery participants in federal waters are required to adhere to Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) requirements. One benefit of VMS on vessels pursuing Pacific halibut is that it would allow for better enforcement of Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) regulations that also apply to directed commercial halibut fishing activities.

References:

News Release: CDFW Seeks Input on 2018 Recreational Pacific Halibut Season Dates

<https://cdfgnews.wordpress.com/2018/02/08/cdfw-seeks-input-on-2018-recreational-pacific-halibut-season-dates/>

News Release: Recreational Pacific Halibut Fishery Opens May 1

<https://cdfgnews.wordpress.com/2018/04/03/recreational-pacific-halibut-fishery-opens-may-1-2/>

CDFW Inseason Tracking Webpage

<https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/conservation/marine/pacific-halibut#31670772-in-season-tracking>

News Release: CDFW Recreational Fishery Closure

<https://cdfgnews.wordpress.com/2018/09/17/recreational-pacific-halibut-fishery-ends-friday-sept-21/>

CDFW Report on 2019 Catch Sharing Plan and Annual Regulations

https://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/J1b_Supp_CDFW_Rpt1_SEPTBB2018.pdf

Appendices:

Appendix 1: California Department of Fish and Wildlife Update to the International Pacific Halibut Commission on 2018 California Fisheries

**Appendix 1:
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Update to the International Pacific Halibut
Commission on 2018 California Fisheries**



**California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Marine Region
January 2019**

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Introduction

The California coastline plays a unique part in Pacific halibut management as it is located at the southern extent of the population range and has historically been a minor, and irregular contributor to harvest removals compared to other management areas. However, recently, a growing commercial fishery and a robust recreational fishery in northern California have developed prompting science, management and policy discussions about the portion of the stock off California. California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is optimistic that Pacific halibut can continue to be a viable and sustainable resource for the local and regional economies of the north coast.

California Commercial Fisheries

Directed Fishery

In 2018, four vessels participated across the three opening days in the 2018 Area 2A directed fishery; the preliminary landings were 2,457 pounds dressed (head on, gutted). The landings were made into the port of Eureka (Figure 1) and sale of the fish produced an estimated \$17,800 in ex-vessel revenue for northern California coastal communities. Landings in 2018 decreased slightly compared to 2017, in part due to unfavorable weather conditions that were present on the days the fishery was open.



Figure 1. A commercial vessel offloads catch in Eureka on July 11, 2018 and is observed by a CDFW Wildlife Officer.

CDFW staff were present during the offloading for three vessels in Eureka and conducted biological sampling in accordance with the IPHC's protocols. Ageing

structures for Pacific halibut were collected and provided to the IPHC for inclusion in the stock assessment.

Commercial Fishery Incidental to Salmon Troll Fishery

Generally, the California commercial salmon season and the incidental to salmon troll fishery for Pacific halibut dates do not align, meaning California salmon fishery participants are usually unable to retain Pacific halibut caught while targeting salmon. However, in 2018, the season dates for the two fisheries aligned and five fishermen landed approximately 300 pounds of Pacific halibut incidentally to their salmon catch.

Future of Directed Commercial Fishery in 2A and California

In 2017, the IPHC requested the PFMC consider options to transition from the current derby-style fishery to one that provides more flexibility and safety to the fleet. Again, in 2018, the IPHC indicated to the PFMC its intent to make modifications to the directed commercial fishery in Area 2A, and suggested lengthening the time the fishery period is open from the current 10-hour time period to a season ranging from two to ten days. CDFW views the 2019 IPHC proposal to increase the Area 2A Directed Commercial fishery season length as a measure that could eliminate or reduce the derby nature of the fishery.

Directed commercial fishery constituents in California expressed support for maintaining open access Pacific halibut fishery opportunities on the west coast, and the desire to continue participating in a coastwide fishery under the same terms as participants in Oregon and Washington. They also indicated that although directed commercial fishery participation in California is relatively new, and involves only a handful of individuals, catches have increased since 2015, and it is important to maintain fishing opportunity for this species as part of their fishing portfolios.

CDFW does not support efforts to develop a restricted access or Individual Quota fishery as an alternative to the current directed fishery. Traditionally, such management programs rely on past fishery participation levels to determine qualification or allocation of shares. Because Californians have had only minor and inconsistent participation in the directed fishery, CDFW expected there would be few if any California qualifiers in any future program that limited entry based on past participation levels. California participation in the directed fishery has been extremely limited in the past for a variety of reasons, but primarily because there has been limited financial incentive for vessels to pursue the 10-hour fishery off the coast of California, where catch rates are comparatively low and existing trip limits are highly unlikely to be attained. CDFW would not want future participation in this fishery sector to be precluded simply because under past management, fish could not be harvested quickly enough off our coast to make participation viable for most people.

CDFW is supportive of eliminating the derby nature of the fishery and would support investigating options over the coming years to find a long-term solution for this fishery. CDFW would support work through the IPHC and PFMC processes to analyze

restructuring the directed commercial fishery into one that is incidental to groundfish fisheries. This alternative would offer the two-fold goal of providing minor harvest opportunity over a longer season while reducing regulatory discards that occur in groundfish fisheries when the directed commercial Pacific halibut fishery is closed (e.g., most of the time). An incidental-only fishery might potentially allow for a broader distribution of commercial catch across space and time, and across markets and participants, and consequently, might better serve the needs of buyers, commercial harvesters and local communities.

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Recreational Fishery

California Recreational Allocation and Regulations

The Area 2A Total Allowable Catch was 1,190,000 net pounds for 2018, which resulted in a California recreational Pacific halibut quota of 30,940 net pounds per the PFMC's Catch Sharing Plan (CSP).

Regulations for California's 2018 fishery provided for a season that would be open May 1-June 15; July 1-15; August 1-15; and from September 1-October 31; or until the quota was projected to be attained, whichever was earlier. However, partially due to significant effort and catch in August, the fishery closed early through an inseason action effective September 21 at 11:59 pm for the remainder of the year. During 2018, the fishery was open for a total of 93 days. The daily bag and possession limit was one fish and there was no size limit.

2018 Inseason Catch Tracking

Monthly estimates produced by CDFW's California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS) program serve as California's best estimate of catch. However, production of these estimates involves a time lag of about six weeks after the month's end. Therefore, CDFW uses weekly projections to approximate catch for any months for which CRFS estimates are not yet available – allowing for timely estimation of cumulative catch

during the season. As the CRFS estimates for a given month become available, those monthly estimates replace the total monthly projection values for that month (Table 1).

CDFW’s 2018 preliminary season catch estimate is 31,156 net pounds, or 100.7 percent of the 30,940 net pound quota.

Table 1. Corrected 2018 Pacific halibut catch estimates in California by month. CDFW projection values are provided in ~~strikeout~~ to illustrate the process of replacing the projections with CRFS estimates when those estimates became available. Data are from CRFS and are preliminary and subject to change.

| Month | Net Pounds Accrued | |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------|
| | CDFW Projection | CRFS Estimate |
| May | 4,894 | 6,926 |
| June | 1,704 | 1,864 |
| July | 5,210 | 6,220 |
| August | 10,100 | 11,972 |
| September | 4,359 | 4,174 |
| October | 0 (CLOSED) | |
| Total | 31,156 | |

Fishery Trends

The 2018 fishing season ran a full week longer than the fishing season in 2017. Since 2015, the first year that inseason catch monitoring and tracking was implemented in California’s recreational fishery, the season has lasted slightly longer each year (Figure 2).

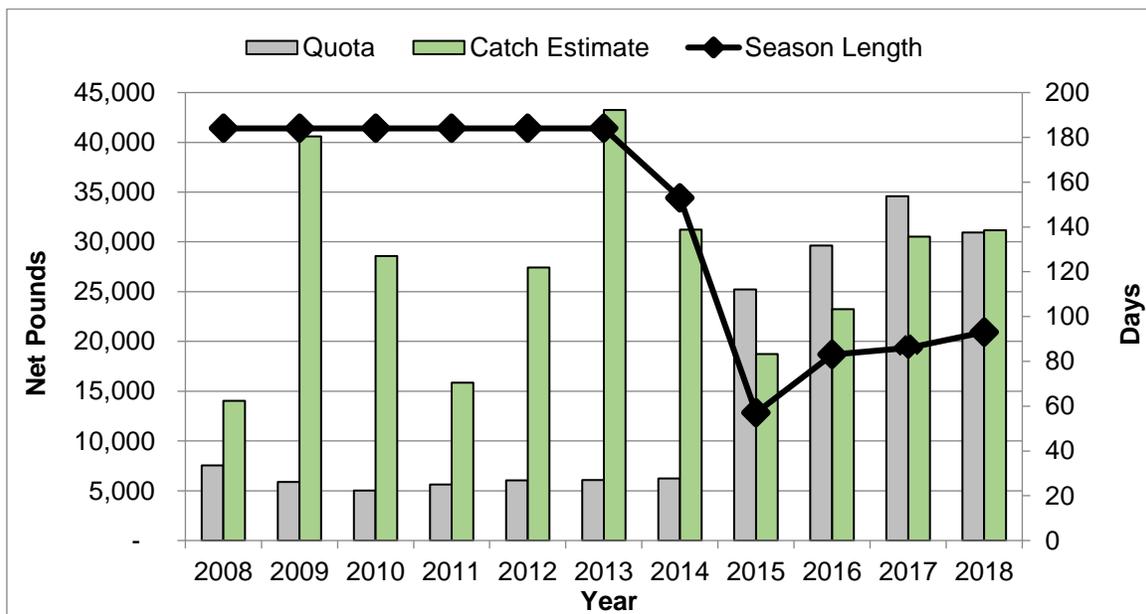


Figure 2. California quota, catch estimates, and number of days open to fishing by year from 2008-2018. Quota prior to 2014 was shared with Southern Oregon. Prior to 2015, there was no mechanism for inseason action if the quota would be exceeded. Catch data for 2018 are preliminary.

California’s recreational fishery achieved several key objectives in 2018. The final-year’s catch estimate was very close to the California quota; reflecting that this year’s inseason management methodologies worked as intended. Additionally, the California quota amount was enough to allow the season to span through several months of the year; and lasted through three spring and summertime holiday weekends; which met priority needs identified by recreational fishery stakeholders in previous years.

Catch per day in the 2018 recreational fishery remained higher than prior past years. From 2008 to 2014, an average of 75 to 200 pounds of Pacific halibut was caught per day (Figure 3). Since 2015, the first year where the number of open fishing days in the season was significantly reduced in order to manage the fishery inseason to not exceed the California quota, between 280 and 350 pounds of Pacific halibut was caught per day.

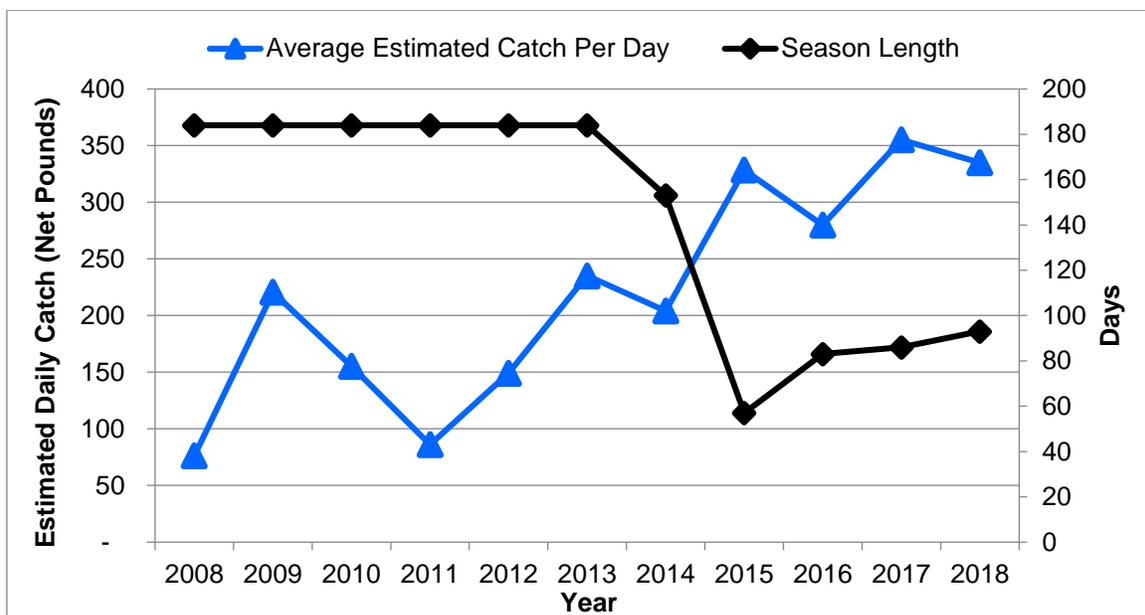


Figure 3. Average estimated volume (net pounds) of Pacific halibut caught per day in California’s recreational fishery, and number of open days per year from 2008-2018. Data are from CDFW and CRFS. Catch data for 2018 are preliminary.

Trends in Weight

The average estimated weight per Pacific halibut in 2018 was 24 net pounds. Since 2008 there has been an increasing trend in the average estimated weight per fish caught in California (Figure 4). Catch estimates are produced by the CRFS program and include sampler collected data such as lengths and weights (measured directly in the field or calculated from the IPHC length/weight regression) which are expanded during the estimation process. The CRFS program produces catch estimates in total numbers and weight of fish, which are then used to calculate the average estimated weight per fish.

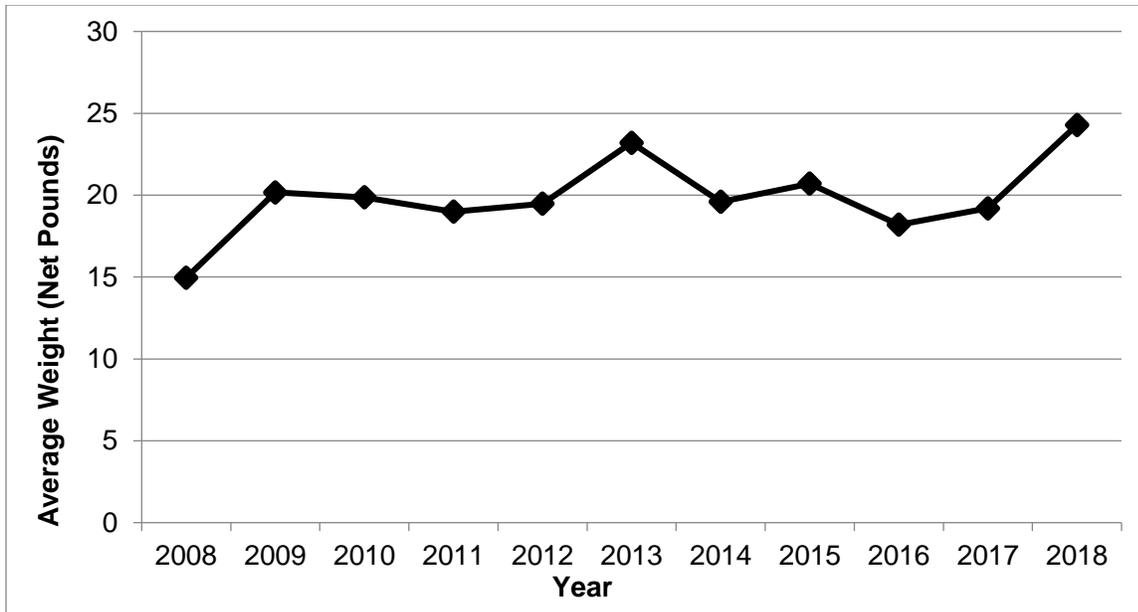


Figure 4. Annual average estimated weight of Pacific halibut off of California from 2008-2018. Data are from the CRFS catch estimation program.

Location of Sampled Pacific Halibut

The CRFS program produces catch estimates on only a District-wide basis for the far-northern part of California, so catch estimates for Pacific halibut by individual port are not available. To look at small scale geographic catch trends by port, raw sample data from the CRFS creel survey must be used. A total of 247 Pacific halibut were examined by CRFS samplers throughout the 2018 season. The greatest number of Pacific halibut observed by samplers (86 fish), were encountered in Eureka followed by Trinidad and Crescent City (Figure 5). The majority of sampled fish (and estimated catch) occurred in August.

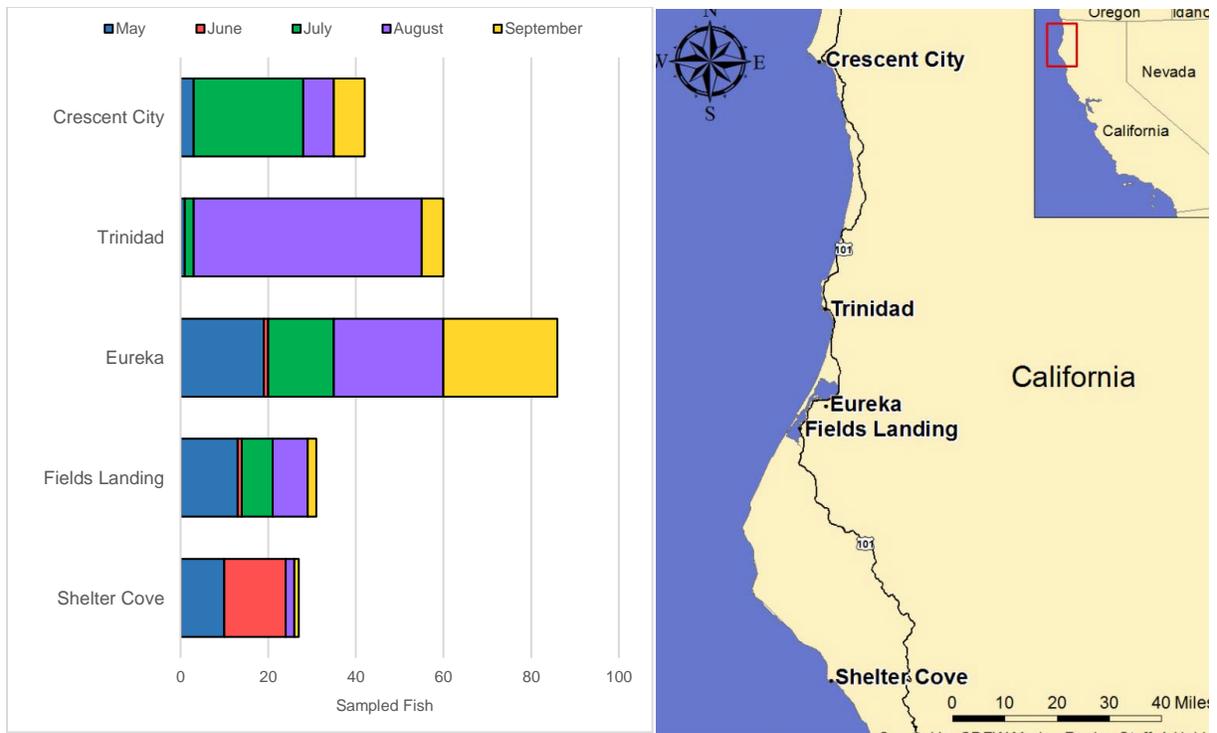


Figure 5. Northern California port areas where Pacific halibut are most frequently encountered and number of sampler examined Pacific halibut by month and port area during 2018. Not shown is one sampled fish in August from the port of Fort Bragg.

Fishery Closure

Provisions in the CSP allow for flexible inseason management of the recreational Pacific halibut fisheries in Area 2A, to allow fisheries to attain but not exceed their respective quotas.

CDFW catch projections through September 9 showed more than 87 percent of the quota had already been taken. Good weather forecasts and the potential for high catch rates prompted CDFW to hold a conference call with NMFS, the IPHC, and PFMC staff on September 14. Based on then-current fishery trends and predicted weather conditions, the agencies determined that a fishery closure effective Friday, September 21 at 11:59 pm, was necessary to avoid exceeding the quota.

CDFW provided notice of the early closure to its constituents through a variety of methods: a news release¹, the details of which were carried in several local north coast news publications; information on the CDFW Pacific halibut webpage²; and the CDFW groundfish regulations hotline. NMFS updated its Pacific halibut hotline with the closure information, and the IPHC posted a news release about the closure to its website.

¹ <https://cdfgnews.wordpress.com/2018/09/17/recreational-pacific-halibut-fishery-ends-friday-sept-21/>

² <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Marine/Pacific-Halibut>

Estimating Discard Mortality

In recent years, the IPHC requested that State agencies provide an annual estimate, if possible, of discard mortality in their recreational fisheries. The current sampling protocol of CDFW's CRFS program includes observation and estimation of the total number of both retained and discarded fish, and collection of biological data from retained fish. Discarded fish that are returned dead are also documented. However, unlike retained fish, no information on the size of discarded fish is collected.

Using CFRS data from 2004 to 2018, CDFW estimated the weight of fish discarded alive and those discarded dead, assuming that the average weight of a discarded fish is the same as a retained fish in each year. In 2018, no fish were estimated as discarded dead (Table 2), as no anglers reported discarding dead Pacific halibut. Meanwhile, 178 fish were estimated to have been released alive.

A mortality rate of seven percent was applied to the estimated number of fish discarded either dead or alive. This mortality rate was established by the PFMC's Groundfish Management Team as a presumed rate of discard mortality for flatfish³. Application of this rate to discarded fish is also consistent with methods used to estimate discard mortality by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. **CDFW's resulting preliminary discard mortality estimate in its 2018 recreational fishery is 299 net pounds.**

³ PFMC (Pacific Fishery Management Council) and NMFS (National Marine Fisheries Service). 2009. Proposed Acceptable Biological Catch and Optimum Yield Specifications and Management Measures for the 2009-2010 Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Final Environmental Impact Statement Including Regulatory Impact Review and Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis. Pacific Fishery Management Council, Portland, OR. January 2009, Table 4-56.

Table 2. Estimated number of fish and weight of recreationally caught Pacific halibut discards, and estimated total discard mortality (net pounds) in California from 2004-2018. Data from 2018 are preliminary and subject to change. Data are from CRFS.

| Year | Discarded Alive | | | Discarded Dead | | Total Discard Mortality (net pounds) |
|----------------|--------------------------|----------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| | Estimated Number of Fish | Estimated Net Pounds | Estimated Discard Mortality (7 percent of net pounds) | Estimated Number of Fish | Estimated Discard Mortality (7 percent of net pounds) | |
| 2004 | 62 | 1,061 | 74 | * | * | 74 |
| 2005 | 37 | 905 | 63 | 5 | 31 | 94 |
| 2006 | 205 | 3,558 | 249 | 0 | 0 | 249 |
| 2007 | 27 | 319 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| 2008 | 133 | 1,559 | 109 | 4 | 4 | 113 |
| 2009 | 226 | 3,040 | 213 | 0 | 0 | 213 |
| 2010 | 63 | 865 | 61 | 0 | 0 | 61 |
| 2011 | 24 | 293 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 21 |
| 2012 | 157 | 2,315 | 162 | 0 | 0 | 162 |
| 2013 | 120 | 2,095 | 147 | 0 | 0 | 147 |
| 2014 | 197 | 2,938 | 206 | 0 | 0 | 206 |
| 2015 | 117 | 2,470 | 173 | 0 | 0 | 173 |
| 2016 | 151 | 2,743 | 192 | 0 | 0 | 192 |
| 2017 | 87 | 1,678 | 117 | 0 | 0 | 117 |
| 2018 | 178 | 4,271 | 299 | 0 | 0 | 299 |
| Average | 119 | 2,007 | 137 | 1 | 6 | 141 |

* No estimates of discarded dead fish available.

2018 Noteables

While Pacific halibut caught off California in 2018 averaged 24 net pounds, each year there are several reports of large (in excess of 70 pounds) Pacific halibut being caught and or landed in California. On May 5, 2018 an angler out of Crescent City caught a Pacific halibut that weighed 108 pounds; this fish was intercepted at the docks by a CRFS sampler (Figure 6). Additional anecdotal reports of larger Pacific halibut can be found on the NorCal Fish Reports website, including a 72 pound fish caught in August out of Eureka (http://www.norcalfishreports.com/fish_reports/137072/shellback=-success.php).



Figure 6. CDFW CRFS sampler with a 108 pound Pacific halibut caught by an angler out of Crescent City on May 5, 2018.

For more information about California's Pacific halibut fishery, contact:

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