

News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2002 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its 78th Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington, with Dr. James Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska presiding as Chairman. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2002 totaling 74,920,000 pounds, compared to 73,180,000 pounds in 2001.

The Commission staff reported on the assessment of the Pacific halibut stock in 2001. The major changes in the assessment this year were: a separate treatment of Areas 2A and 2B in the assessment, whereas they had been previously combined; the incorporation of additional survey information in Areas 2C and 3A; and, a revision in the estimate of halibut habitat in all areas. The separation of Areas 2A and 2B and some computational changes resulted in increased estimates of exploitable biomass in both areas. Exploitable biomass was estimated to be slightly lower in Area 2C and slightly higher in Area 3A as a result of these changes. Revisions of halibut habitat based on bottom areas were completed for all regulatory areas but the effect was minor, except in Area 4B, where the change resulted in an approximate 30% decrease in habitat. The total halibut stock is declining slowly due to lower recruitment associated with environmental conditions unfavourable to halibut recruitment. However, the halibut biomass is still above the long-term average level and is expected to remain above this level for the next several years.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2002 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission will recommend to the governments the following catch limits for 2002 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):

2002 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Point Chehalis)	222,700
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	39,300
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Point Chehalis)	88,389
2A Treaty Indian commercial	467,500
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	16,000
2A Sport - North of Columbia River	214,110
<u>2A Sport - South of Columbia River</u>	<u>262,001</u>
Area 2A total	1,310,000
2B	11,750,000
2C	8,500,000
3A	22,630,000
3B	17,130,000
4A	4,970,000
4B	4,180,000
4C	2,030,000
4D	2,030,000
<u>4E</u>	<u>390,000</u>
<u>Area 4 total</u>	<u>13,600,000</u>
Total	74,920,000

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-sharing plan allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E. The requirements for fishing Area 4D CDQ in Area 4E will be part of regulations promulgated by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

The catch-sharing plan implemented by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) for Area 2A was adopted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. Fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons in Area 2A and the incidental commercial halibut fishery during the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis will be established under United States domestic regulations established by NMFS. The remainder of the Area 2A catch-sharing plan, including sport fishing seasons, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS.

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 26, July 10, July 24, August 7, August 21, September 4, and September 18. 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 announced at a later date.

The staff reported to the Commission on its further investigation of the issues associated with an extended halibut fishing season. The report concluded that winter fisheries would likely result in altered biomass distribution by regulatory area compared with that resulting from present fisheries. Although the staff believes that the stock could be assessed and conservation assured when dealing with such an alteration, significant impacts on data capture programs, quota share management, as well as management and enforcement costs were identified. The Commission conducted extensive discussions on the season extension issue and received several industry proposals and public testimony. The Commission directed the staff to continue its investigation and broaden the scope to include consideration of multiple-year averaging for catch limits, alternate management frameworks, and the catch of halibut in other fisheries. The Commission made only slight changes to the existing season to accommodate market opportunities.

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 18 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 18.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission approved revising the current definition of illegal possession of halibut from a person "knowingly" in possession of halibut taken in contravention of regulations to a person in contravention of IPHC regulations. A person is not required to know that they are in contravention of the regulations to be in illegal possession of halibut.

The Commission adopted regulations recognizing the customary and traditional use of halibut for subsistence fishing for Alaska. The specific regulations on gear, eligibility, daily bag limits, permitting and recording for this fishery will be promulgated by NMFS. Although the Commission authorized a season of January 1 to December 31 for this fishery, the revision to the IPHC regulations will take effect only if and when the customary and traditional fishery proposal is approved by the U.S. government.

In Alaska, the regulations will be changed to allow fishing vessels carrying crab pots to use halibut heads and carcasses as bait, provided they have documentation of legal purchase or documentation of legally acquiring the bait.

The Commission re-authorized the regulations allowing CDQ harvesters in Area 4E to retain undersized halibut caught with commercial gear for personal use (not to sell or barter the halibut). The regulation was expanded to include Area 4D CDQ vessels that land all of their catch in Area 4E or Area 4D. The regulations again require the manager of each of the authorized CDQ organizations that allows persons to harvest halibut in Area 4D and 4E CDQ fisheries 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.

Regulations were adopted to specify which commercial fishing regulations apply to the commercial treaty Indian fishery in Area 2A-1. The commercial fishing regulations that will apply are as follows: size limit, careful release of halibut, logs, receipt and possession of halibut, and fishing gear (except that the 72-hour fishing restriction preceding the halibut fishing period shall not apply).

The regulations were not changed to allow vessel monitoring systems or transponders in place of Area 4 clearance procedures. However, NMFS Enforcement will work with harvesters to provide waivers to clearance procedures if the vessel has the appropriate vessel monitoring systems in place. For further information on waivers, contact NMFS Enforcement in Juneau (907) 586-7200.

Other Actions

An industry proposal requested Staff assistance in implementing a web-based registry for chalky fish occurrence and the Commission directed the staff to undertake this work.

The Commission notes that halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries was reduced slightly in 2001, continuing the trend initiated by the 1991 Commission agreement to achieve lower bycatch mortality levels. However, the Commission believes that progress on further reductions on bycatch mortality is desirable and that current levels of mortality reduce yield to the directed halibut fisheries. The Commission will continue to work with agencies of the two governments to achieve reductions in halibut bycatch mortality.

The Commission received several proposals from its Conference Board concerning restrictions on or banning of halibut aquaculture-related activities. Such restrictions are not part of the Commission's mandate or jurisdiction and support for aquaculture in general is a policy of the Canadian government. The Commission took no action on most of these proposals with the exception of publishing annual reports on halibut aquaculture activities by the two governments on the Commission's web page. In addition, the staff was directed to form a small interagency committee to monitor halibut aquaculture development and advise the Commission on potential negative impacts on the wild halibut resource or its management.

The Commission staff had proposed an extensive tagging program for 2002 employing passive integrated transponder (PIT) tags. However, the staff reported that technical evaluation of tagging procedures, location, and detection had not progressed to its satisfaction and the program will be postponed to 2003 while further research is completed. The Commission also directed the staff to complete a peer review of the project during 2002.

The recommended regulations for the 2002 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 Victoria, B.C. from January 21 to 24, 2003. The Canadian Government commissioner, Dr. Richard Beamish, was elected Chairman for the coming year. The United States Government commissioner, Dr. James Balsiger, was elected as Vice Chairman. Other Canadian commissioners are Clifford Atleo and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Andrew Scalzi. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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