

News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2008 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its Eighty-fourth Annual Meeting in Portland, OR, with Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, AK presiding as Chair. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States, catch limits for 2008 totaling 60,400,000 pounds, a 7.3% decrease from the 2007 catch limit of 65,170,000 pounds.

The Commission staff reported on the 2007 Pacific halibut stock assessment which implemented a coastwide estimation of biomass, compared with previous assessments which assessed stock biomass for each individual IPHC regulatory area. This approach was introduced for the 2006 stock assessment but not endorsed by the Commission at its 2007 Annual Meeting. Following a June 2007 stock assessment workshop and external peer review of the assessment, the Commission and its advisory bodies endorsed the coastwide approach to the assessment of halibut stock abundance at the 2008 Annual Meeting. While the staff catch limit recommendations, arising from IPHC survey-based apportionment of the coastwide biomass estimated were accepted for most areas, the Commission requested additional investigation of apportionment methods during 2008.

For 2008, the Commission recommends a 20% harvest rate for use in Areas 2A through 4A. However, the Commission staff expressed concern over harvest rates in Area 4A and will conduct a comprehensive examination of optimum harvest rates for Area 4 as a whole during 2008. In addition, the IPHC standardized setline assessment survey will be extended into the eastern Bering Sea flats during 2008, repeating a survey first conducted in this area in 2006. Low levels of recruitment and lower estimated levels of productivity in Areas 4B and 4CDE continued to support harvest rates lower than 20% for these areas. Accordingly, the Commission adopted catch limits based on a harvest rate of 15% for Areas 4B and 4CDE. Catch limits adopted for 2008 were lower over the entire coast reflecting stock biomass declines as the exceptionally strong 1987 and 1988 year classes pass out of the fishery. Recruitment of the 1994 and 1995 year classes are above average and the 1999 and 2000 year classes are also estimated to be above average but several years away from making major contributions to the exploitable biomass of the stock.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2008 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 2008 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):

2008 Catch Limits

Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A	
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	213,674
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	37,707
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	70,000
Treaty Indian commercial	397,000
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	30,000
Sport – North of Columbia River	220,238
<u>Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>251,381</u>
Area 2A total	1,220,000
Area 2B (includes sport catch allocation)	9,000,000
Area 2C	6,210,000
Area 3A	24,220,000
Area 3B	10,900,000
Area 4A	3,100,000
Area 4B	1,860,000
Area 4C	1,769,000
Area 4D	1,769,000
	<u>352,000</u>
Area 4E	8,850,000
 Area 4 total	
Total	60,400,000

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada (DFO) 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 4CDE. 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 and Area 4C Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ to be fished in Area 4D.

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. The Commission received a request for an earlier starting date for the directed commercial fishery. The proposal was for mid-May, however Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife officials expressed concern over an earlier opening and requested that the proposal be reviewed more thoroughly during 2008. Therefore, the Commission adopted an Area 2A commercial fishery opening date two weeks earlier than in 2007. In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 11, June 25, July 9, July 23, August 6, August

20, September 3, and September 17, 2008. 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).

After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sector, the Commission approved a season opening date of March 8. The Saturday opening date is to facilitate marketing. Therefore, seasons will commence at 12 noon local time on March 8 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2008 for the following fisheries and areas: the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States IFQ and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E. All Area 2A commercial fishing including the treaty Indian commercial fishery will fall within March 8 – November 15, 2008.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The current IPHC definition of net weight is halibut which are gutted, head-off, and without ice and slime. The Commission approved adding the conversion factors that will be required to be used if halibut is weighed with head-on and with ice and slime. The conversion factors will be defined in regulation as a 10% deduction for head and 2% for ice and slime.

The Commission approved adding the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) voluntary sablefish logbook as an acceptable logbook that can be used by U.S. operators in the commercial halibut fishery.

The Commission adopted a regulation that restricts tagging of halibut to IPHC-authorized programs, and by state and federal agencies. Individuals and organizations outside of state and federal agencies will be required to obtain a permit from IPHC for any halibut tagging program.

For Alaska, the Commission adopted a sport regulation that no person shall possess on board a fishing vessel, including charter vessels and pleasure craft, halibut that has been filleted, mutilated, or otherwise disfigured in any manner except that each halibut may be cut into no more than two ventral and two dorsal pieces and two cheeks, all with skin on. The change allows enforcement officers to count the number of fish possessed by an angler. Additionally, in Area 2C the NMFS regulation that requires charter vessels to retain halibut carcasses remains in effect unless superseded by new NMFS regulations.

Other Actions

A proposal to allow Pacific hake (whiting) shoreside trawl vessels operating in Area 2A to retain halibut until offloading was not adopted. This practice, which has been previously allowed through an IPHC permitting process, will continue in this manner while IPHC and NMFS staffs work on the development of U.S. domestic regulations for this program.

Commercial fishing vessels are not allowed to have fishing pots capable of catching halibut on board the vessel. A proposal to allow sport or personal use crab pots on board commercial halibut vessels was not adopted. The IPHC staff, enforcement agencies, and industry agreed to further discuss and review the proposal prior to the 2009 Annual Meeting.

The catch in sport fisheries and enforcement of sport fishing regulations, particularly for charter vessels, were discussed at length. For the 2009 Annual Meeting, the Commission will request reports from NMFS and Alaska State enforcement agencies concerning enforcement of regulations for the Alaska sport charter fishery.

An industry proposal to reduce the commercial size limit for halibut was reviewed. The IPHC staff was directed to review how a reduced size limit would affect assessment, yield, and long-term productivity of the halibut stock.

The Conference Board supported the coastwide assessment model but asked for a workshop on apportionment methods. The Commissioners directed the staff to conduct a workshop in early fall 2008 to review apportionment procedures, with special consideration of migration, updated PIT tag results, and harvest policy.

The Conference Board and the Processor Advisory Group asked the staff to host a workshop on bycatch programs and bycatch reduction strategies. The Commissioners directed the staff to assemble material reviewing bycatch reduction targets, reduction methodology, progress in other jurisdictions, and update the 1991 IPHC Bycatch Work Group results. This information will be made available and used in planning for a potential bycatch workshop in 2009.

The Commission honoured Mr. Myron Melovidov Jr. of St. Paul, AK as the sixth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Melovidov was 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 recommended regulations for the 2008 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 Commission is pleased to announce that it has re-appointed Dr. Bruce M. Leaman as the IPHC Executive Director. Dr. Leaman was first appointed to this position in 1997 and the new appointment will expire in January 2013.

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission is planned for Vancouver, B.C. from January 13 to 16, 2009. The Canadian Government Commissioner, Dr. Laura J. Richards of Nanaimo, B.C., was elected

Chair. The United States Government Commissioner, Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, AK, was elected Vice-Chair for the coming year. Other Canadian Commissioners are Clifford Atleo (Port Alberni, B.C.) and Gary Robinson (Vancouver, B.C.). The other United States Commissioners are Ralph Hoard (Seattle, WA) and Phillip Lestenkof (St. Paul, AK). Dr. Bruce M. Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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