

News Release

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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2005 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its Eighty-first Annual Meeting in Victoria, British Columbia, with Dr. Richard J. Beamish of Nanaimo, British Columbia presiding as Chair. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States, catch limits for 2005 totaling 73,820,000 pounds, a 3.5% decrease from the 2004 catch limit of 76,510,000 pounds.

The Commission staff reported on the 2004 assessment of the Pacific halibut stock which implemented only minor technical changes from the previous year. The halibut stock is healthy in the central and southern portions of the range (Areas 3A through 2A) but is believed to have declined in Areas 3B through Area 4, and lower catch limits are required in those areas. The recruitment of the 1994 and 1995 year classes appears to be relatively strong in most areas, although Area 4B is showing a notably lower level of recruitment of these same year classes compared with other regulatory areas. Estimates of fishing rate, hence exploitable biomass, derived from mark-recapture analysis of PIT-tagged halibut are not yet used directly for determining recommended catch limits. The primary tagging took place in 2003 and there are not yet sufficient recoveries of tagged fish, particularly for the western areas, to determine mixing rates among and exploitable biomass within regulatory areas.

In 2004, Commission staff identified a 25% harvest rate as a candidate target rate for use with a new population assessment, pending its evaluation using the sex-specific population model. This updated evaluation was completed and indicated that a harvest rate less than 25% would result in a 50% lower probability that the stock biomass would reach a level requiring reductions in harvest rate. Accordingly, the Commission adopted a harvest rate of 22.5% as the baseline harvest rate for the central Gulf of Alaska and southward regulatory areas. For the western Gulf of Alaska (Area 3B) and the Bering Sea (Area 4), a 20% harvest rate is maintained due to concern that the long term productivity of these areas may not be as high as that in the central and southern areas of the stock.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2005 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 2005 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):

2005 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Point Chehalis)	226,203
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	39,918
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Point Chehalis)	70,000
2A Treaty Indian commercial	452,500
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	38,000
2A Sport – North of Columbia River	237,257
<u>2A Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>266,122</u>
Area 2A total	1,330,000
2B (includes sport catch allocation)	13,250,000
2C	10,930,000
3A	25,470,000
3B	13,150,000
4A	3,440,000
4B	2,260,000
4C	1,815,000
4D	1,815,000
<u>4E</u>	<u>359,000</u>
Area 4 total	10,240,000
Total	73,820,000

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada will allocate the adopted Area 2B catch limit between sport and commercial fisheries.

The IPHC sets biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4C-D-E. 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 catch-sharing plan allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E.

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. In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 29, July 13, July 27, August 10, August 24, September 14, and September 28, 2005. 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.

Area 2A fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons and the incidental commercial halibut fishery during the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis will be established under United States domestic regulations by the National Marine Fisheries Service

(NMFS). The remainder of the Area 2A catch-sharing plan, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. For further information of the depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut fishery, incidental halibut during the sablefish fishery, and the sport fisheries, call the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825).

The Commission continued its discussions on the season extension issue and received several industry proposals and public testimony. The Commission also received a staff report indicating very little difference between the size compositions of halibut landed in the first two weeks compared with that during the last two weeks of March in 2004. After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sector, the Commission voted on a season similar to 2003 and 2004. Further, it was agreed to open the season on a Sunday to facilitate marketing. Therefore, seasons will commence at 12 noon local time on February 27 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2005 for the following fisheries and areas: 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 (IFQ) and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E. In addition, the Commission formed a working group, composed of staff and members of its advisory bodies, to examine and report on the relative merits and expense of different research to understand the timing and extent of winter migratory movements of halibut among regulatory areas. The working group will consider both pop-up satellite and transponder tagging, as well as an experimental winter fishery, and make recommendations to the Commission prior to its next Annual Meeting.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission approved changes to the regulations that will allow Area 4C IFQ and CDQ fishing to occur in Areas 4C or 4D. This measure facilitates implementation of action approved by the U.S. NPFMC. A component of this measure is a modification of the IPHC clearance regulations that will allow a vessel to clear simultaneously into Areas 4C and 4D.

At the request of NOAA Enforcement, the Commission will clarify its regulations to ensure that halibut fillets are not allowed on board a commercial vessel. The clarification will change the wording and move the regulation paragraph from the size limit section to the receipt and possession section. This clarification will not change the current exceptions for cheeking of halibut in accordance with NMFS regulations, or for filleting of weighed and recorded IFQ fish (Section 13 (2) (a) and (b)).

Other Actions

The staff proposal to recognize First Nations' ceremonial and subsistence fishing in IPHC regulations was deferred, pending clarification of this regulation.

The Commission and its advisory bodies reviewed the request from the Alaska Food Coalition for a food bank donation program in the Gulf of Alaska, funded by retained halibut bycatch from trawl fisheries. Neither the Commission nor its advisory bodies approved of this proposal. While the Commission understood the intent of the proposal, it believed that this proposal would work against the Commission's agreement between the two countries to reduce halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries. The advisory bodies also believed that other available sources of acceptable fish protein should be thoroughly evaluated.

The Commission honoured Mr. Casey Knight of Petersburg, Alaska as the third recipient of the IPhC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Knight was unable to attend the meeting because of academic commitments but has been presented with a certificate and plaque, as well as the scholarship of \$2,000 (U.S.). The Commissioners expressed their continued support for the scholarship program and commended the Scholarship Committee for their efforts in assessing the candidates.

The Commission noted that halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries was reduced slightly in 2004, and was at the lowest level since 1987, continuing the trend initiated by the 1991 Commission agreement to achieve lower bycatch mortality levels. However, the Commission agrees that further reductions are 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 recommended regulations for the 2005 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 is planned for Bellingham or Seattle, Washington from January 17 to 20, 2006. The United States Government commissioner, Dr. James Balsiger, was elected Chair for the coming year. The Canadian Government commissioner, Dr. Richard Beamish, was elected as Vice Chair. Other Canadian commissioners are Clifford Atleo and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Phillip Lestenkof. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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