



February 8, 2016

HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2016 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its 92nd Annual Meeting in Juneau, Alaska, on January 29, 2016, with Dr. James Balsiger presiding as Chair. More than 280 halibut industry stakeholders attended the meeting, with over 80 more participating via the web. All of the Commission's public and administrative sessions during the meeting were open to the public and broadcast on the web.

The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2016 totaling 29.89 million pounds. The Commission also addressed other regulatory issues and took actions regarding assessment survey expansion and bycatch management. A news release issued January 29, 2016, announced the catch limits and fishing seasons for 2016, and that information is repeated in this news release. Documents and presentations from the Annual Meeting can be found on the Annual Meeting page of the IPHC website: <http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html>.

Stock Assessment and Harvest Advice

As has been the case since 2012, this year's stock assessment is based on an ensemble of models, incorporating the uncertainty within and among models. This approach reduces the potential for abrupt changes in management advice and provides a more realistic presentation of uncertainty and a stronger basis for risk assessment. As in 2014, the models included in the ensemble consist of two long time-series models, reconstructing historical dynamics back to the beginning of the modern fishery, and two short time-series models incorporating data from 1996 to the present, the period when all sources of removals and surveys are available for all regions. For each time-series length, one model is fitted to coastwide aggregate data and the other to data disaggregated into geographic regions.

The results of the 2015 stock assessment indicate that the Pacific halibut stock declined continuously from the late 1990s to around 2010. That trend resulted from decreasing size at age, as well as recent recruitment strengths that were smaller than those from the 1980s and 1990s. The estimated female spawning biomass appears to have stabilized near 200 million pounds, with a slightly increasing trend.

An executive summary of the 2015 stock assessment is posted on the IPHC website at <http://iphc.int/meetings-and-events/interim-meeting/im2015-documents.html>.

The complete report of the 2015 stock assessment is available on the IPHC website at http://iphc.int/publications/rara/2015/RARA2015_12Assessment.pdf.

As it has been since 2013, the 2016 IPHC staff harvest advice was presented in the form of a decision table that estimates the risks to stock and fishery status. The final version of the decision table for 2016, incorporating the adopted catch limits, is posted on the IPHC website at <http://iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html> (titled "Adopted Catch Limits for 2016").

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Catch Limits and Seasons

Catch Limits

The Commission received harvest advice for 2016 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and recommends to the two governments the following catch limits for 2016:

IPHC Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington)	1,140,000
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	193,364
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	34,123
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	49,686
Treaty Indian commercial	365,100
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	33,900
Sport – Washington	214,110
Sport – Oregon	220,077
Sport – California	29,640
Area 2B (British Columbia) (includes sport catch allocation)	7,300,000
Area 2C (southeastern Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport ¹)	4,950,000
Commercial fishery (3,924,000 catch and 120,000 incidental mortality)	4,044,000
Guided sport fishery	906,000
Area 3A (central Gulf of Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport ¹)	9,600,000
Commercial fishery (7,336,000 catch and 450,000 incidental mortality)	7,786,000
Guided sport fishery	1,814,000
Area 3B (western Gulf of Alaska)	2,710,000
Area 4A (eastern Aleutians)	1,390,000
Area 4B (central/western Aleutians)	1,140,000
Areas 4CDE	1,660,000
Area 4C (Pribilof Islands)	733,600
Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea)	733,600
Area 4E (Bering Sea flats)	192,800
Total	29,890,000

¹The combined total includes estimated mortality from regulatory discards of sublegal halibut and lost gear in the commercial fishery, plus discard mortality in the guided sport fishery, as mandated in the U.S. Catch Sharing Plan.

Notes Regarding the Catch Limits for Specific Regulatory Areas

Area 2A

The Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for Area 2A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. The overall catch limit for Area 2A in 2016 is sufficient to permit non-treaty incidental harvest of halibut during the limited-entry sablefish longline fishery, under the provisions of the CSP.

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Area 2B

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

Areas 2C and 3A

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) CSP for Areas 2C and 3A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for Areas 2C and 3A. That CSP sets the allocation between the commercial and charter sport sectors in those two Regulatory Areas. Note that since 2014, the IPHC catch limits for Areas 2C and 3A include both sectors (commercial and recreational charter), plus discard and lost gear mortality estimates, as noted in the table footnote above. The Area 2C commercial fishery allocation is 3,924,000 pounds for the commercial fishery catch and 120,000 pounds estimated for incidental mortality within the fishery. The Area 3A commercial fishery allocation is 7,336,000 pounds for the commercial fishery catch and 450,000 pounds estimated for the incidental mortality within the fishery.

Area 4CDE

The IPHC sets a combined catch limit for Area 4CDE. The individual catch limits for Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the 4CDE CSP adopted by the NPFMC. The CSP also 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 Areas 4D and 4C.

Fishing Season Dates

The Commission approved a season of March 19 to November 7, 2016, for the U.S. and Canadian quota fisheries. Seasons will commence at noon local time on March 19 and terminate at noon local time on November 7, 2016 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 19 and November 7, 2016. The Saturday opening date was chosen to facilitate marketing.

In Area 2A, eight 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery south of Point Chehalis, Washington, are recommended: June 22, July 6, July 20, August 3, August 17, August 31, September 14, and September 28, 2016. All fishing periods will begin at 8 a.m. and end at 6 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits announced at a later date.

Area 2A fishing dates for incidental commercial halibut fisheries concurrent with the limited-entry sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis and the salmon troll fishing seasons will be established under U.S. domestic regulations by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The remainder of the Area 2A CSP, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. Further information regarding the depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut fishery, and details for the sport fisheries, is available at the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825). The Area 2A IPHC licensing procedures did not change.

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Regulatory Changes

Charter Halibut Sector Management Measures for Areas 2C and 3A

The Commission received a request from the NPFMC to adopt charter halibut sector management measures in accordance with the NMFS CSP for Areas 2C and 3A. The NPFMC proposal is designed to keep removals by the charter fishery within the limits of the CSP. After consideration of the advice of the Council, Commission staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fisheries agencies, the Commission approved the following measures:

In Area 2C, 1) a one-fish daily bag limit, and 2) a “reverse slot” size limit restriction (≤ 43 inches or ≥ 80 inches).

In Area 3A, 1) a two-fish daily bag limit, 2) a maximum size limit for the second fish of 28 inches, 3) a four-fish annual limit, 3) a vessel limit of one trip per calendar day, 4) a limit of one trip per charter permit per calendar day, and 5) a one-day-per-week closure of halibut charter fishing on Wednesdays throughout the year. In addition, immediately upon landing a halibut a harvest record is required, for which the angler must record the date and regulatory area in ink on the back of the State of Alaska sport fishing license.

The requirement to retain the filleted carcass on board the vessel until the fillets are offloaded will be removed from IPHC regulations. This requirement now appears in the NMFS regulations.

Longline Pot Gear

The NPFMC and NMFS are developing regulations that allow the use of longline pot gear, as defined by the the NPFMC, in the IFQ sablefish fishery in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). The NPFMC recommended that the Commission allow the retention of legal-sized halibut, if unused halibut IFQ is available, in longline pot gear during the commercial halibut fishery season in the GOA.

The Commission approved longline pot gear, as defined by the NPFMC, as legal gear for the commercial halibut fishery in Alaska when NMFS regulations permit the use of this gear in the IFQ sablefish fishery. The expectaton is that NMFS will implement regulations to allow the use of pot gear in the GOA IFQ sablefish fishery in late 2016 or at the beginning of the 2017 fishery.

The Commission intends to review the use of pot gear as a legal gear for halibut in this fishery after three years.

Halibut with External IPHC Tags

The Commission approved the exemption of halibut with external IPHC tags from sport daily bag or possession limits, size limits, and season restrictions, and from personal use and subsistence daily bag or catch limits. Such tagged halibut are already exempt from commercial IVQs, IFQs, and CDQs, and this change was made to ensure IPHC receives information from all tagged halibut that are caught.

Use of the NMFS eLog in Alaska

The Commission approved the explicit addition of the electronic version of the NMFS Groundfish/IFQ Daily Fishing Longline and Pot Gear logbook to the list of acceptable logbooks for use in the Alaskan commercial halibut fishery.

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Area 2A Fish Tickets

The Commission approved changing the wording of regulations to make it clear that the Tribal Identification Number and not the Vessel Identification Number should be recorded on the fish ticket in the Area 2A Treaty Indian fisheries.

Other Actions

Discard Mortality Rate

In response to a motion approved by the Conference Board, the Commission directed the staff to re-examine the appropriateness of the 16% discard mortality rate (DMR) currently assigned to halibut released in the U.S. and Canadian directed halibut fisheries. The Commissioners noted that this would be part of a larger evaluation of DMRs that the IPHC and NMFS staffs are currently engaged in.

Nunivak Survey

In response to a Conference Board motion that the IPHC consider the feasibility of including in the annual IPHC setline survey additional sites around Nunivak Island, the Commission directed the staff to look at all available sources of information on abundance and distribution around Nunivak. The Commission invited fishers in that area to participate in the IPHC logbook program as a ready source of such information, and asked the staff to continue its outreach to the communities there.

Harvest Policy Analysis

The Conference Board recommended that the Commission prioritize and assign sufficient resources for the staff and the Management Strategy Advisory Board (MSAB), in conjunction with the Scientific Review Board, to review and update the harvest policy and harvest control rules. The Commission confirmed that such a review is a priority for the staff and the MSAB, and noted that it has provided additional resources for the project in this year's budget.

Halibut Bycatch

The Commission affirmed its commitment to bycatch reduction. The Commission directed the staff to continue its work to quantify bycatch and its impact on the halibut stock, and to promote the reduction of bycatch. The Commission also noted that bycatch management is a primary focus of the IPHC's developing relationship with the NPFMC.

Expanded Survey

The Commission approved the next in a series of expansions to the Commission's standardized stock assessment survey. In 2016, the Commission's survey in the Area 4D Edge will be expanded. The purpose of the expansion series is to reduce potential biases in the surveys among regulatory areas and to encompass depths to which the commercial fishery has recently expanded. The Commission will continue to review survey expansion at the next Annual Meeting.

IPHC Merit Scholarship

The Commission honored Ms. Shalie Dahl of Petersburg, Alaska, as the fourteenth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Ms. Dahl was able to attend the 2015 Interim Meeting in Seattle, but due to class commitments she was unable to be present at the Annual Meeting to accept the scholarship.

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The Commission decided to change the format of the scholarship to an award of \$4,000 per year, renewable for up to four total years of study, with new scholarships awarded every other year. The first scholarship at the \$4,000 level will be awarded in 2016, and the next will be awarded in 2018. Solicitation for the 2016 IPHC merit scholarship was announced in a recent news release (<http://www.iphc.int/news-releases/444-nr20160201.html>), with an application deadline date of June 30, 2016.

Upcoming Meetings

The Commission's 2016 Interim Meeting will be held November 29-30, 2016, in Seattle, Washington in a venue accessible to the public and will be webcast. The next Annual Meeting of the Commission will take place January 23-27, 2016 in Victoria, British Columbia. The 2018 Annual Meeting is planned for January 22-26, 2018 in Portland, Oregon.

Commission Membership

Canadian Government Commissioner Paul Ryall of Vancouver, British Columbia, was elected Chair for the coming year. United States Government Commissioner Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska, was elected Vice-Chair. The other Canadian Commissioners are David Boyes of Courtenay, British Columbia, and Ted Assu of Campbell River, British Columbia. The other U.S. Commissioners are Robert Alverson of Seattle, Washington, and Jeffery Kauffman of Wasilla, Alaska.

Executive Director

The Commission announced the selection of Dr. David Wilson to succeed Dr. Bruce Leaman as its Executive Director.

Dr. Wilson comes to the IPHC with a wide range of experience in international and domestic fisheries management and administration. He is currently serving as Interim Executive Secretary of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). Prior to joining the IOTC, he was head of the International Fisheries Section of the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resources Economics and Sciences, and he served as the head of the Australian scientific delegations to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the IOTC. Dr. Wilson has also spent time working for the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA), and almost 10 years working in Panama (as a research fellow at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute), American Samoa (as a fisheries biologist at the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources), and the Turks and Caicos Islands (as director of the Boston University Center for Marine Resource Studies). Dr. Wilson earned his doctorate at James Cook University in 2001, in association with the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

Dr. Wilson is expected to join the IPHC staff in August 2016.

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