

News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2000 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its 76th Annual Meeting in Lynnwood, Washington, with Steven Pennoyer of Juneau, Alaska presiding as Chairman. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2000 totaling 67,500,000 pounds, compared to 74,060,000 pounds in 1999.

The Commission staff reported on the assessment of the Pacific halibut stock in 1999. The only major change in the assessment this year was a lowering of the pre-1993 IPHC setline survey catch rates to account for a bait change, which reduced the population estimates by 20-30% in the eastern and central Gulf of Alaska (Areas 2 and 3A). A continuing decline in size at age has also affected the estimated biomass in Area 2C and Area 3A. The assessment estimates a low recruitment in Area 3A in recent years, implying a rapidly declining biomass in that area. However, trawl surveys indicate a relatively high abundance of sublegal fish in that area, so the assessment may be overly pessimistic. Nevertheless, it is clear that recruitment in all areas has declined from the high levels of 1985-1995. Farther west in Areas 3B and 4, size at age and recruitment have also declined but the lower exploitation rate in those areas has moderated the decline in biomass relative to the central Gulf of Alaska.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2000 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States fishermen and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission will recommend to the governments the following catch limits for 2000 in Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington), Area 2B (British Columbia), Area 2C (southeastern Alaska), Area 3A (central Gulf), Area 3B (western Gulf), Area 4A (eastern Aleutians), Area 4B (western Aleutians), Area 4C (Pribilof Islands), Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea), and Area 4E (Bering Sea flats):

2000 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of 2A-1) fisheries	138,632
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	24,464
2A Treaty Indian commercial	305,000
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	10,500
2A Sport - North of Columbia River	188,307
<u>2A Sport - South of Columbia River</u>	<u>163,097</u>
Area 2A total	830,000
2B	10,600,000
2C	8,400,000
3A	18,310,000
3B	15,030,000
4A	4,970,000
4B	4,910,000
4C	2,030,000
4D	2,030,000
<u>4E</u>	<u>390,000</u>
<u>Area 4 total</u>	<u>14,330,000</u>
Total	67,500,000

The catch limits for Regulatory Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the catch-sharing plan implemented by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC). The NPFMC catch sharing plan in Area 4 allows the Commission to set biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4C-D-E. The catch limits for the fisheries in Area 2A reflect the catch-sharing plan implemented by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC).

The staff reported to the Commission on its investigation of the biological, regulatory, enforcement, and logistical considerations associated with an extended halibut fishing season. Based primarily on concerns about interceptions of migrating fish from different regulatory areas during winter fishing and administrative concerns identified by the Parties, the staff recommended no change to the existing March 15-November 15 season. The Commission therefore made no changes to the existing season for individual quota fishing. However, industry groups presented the Commission with a list of items concerning a potential season extension that they wished to have investigated by Commission staff. The Commission staff will consider these items, in consultation with industry, during the design of its research programs and report to the Commission at its next annual meeting on its progress.

Therefore, the treaty Indian commercial fishery in Area 2A, the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States Individual Fishing Quota (IVQ)

fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E will all commence at 12 noon local time on March 15 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15.

In Area 2A, six 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended for July 5, July 19, August 2, August 23, September 6, and September 20. All fishing periods will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits. Fishing dates for an incidental commercial catch halibut fishery will be established under United States domestic regulations established by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and will be concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons in Area 2A. The remainder of the Area 2A catch-sharing plan, including sport-fishing seasons, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Area 2A licensing regulations remained the same as in 1999. The Commission will issue vessel licenses for the sport charter halibut fishery, the directed commercial halibut fishery, and the incidental commercial halibut fishery. The deadline dates for receiving license applications remain the same: April 30 for the directed commercial fishery and March 31 for the incidental commercial fishery. A vessel that has a commercial halibut license cannot be used for sport fishing for halibut.

The Commission changed the regulations applicable to the United States to make the operator or owner of the vessel responsible for offloading all halibut from the vessel once offloading commences. Previously, the processor or buyer was responsible.

The Commission reauthorized for another two years the regulation allowing Community Development Quota (CDQ) fishers in Area 4E to retain undersized halibut caught with commercial gear for personal use (not to sell or barter the halibut). The regulations again require the managers of the authorized CDQ organization that allows persons to harvest halibut in Area 4E CDQ fishery to report annually the total number and weight of undersized halibut to the Commission. The report must include the methodology on how the data were collected and be received by IPHC prior to December 1.

A proposal by the industry to allow filleting on board a vessel of the retained fish for personal use from the IFQ fishery was not adopted by the Commission. NMFS Enforcement, and therefore the Commission, remained concerned that if fillets were allowed on board the vessel as proposed enforcement could be compromised. NMFS Enforcement was asked to work with the industry and IPHC to see if a viable regulation change could be agreed upon and presented at next year's Annual Meeting.

The Commission held extensive discussions on the present and future status of landing and holding live halibut for subsequent sale after the halibut fishing season closes. Although a Commission regulation requiring that fish be offloaded with gills and entrails removed effectively prohibits live fish landing. Canada has specifically chosen to reject this regulation. The existing Commission regulation was implemented to improve fish quality and address sampling concerns, rather than to prohibit live fish landing. The Commission will continue to

examine the issue of live fish landing but made no changes to its existing regulation requiring the dressing of fish prior to offloading. The Commission staff will work with Canadian government authorities to ensure that the live fish holding operations in Canada meet Commission requirements concerning conservation and data capture.

Other Actions

The recommended regulations for the 2000 halibut fishery will become official as soon as they are approved by the Canadian and United States Governments. The Commission will publish and distribute regulation pamphlets.

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission will be held in Vancouver, BC. from January 22 to 25, 2001. The Canadian Government commissioner, Richard Beamish, was elected Chairman for the coming year. The United States Government commissioner, Steven Pennoyer, was elected as Vice Chairman. Other Canadian commissioners are Kathleen Pearson and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Andrew Scalzi. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Director of the Commission.

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