

News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2012 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its Eighty-eighth Annual Meeting in Anchorage, AK, with Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau AK presiding as Chair. More than 200 halibut industry stakeholders attended the meeting, with over 50 more participating in web broadcasts of the public sessions.

The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2012 totaling 33,540,000 pounds, an 18.3% decrease from the 2011 catch limit of 41,070,000 pounds.

In addition to setting catch limits for 2012, the Commission dealt with a wide range of catch limit and regulatory issues, and also took important actions regarding bycatch management, scientific assessment review, and the IPHC performance review. Details of the stock assessment, catch limits and seasons, regulatory actions, and other issues are presented in the following sections.

Stock Assessment and Harvest Rates

The Commission staff reported on the 2011 Pacific halibut stock assessment, comprised of a coastwide estimation of biomass from a variant of the assessment model used since 2006, with apportionment to regulatory areas based on the data from the annual Commission standardized stock assessment survey. Coastwide overall commercial fishery weight per unit effort (WPUE) was largely unchanged (+1%) in 2011 from 2010 values, although a significant decline (-18%) continued in Area 3B. Area 2A commercial WPUE also declined significantly, although this area has significantly shorter openings with the tribal fishery and derby-style commercial fishery, leading to a commercial index that is more variable than other areas. In contrast, commercial WPUE increased from 8-15% in Areas 2B, 2C, and 4B. The 2011 IPHC stock assessment survey WPUE values (adjusted for hook competition, survey timing, and averaged as in the apportionment process) increased notably in Area 2C but continued to decrease by about 20% in Areas 3B, 4A, and 4CDE. The coastwide survey WPUE value declined by approximately 5% from 2010 to 2011.

The Commission has expressed concern over continued declining catch rates in several areas and has taken aggressive action to reduce harvests. In addition, the staff has noted a continuing problem of reductions in previous estimates of biomass as additional data are obtained, which has the effect of increasing the realized historical harvest rates on the stock. Commission scientists will be conducting additional research on this matter in 2012. For 2012, the Commission approved a 21.5% harvest rate for use in Areas 2A through 3A and a 16.1% harvest rate for Areas 3B through 4.

Catch Limits and Seasons

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2012 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission faced very difficult decisions on the appropriate harvest from the stock and recognized the economic impact of the reduced catch limits recommended by its scientific staff. However, the Commission believes that conservation of the halibut resource is the most important management objective and will serve the best economic interests of the industry over the long term. Accordingly, catch limits adopted for 2012 were lower in all regions of the stock except Areas 2A and 2C.

The Commission is recommending to the governments the following catch limits for 2012:

2012 Catch Limits	
Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington)	
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	173,216
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	30,568
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	21,173
Treaty Indian commercial	321,650
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	24,500
Sport – North of Columbia River	214,110
<u>Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>203,783</u>
Area 2A total	989,000
Area 2B (British Columbia) (includes sport catch allocation)	7,038,000
Area 2C (southeastern Alaska)	2,624,000
Area 3A (central Gulf of Alaska)	11,918,000
Area 3B (western Gulf of Alaska)	5,070,000
Area 4A (eastern Aleutians)	1,567,000
Area 4B (western Aleutians)	1,869,000
Area 4C (Pribilof Islands)	1,107,355
Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea)	1,107,355
<u>Area 4E (Bering Sea flats)</u>	<u>250,290</u>
Area 4 total	5,901,000
Total	33,540,000

Notes Regarding the Catch Limits for Specific Regulatory Areas

Area 2A

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 overall catch limit for Area 2A in 2012 is

sufficient to permit non-treaty incidental harvest of halibut during the limited entry sablefish longline fishery, under the provisions of the PFMC catch sharing plan and the adopted total Area 2A catch limit.

Area 2B

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

Area 4

The IPHC sets 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.

Fishing Season Dates

After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sector, the Commission approved a season of March 17 – November 7, 2012 for the U.S. and Canadian Individual Quota fisheries, and the Treaty tribal fisheries in Area 2A. The Saturday opening date is to facilitate marketing. In order to provide more time for its staff to conduct the stock assessment prior to its Interim Meeting, the Commission selected an earlier closing date than in 2011.

Seasons will commence at noon local time on March 17 and terminate at noon local time on November 7, 2012 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 take place between March 17 and November 7, 2012.

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 27, July 11, July 25, August 8, August 22, September 5, September 19, 2012. 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 the limited entry sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis and the salmon troll fishing seasons 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, and the sport fisheries, call the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825).

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission took action on the following four regulatory changes and issues proposed by staff and stakeholders.

Logbooks

The Commission approved the staff recommendations to modify its regulations so as to provide conformity with DFO logbook regulations in Area 2B (requiring latitude/longitude position information and recording of catch by set) and to allow the use of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Fixed Gear logbook as an approved logbook for commercial fishing in Area 2A.

Area 2A Licensing

The Area 2A licensing regulations remained the same as in 2011, with the exception that vessels fishing in the incidental halibut fishery concurrent with the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis are also required to obtain a commercial license from the Commission. Fishers must choose between a commercial or sport charter license. Commercial fishers must choose between a license for (1) retaining halibut caught incidentally during the salmon troll fishery, or (2) fishing in the directed commercial halibut fishery (south of Point Chehalis) and/or retaining halibut caught incidentally in the primary sablefish fishery (north of Point Chehalis). The deadline dates for receiving license applications remain the same: April 30 for the directed commercial fishery/incidental sablefish fishery and April 2 (as March 31 is on Saturday) for the incidental halibut fishery concurrent with the salmon troll fishery. A vessel that has a commercial halibut license cannot be used for halibut sport fishing.

Control of Charter Harvest in Area 2C

The Commission received a request from the NPFMC to change the Commission's existing one-fish bag limit with 37-in maximum length for charter fishing in Area 2C, to a one-fish bag limit with a U45/O68 reverse-slot limit length restriction (≤ 45 in or ≥ 68 in, head on). This proposal is intended to keep the removals by the charter fishery within the Council's 0.931 Mlb Guideline Harvest Level for Area 2C. In addition, the entire carcass must be retained on board the vessel until all fillets are offloaded. After consideration of the request and discussion concerning the estimation of release mortality associated with this measure, the Commission adopted the U45/O68 reverse slot limit for charter halibut fishing in Area 2C for 2012.

Recreational Fishery Release Mortality

The Commission discussion of the reverse slot limit for Area 2C highlighted the issue of release mortality for halibut discarded by recreational fisheries coastwide. There are currently no estimates of release mortality during recreational fishing included in halibut management, although such releases by the recreational sector are known to be common, while similar mortality for undersize releases in the commercial fisheries is included. Accordingly, the Commission directed staff to write letters to all agencies involved in management of halibut recreational fisheries requesting implementation of data collection programs and estimation of such mortality for all recreational fisheries.

The Commission received a number of regulatory and catch limit proposals after the deadlines for submission and did not consider these proposals. Participants are reminded that future proposals should be received by Commission deadlines if they are to be considered by the

Commission and its advisory bodies, to clearly distinguish the regulatory or catch limit objective of the proposals, and to submit the proposals under the appropriate category.

The recommended regulations for the 2012 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.

Other Actions

Halibut Bycatch Mortality

The Commission expressed its continued concern about the yield and spawning biomass losses to the halibut stock from mortality of halibut in non-directed fisheries. Significant progress in reducing this bycatch mortality has been achieved in Areas 2B, and recently in Area 2A, using individual bycatch quotas for vessels in some fisheries. Reductions have also occurred in Alaska, and new measures aimed at improving bycatch estimation, scheduled to begin in 2013, will help to refine these estimates. The Commission noted the upcoming workshop on bycatch being conducted jointly with the NPFMC and approved a request from its Conference Board to recommend a member from the directed halibut fishery to serve as a panelist on this workshop. In addition, the Commission directed staff to coordinate with state agencies and review estimates of mortality in all state-managed fisheries in Alaska to ensure that they remain appropriate.

The Commission reviewed progress by its Halibut Bycatch Working Group and developed objectives and timelines for work in 2012. In particular, the Working Group will review a staff report on halibut migration, review actions taken by both countries to reduce bycatch mortality, identify further actions that will be effective in reducing bycatch mortality, and identify options to mitigate the effects of such mortality.

Assessment Work Team

The Commission will develop a multi-year plan to review current and planned research activities as well as to plan and prioritise activities in the following areas: peer review of the current assessment model, analysis of the causes for the currently observed retrospective bias in estimates of exploitable biomass, analysis of the ongoing decline in halibut size at age, and development of a Management Strategy Evaluation for the halibut stock. A planning meeting for this initiative, involving the Commission, its staff, scientific advisors, managers, and industry participants will be held before the end of March 2012. The Commission also approved budget resources to support this work.

Performance Review

The independent consultants contracted to conduct a Performance Review of the Commission (<http://www.iphc.int/component/content/article/253.html>) attended all sessions of the Annual Meeting. The consultants' report will be submitted to the Commission by April 30, 2012 and a public presentation of their findings will occur in spring 2012. The Commission will announce any actions arising from this review during its next cycle of meetings.

IPHC Merit Scholarship

The Commission honoured Mr. John Scott of Girdwood, AK as the tenth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Scott regretted being unable to attend the Annual Meeting due to class requirements, and was previously presented with 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.

2013 Annual Meeting

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission will be held January 22-25, 2013 in Victoria, B.C.

Commission Membership

The Canadian Government Commissioner, Dr. Laura J. Richards, of Nanaimo B.C., was elected Chair for the coming year. The United States Government Commissioner, Dr. James W. Balsiger, of Juneau AK., was elected Vice-Chair. It was noted that Dr. Richards term as Canadian Government Commissioner will expire during 2012 and that the Canadian Government will appoint a replacement who will fill the role of Commission Chair. Other Canadian Commissioners are Gary Robinson (Vancouver, B.C.) and Acting Commissioner Michael Pearson (Ottawa, ON). Mr. Robinson's term will also expire in 2012 and a replacement Commissioner will be named by the Canadian Government. Dr. Richards and Mr. Robinson were thanked for their exceptional service to the Commission. 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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