



Overview: IPHC 5-year Biological and Ecosystem Sciences Research Program (2017-21)

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PURPOSE

To provide the RAB with a description of the research projects proposed by IPHC Secretariat and contemplated within the Five-year Biological and Ecosystem Science Research Program (2017-21).

BACKGROUND

The main objectives of the Biological and Ecosystem Science Research at the IPHC are to:

- 1) identify and assess critical knowledge gaps in the biology of the Pacific halibut;
- 2) understand the influence of environmental conditions; and
- 3) apply the resulting knowledge to reduce uncertainty in current stock assessment models.

The primary biological research activities at IPHC that follow Commission objectives are identified and described in the [IPHC Five-Year Biological and Ecosystem Science Research Plan \(2017-21\)](#). These activities are summarized in five broad research areas designed to provide inputs into stock assessment and the management strategy evaluation processes ([Appendix I](#)), as follows:

- 1) Migration and Distribution. Studies are aimed at further understanding reproductive migration and identification of spawning times and locations as well as larval and juvenile dispersal.
- 2) Reproduction. Studies are aimed at providing information on the sex ratio of the commercial catch and to improve current estimates of maturity.
- 3) Growth and Physiological Condition. Studies are aimed at describing the role of some of the factors responsible for the observed changes in size-at-age and to provide tools for measuring growth and physiological condition in Pacific halibut.
- 4) Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs) and Survival. Studies are aimed at providing updated estimates of DMRs in both the longline and the trawl fisheries.
- 5) Genetics and Genomics. Studies are aimed at describing the genetic structure of the Pacific halibut population and at providing the means to investigate rapid adaptive changes in response to fishery-dependent and fishery-independent influences.

DISCUSSION ON THE MAIN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

1. Migration and Distribution.

Research activities in this Research Area aim at improving existing knowledge on Pacific halibut larval and juvenile distribution. The relevance of research outcomes from these activities for stock assessment (SA) is in the improvement of estimates of productivity. These

research outcomes will be used to generate potential recruitment covariates and to inform minimum spawning biomass targets by Biological Region and represent one of the top three biological inputs into SA ([Appendix II](#)). The relevance of these research outcomes for the management and strategy evaluation (MSE) process is in the improvement of the parametrization of the Operating Model and represent the top ranked biological input into the MSE ([Appendix III](#)).

1.1. Larval distribution and connectivity between the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea.

Principal Investigator: Lauri Sadorus (M.Sc.)

Objective: To investigate larval and juvenile connectivity of Pacific halibut within and between the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea.

Knowledge of the dispersal of Pacific halibut larvae and subsequent migration of young juveniles has remained elusive because traditional tagging methods are not effective on these life stages due to the small size of the animals. This larval connectivity project, in cooperation with NOAA EcoFOCI, used two recently developed modeling approaches to estimate dispersal and migration pathways of larval and young juvenile Pacific halibut in order to better understand the connectivity of populations between the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea and within each of these two ocean basins. The results of this study have been published in the journal *Fisheries Oceanography* ([Sadorus et al., 2021](#)). A full description of this project is included in paper [IPHC-2021-RAB022-09](#).

2. Reproduction.

Research activities in this Research Area aim at providing information on key biological processes related to reproduction in Pacific halibut (maturity and fecundity) and to provide sex ratio information of Pacific halibut commercial landings. The relevance of research outcomes from these activities for stock assessment (SA) is in the scaling of Pacific halibut biomass and in the estimation of reference points and fishing intensity. These research outputs will result in a revision of current maturity schedules and will be included as inputs into the SA ([Appendix II](#)), and represent the most important biological inputs for stock assessment. The relevance of these research outcomes for the management and strategy evaluation process is in the improvement of the simulation of spawning biomass in the Operating Model ([Appendix III](#)).

Recent sensitivity analyses have shown the importance of changes in spawning output due to skip spawning and/or changes in maturity schedules for stock assessment (Stewart and Hicks, 2018). Information of these key reproductive parameters provides direct input to stock assessment. For example, information on fecundity-at-age and –at-size could be used to replace spawning biomass with egg output as the metric of reproductive capability in the stock assessment and management reference points. This information highlights the need for a better understanding of factors influencing reproductive biology and reproductive success of Pacific halibut. In order to fill existing knowledge gaps related to the reproductive biology of female Pacific halibut, research efforts are devoted to characterize female maturity in this species. Specific objectives of current studies include: 1) histological assessment of

the temporal progression of female developmental stages and reproductive phases throughout an entire reproductive cycle; 2) investigation of skip-spawning in females; and 3) fecundity estimations. A full description of this project is included in paper [IPHC-2021-RAB022-10](#).

3. Growth.

Principal Investigator: Josep Planas (Ph.D.)

Objective: To investigate somatic growth variation as a driver for changes in size-at-age.

Research activities conducted in the Research Area on Growth aim at providing information on somatic growth processes driving size-at-age in Pacific halibut. The relevance of research outcomes from these activities for stock assessment resides, first, in their ability to inform yield-per-recruit and other spatial evaluations for productivity that support mortality limit-setting, and, second, in that they may provide covariates for projecting short-term size-at-age and may help delineate between fishery and environmental effects, thereby informing appropriate management responses ([Appendix II](#)). The relevance of these research outcomes for the management and strategy evaluation process is in the improvement of the simulation of variability and to allow for scenarios investigating climate change ([Appendix III](#)).

The IPHC Secretariat has completed a study funded by the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB Project No. 1704; 2017-2020) to identify relevant physiological markers for somatic growth. This study resulted in the identification of 23 markers in skeletal muscle that were indicative of temperature-induced growth suppression and 10 markers in skeletal muscle that were indicative of temperature-induced growth stimulation. These markers represented genes and proteins that changed both their mRNA expression levels and abundance levels in skeletal muscle, respectively, in parallel with changes in the growth rate of Pacific halibut. A manuscript describing the results of this study is currently in preparation (Planas et al., in preparation).

In addition to temperature-induced growth manipulations, the IPHC Secretariat has conducted similar studies as part of NPRB Project No. 1704 to identify physiological growth markers that respond to density- and stress-induced growth manipulations. The respective justifications for these studies are that (1) population dynamics of the Pacific halibut stock could be affected by fish density, and (2) stress responses associated with capture and release of discarded Pacific halibut may affect subsequent feeding behavior and growth. Investigations related to the effects of density and stress exposure are still underway.

4. Discard Mortality Rates (DMRs) and Survival Assessment.

Information on all Pacific halibut removals is integrated by the IPHC Secretariat, providing annual estimates of total mortality from all sources for its stock assessment (SA). Bycatch and wastage of Pacific halibut, as defined by the incidental catch of fish in non-target fisheries and by the mortality that occurs in the directed fishery (i.e. fish discarded for sublegal size or for regulatory reasons), respectively, represent important sources of mortality that can result in significant reductions in exploitable yield in the directed fishery. Given that the incidental

mortality from the commercial Pacific halibut fisheries and bycatch fisheries is included as part of the total removals that are accounted for in the SA, changes in the estimates of incidental mortality will influence the output of the SA and, consequently, the catch levels of the directed fishery. Research activities conducted in this Research Area aim at providing information on discard mortality rates and producing guidelines for reducing discard mortality in Pacific halibut in the longline and recreational fisheries. The relevance of research outcomes from these activities for SA resides in their ability to improve trends in unobserved mortality in order to improve estimates of stock productivity and represent the most important inputs in fishery yield for SA ([Appendix II](#)). The relevance of these research outcomes for the management and strategy evaluation process is in fishery parameterization ([Appendix III](#)).

For this reason, the IPHC Secretariat is conducting two research projects to investigate the effects of capture and release on survival and to improve estimates of DMRs in the directed longline and guided recreational Pacific halibut fisheries:

4.1. Evaluation of the effects of hook release techniques on injury levels and association with the physiological condition of captured Pacific halibut and estimation of discard mortality using remote-sensing techniques in the directed longline fishery.

Principal Investigator: Claude Dykstra (B.Sc.)

Objective: To provide estimates of discard mortality and best-handling practices in the Pacific halibut directed fishery.

The IPHC Secretariat, with funding by a grant from the Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program NOAA (NA17NMF4270240; 2017-2020), has recently conducted studies to evaluate the effects of hook release techniques on injury levels, their association with the physiological condition of captured Pacific halibut and, importantly, has generated experimentally-derived estimates of discard mortality rate (DMR) in the directed longline fishery. The initial results on individual survival outcomes for Pacific halibut released in excellent condition as the viability category assigned to the fish following capture indicate a range of DMRs between 4.2% (minimum) and 8.4% (maximum), that is consistent with the currently-applied DMR value of 3.5%. A manuscript describing these results has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of North American Fishery Management* (Loher et al., in press).

The IPHC Secretariat is currently conducting modeling analyses of potential relationships between individual physiological characteristics of discarded Pacific halibut, environmental conditions and handling practices, as well as on the ability of electronic monitoring systems to capture release methods and individual lengths of captured fish.

4.2. Discard mortality rates of Pacific halibut in the charter recreational fishery.

Principal Investigator: Claude Dykstra (B.Sc.)

Objective: To provide estimates of discard mortality and best-handling practices in the Pacific halibut guided recreational fishery.

The IPHC Secretariat is conducting a research project to better characterize the nature of charter recreational fisheries with the ultimate goal of better understanding discard practices relative to that which is employed in the directed longline fishery. This project has received funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF Project No. 61484) and the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB Project No. 2009) ([Appendix IV](#)). A full description of this project is included in paper [IPHC-2021-RAB022-11](#).

5. Genetics and genomics.

Principal Investigator: Andy Jasonowicz (M.Sc.)

Objective: To investigate the genetic structure of the Pacific halibut population and to conduct genetic analyses to inform on Pacific halibut movement and distribution in the Convention Waters.

The IPHC Secretariat is conducting studies that incorporate genomics approaches in order to produce useful information on population structure and distribution and connectivity of Pacific halibut. The relevance of research outcomes from these activities for stock assessment (SA) resides (1) in the introduction of possible changes in the structure of future stock assessments, as separate assessments may be constructed if functionally isolated components of the population are found (e.g. IPHC Regulatory Area 4B), and (2) in the improvement of productivity estimates, as this information may be used to define management targets for minimum spawning biomass by Biological Region. These research outcomes provide the second and third top ranked biological inputs into SA ([Appendix II](#)). Furthermore, the relevance of these research outcomes for the management and strategy evaluation process is in biological parameterization and validation of movement estimates, on one hand, and of recruitment distribution, on the other hand ([Appendix III](#)). This project has received funding from the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB Project No. 2110) ([Appendix IV](#)). A full description of this project is included in paper [IPHC-2021-RAB022-13](#).

6. Other research.

The IPHC Secretariat (PI's: Mr. Claude Dykstra and Dr. Ian Stewart) has been successful in securing funding from NOAA's 2021 Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP) for a project entitled "Gear-based approaches to catch protection as a means for minimizing whale depredation in longline fisheries" ([Appendix IV](#)). This study seeks to identify potential methods for protecting hook captured fish from whale depredation and to develop and field-test several simple low-cost catch-protection designs that can be deployed effectively using current longline fishing techniques. The proposed work entails conducting a workshop with industry (affected fishers, gear researchers, scientists) in late 2021 to identify methods to protect fishery catches from depredation. The top two or three catch protection design outcomes from the workshop will be incorporated into functional prototypes and field tested in 2022 on longline sea trials targeting flatfish. A full description of this project is included in paper [IPHC-2021-RAB022-12](#).

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the RAB **NOTE** IPHC-2021-RAB022-08, which outlined the research projects proposed by the IPHC Secretariat to the Commission and provided an overview of the 5-year research program (2017-21).

APPENDICES

- Appendix I:** Integration of ongoing biological research activities, stock assessment and management strategy evaluation.
- Appendix II:** List of ranked biological uncertainties and parameters for stock assessment and their links to potential research areas and research activities (2017-21)
- Appendix III:** List of ranked biological uncertainties and parameters for management strategy evaluation and their potential links to research areas and research activities (2017-21)
- Appendix IV:** Summary of awarded research grants current in 2021



APPENDIX I

Integration of ongoing biological research activities, stock assessment and management strategy evaluation

Research areas	Research activities	Research outcomes	Relevance for stock assessment	Relevance for MSE	Specific analysis input	SA Rank (Top 3)	MSE Rank (Top 3)
Migration	Larval and juvenile connectivity and early life history studies	Improved understanding of larval and juvenile distribution	Improve estimates of productivity	Improve parametrization of the Operating Model	Will be used to generate potential recruitment covariates and to inform minimum spawning biomass targets by Biological Region	3. Biological input	1. Biological parameterization and validation of movement estimates
Reproduction	Histological maturity assessment	Updated maturity schedule	Scale biomass and reference point estimates	Improve simulation of spawning biomass in the Operating Model	Will be included in the stock assessment, replacing the current schedule last updated in 2006	1. Biological input	2. Biological parameterization and validation of recruitment variability and distribution
	Examination of potential skip spawning	Incidence of skip spawning			Will be used to adjust the asymptote of the maturity schedule, if/when a time-series is available this will be used as a direct input to the stock assessment		
	Fecundity assessment	Fecundity-at-age and -size information			Will be used to move from spawning biomass to egg-output as the metric of reproductive capability in the stock assessment and management reference points		
	Examination of accuracy of current field macroscopic maturity classification	Revised field maturity classification	Scale biomass and fishing intensity		Revised time-series of historical (and future) maturity for input to the stock assessment	1. Assessment data collection and processing	
	Sex ratio of current commercial landings	Sex ratio-at-age			Annual sex-ratio at age for the commercial fishery fit by the stock assessment		
	Historical sex ratios based on archived otolith DNA analyses	Historical sex ratio-at-age	Annual sex-ratio at age for the commercial fishery fit by the stock assessment				
Recruitment strength and variability	Establishment of temporal and spatial maturity and spawning patterns	Improve stock-recruitment curve for more precise assessment	Improve simulation of recruitment variability and parametrization of recruitment distribution in the Operating Model	May be used to provide a weighted spawning biomass calculation and or inform targets for minimum spawning biomass by Biological Region			
Growth	Evaluation of somatic growth variation as a driver for changes in size-at-age	Identification and application of markers for growth pattern evaluation	Scale stock productivity and reference point estimates	Improve simulation of variability and allow for scenarios investigating climate change	May inform yield-per-recruit and other spatial evaluations of productivity that support mortality limit-setting		3. Biological parameterization and validation for growth projections
		Environmental influences on growth patterns			May provide covariates for projecting short-term size-at-age. May help to delineate between effects due to fishing and those due to environment, thereby informing appropriate management response		
Mortality and survival assessment	Discard mortality rate estimate: longline fishery	Experimentally-derived DMR	Improve trends in unobserved mortality	Improve estimates of stock productivity	Will improve estimates of discard mortality, reducing potential bias in stock assessment results and management of mortality limits	1. Fishery parameterization	
	Discard mortality rate estimate: recreational fishery				Will improve estimates of discard mortality, reducing potential bias in stock assessment results and management of mortality limits		
	Best handling practices: longline fishery	Guidelines for reducing discard mortality			May reduce discard mortality, thereby increasing available yield for directed fisheries		
	Best handling practices: recreational fishery	Guidelines for reducing discard mortality			May reduce discard mortality, thereby increasing available yield for directed fisheries		
Genetics and genomics	Population structure	Stock structure of IPHC Regulatory Area 4B relative to the rest of the Convention Area	Altered structure of future stock assessments	Improve parametrization of the Operating Model	If 4B is found to be functionally isolated, a separate assessment may be constructed for that IPHC Regulatory Area	2. Biological input	1. Biological parameterization and validation of movement estimates.
	Distribution	Assignment of individuals to source populations and assessment of distribution changes			Will be used to define management targets for minimum spawning biomass by Biological Region	3. Biological input	2. Biological parameterization and validation of recruitment distribution



APPENDIX II

List of ranked biological uncertainties and parameters for stock assessment and their links to potential research areas and research activities (2017-21)

SA Rank	Research outcomes	Relevance for stock assessment	Specific analysis input	Research Area	Research activities
1. Biological input	Updated maturity schedule	Scale biomass and reference point estimates	Will be included in the stock assessment, replacing the current schedule last updated in 2006	Reproduction	Historical maturity assessment
	Incidence of skip spawning		Will be used to adjust the asymptote of the maturity schedule, if/when a time-series is available this will be used as a direct input to the stock assessment		Examination of potential skip spawning
	Fecundity-at-age and -size information		Will be used to move from spawning biomass to egg-output as the metric of reproductive capability in the stock assessment and management reference points		Fecundity assessment
	Revised field maturity classification		Revised time-series of historical (and future) maturity for input to the stock assessment		Examination of accuracy of current field macroscopic maturity classification
2. Biological input	Stock structure of IPHC Regulatory Area 4B relative to the rest of the Convention Area	Altered structure of future stock assessments	If 4B is found to be functionally isolated, a separate assessment may be constructed for that IPHC Regulatory Area	Genetics and Genomics	Population structure
3. Biological input	Assignment of individuals to source populations and assessment of distribution changes	Improve estimates of productivity	Will be used to define management targets for minimum spawning biomass by Biological Region	Migration	Distribution
	Improved understanding of larval and juvenile distribution		Will be used to generate potential recruitment covariates and to inform minimum spawning biomass targets by Biological Region		Larval and juvenile connectivity studies
1. Assessment data collection and processing	Sex ratio-at-age	Scale biomass and fishing intensity	Annual sex-ratio at age for the commercial fishery fit by the stock assessment	Reproduction	Sex ratio of current commercial landings
	Historical sex ratio-at-age		Annual sex-ratio at age for the commercial fishery fit by the stock assessment		Historical sex ratios based on archived otolith DNA analyses
2. Assessment data collection and processing	New tools for fishery avoidance/deterrence; improved estimation of depredation mortality	Improve mortality accounting	May reduce depredation mortality, thereby increasing available yield for directed fisheries. May also be included as another explicit source of mortality in the stock assessment and mortality limit setting process depending on the estimated magnitude	Mortality and survival assessment	Whale depredation accounting and tools for avoidance
1. Fishery yield	Physiological and behavioral responses to fishing gear	Reduce incidental mortality	May increase yield available to directed fisheries	Mortality and survival assessment	Biological interactions with fishing gear
2. Fishery yield	Guidelines for reducing discard mortality	Improve estimates of unobserved mortality	May reduce discard mortality, thereby increasing available yield for directed fisheries	Mortality and survival assessment	Best handling practices: recreational fishery

APPENDIX III

List of ranked biological uncertainties and parameters for management strategy evaluation (MSE) and their potential links to research areas and research activities (2017-21)

MSE Rank	Research outcomes	Relevance for MSE	Research Area	Research activities
1. Biological parameterization and validation of movement estimates	Improved understanding of larval and juvenile distribution	Improve parameterization of the Operating Model	Migration	Larval and juvenile connectivity studies
	Stock structure of IPHC Regulatory Area 4B relative to the rest of the Convention Area			Population structure
2. Biological parameterization and validation of recruitment variability and distribution	Assignment of individuals to source populations and assessment of distribution changes	Improve simulation of recruitment variability and parameterization of recruitment distribution in the Operating Model	Genetics and Genomics	Distribution
	Establishment of temporal and spatial maturity and spawning patterns	Improve simulation of recruitment variability and parameterization of recruitment distribution in the Operating Model	Reproduction	Recruitment strength and variability
3. Biological parameterization and validation for growth projections	Identification and application of markers for growth pattern evaluation	Improve simulation of variability and allow for scenarios investigating climate change	Growth	Evaluation of somatic growth variation as a driver for changes in size-at-age
	Environmental influences on growth patterns			
	Dietary influences on growth patterns and physiological condition			
1. Fishery parameterization	Experimentally-derived DMRs	Improve estimates of stock productivity	Mortality and survival assessment	Discard mortality rate estimate: recreational fishery



APPENDIX IV
Summary of awarded research grants

Project #	Grant agency	Project name	PI	Partners	IPHC Budget (\$US)	Management implications	Grant period
1	National Fish & Wildlife Foundation	Improving the characterization of discard mortality of Pacific halibut in the recreational fisheries (NFWF Award No. 61484)	IPHC Dr J. Planas and Mr Claude Dykstra	Alaska Pacific University, U of A Fairbanks, charter industry	\$98,902	Bycatch estimates	1 April 2019 – 1 November 2021
2	North Pacific Research Board	Pacific halibut discard mortality rates (NPRB Award No. 2009)	IPHC Dr. J. Planas	Alaska Pacific University	\$210,502	Bycatch estimates	1 January 2021 – 31 March 2022
3	Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program-NOAA	Gear-based approaches to catch protection as a means for minimizing whale depredation in longline fisheries (NOAA Award Number NA21NMF4720534)	IPHC Mr. Claude Dykstra and Dr. I. Stewart	Deep Sea Fishermen's Union, Alaska Fisheries Science Center-NOAA, industry representatives	\$99,700	Whale depredation	1 November 2021 – 30 April 2022
4	North Pacific Research Board	Pacific halibut population genomics (NPRB Award No. 2110)	IPHC Dr. J. Planas	Alaska Fisheries Science Center-NOAA	\$193,685	Stock structure	1 February 2022 – 31 January 2024
Total awarded (\$)					\$602,789		