

2010 Research Advisory Board (RAB) Meeting IPHC Offices, Seattle WA

17 November, 2010

RAB members: David Beggs, Tony Blore, Dave Boyes, Art Davidson, Lu Dochtermann, Jay Hebert, Jim Hubbard, Brad Mirau, Rob Wurm. . Regrets: John Woodruff, Richie Shaw

IPHC staff: Bruce Leaman, Joan Forsberg, Robert Tobin, Steve Wischniowski, Gregg Williams, Heather Gilroy, Claude Dykstra, Tim Loher, Eric Soderlund, Ray Webster, Kirsten MacTavish, Huyen Tran, Juan Valero, Aregash Tesfatsion, Lara Erikson, Evangeline White, Lauri Sadorus, Tracee Geernaert, Steve Kaimmer.

Review of issues from previous meetings

- 1) Whale depredation – The discussion began with a question about last year’s minutes, that they reflected a support for killing whales. Bruce commented that was certainly not the staff’s nor RAB’s intention. The issue of depredation has been discussed at the PHMA meetings on a regular basis but they have not come up with any viable ideas. One idea to better track the conflict would be to use a company such as SeaState, which takes individual reports from vessels and assembles them into a comprehensive real-time report which can be immediately distributed back to the fleet. Staff agreed to provide SeaState contact information to Beggs for follow-up. Rob Wurm suggested more outreach is needed re: the impact of depredation on survey and commercial catches on the assessment, in particular noting that the assessment does ‘see’ depredation mortality. Posting a short discussion item on the IPHC web site was suggested as one idea. Jim Hubbard noted that ALFA is doing some marine mammal tracking for its membership. The ‘flossing’ behavior used by sperm whales was described and Hubbard mentioned that 40% of the sablefish on his gear had fresh sore-mouths. He questions just how much of the fish that whales are ‘flossing’ from the gear is actually consumed by the whales. Also, Jim described how they inadvertently discovered that the use of a small skiff to photograph his vessel while hauling also appeared to distract whales from harassing his gear.
- 2) Area 2B changes in fishing distribution pre/post Integration program – This is a follow up to a presentation made by staff at last year’s RAB meeting. Dave Boyes thinks that fishers have moved back to a pre-2006 distribution, having gotten accustomed to the quota requirements. In the first few years of the Integration program, harvesters were fishing in deeper waters to avoid rockfish. Interpretation of behavior changes is confounded by the declines in halibut catch limit, the ease of catching the quota, and the stability of rockfish quotas. This was confirmed by the data extracted by staff.
- 3) Area 4 fishing – Lu Dochtermann commented on his recent poor fishing in Area 4A and 4D. He is very concerned – “It’s a nightmare out there!”
- 4) Pus pockets – This was another item from last year’s RAB meeting, as it was a common occurrence for some fishers. Brad said it’s virtually disappeared this year, having only one reported incident. Tony Blore said it was a non-issue for him and couldn’t find any on fish from which to collect samples. Art noted that he saw three consecutive fish come up on his gear with pus pockets this year, but that was all.

- 5) Wind turbines (BC) – The wind farm planned for Hecate Strait may be on hold. Beggs noted that the initial support from the Charlottes may not be as widespread as believed. This may be because the planned transmission line to the Charlottes was dropped from the plans. It is believed the Council of the Haida Nation has a vested corporate interest in the wind farm project.
- 6) Removal experiment & fine-scale movement – Staff has not pursued this line of research any further.
- 7) Consumer education on chalky fish (HANA) – Tony noted that this has been brought up at HANA meetings, and it has been met with varying degrees of concern with regards to marketing. On the one hand, it may be best to ‘let sleeping dogs lie’, as it could do more harm than good to raise this to the consumer. Most agreed that chalk has been loosely incorporated into the current pricing structure. The HANA web site has some information on chalk, as does the IPHC web site. Brad Mirau noted that he has never had a claim for chalky fish from frozen at-sea halibut; Bruce followed up by explaining that chalk is an enzyme-driven process which is suspended by freezing. While the process begins when the product is thawed, it is usually in the consumer’s stomach before the fish becomes chalky.
- 8) Staff evaluation of size limit changes – Bruce noted that Steven did a comprehensive analysis of this topic last year, which can be found in the RARA. Tony thought the consumer wouldn’t pay a standard halibut price for a piece of fish off a 26-32” halibut. The discussion moved into concerns about bycatch of small halibut and observer coverage. Beggs voiced his concern that if the size limit dropped there would be a significant increase in high-grading of fish and would result in a massive price differential on the market side of things.
- 9) Assessment survey design – will discuss later in the meeting.

New issues raised by RAB members

- Dave Boyes – The 2010 fishery in 2B appeared very successful, with the fish being much bigger than before; he wants to know where the fish came from. Bruce noted that the Commission has been moving to lower exploitation rates in 2B, which hopefully is helping the stock status both in terms of survival and growth. David also wondered about the implications of higher fuel costs on fishing. This may serve to change fishing patterns, i.e., distribution of the fleet. Art also noted the fish seemed bigger this year and he keeps trying to avoid them during his blackcod fishing. Dave commented that the ocean “seemed alive again”, at least in Hecate Strait. Dave also feels that it is difficult to work with so many different conservation agencies as there is tension between the different options an agency or a group of agencies takes, e.g. MPAs, SARA, etc. These agencies and their requirements tend to force more intense fishing on the unprotected areas – he thinks these kinds of concerns should be raised at the management level.
- Brad Mirau – Concerned about the bycatch of rockfish in the halibut fishery and how it could end up being a controlling factor in how the harvest of halibut is pursued. He is not convinced that DFO has a proper handle on rockfish numbers and stated that any info or data that IPHC collects on rockfish would be useful. Claude reviewed the monitoring of rockfish bycatch on the assessment survey.
- Jay Hebert – Jay feels the IPHC survey in the Bering Sea is too static for a dynamic species such as halibut. It needs to be far more adaptable/flexible in order to monitor the change in the stock, i.e., the survey should be modified. He also wondered about the effect of trawl bycatch on the number of recruits. Also, with the whale depredation in the Bering Sea, he feels that pot gear should be looked at more closely as an alternative allowable gear. Killer whales have been observed to be biting the webbing out of pots to get at the fish, but it’s not known how widespread this behavior is. Jay believes it is rare.

- Jim Hubbard – His concern is about the catch of rockfish by the halibut fishery, and the likelihood that it could somehow restrict or curtail halibut fishing. He would like to put pressure to raise the rockfish bycatch limits as he is seeing yelloweye stocks that aren't being fished at all. He finds it sad that fishing is no longer based on target species but on species nobody wants, i.e., noncommercial species.
- David Beggs – The staff seems to be working on the issues he thinks are relevant. Depredation is still a big concern for him, and he supports additional outreach. He would like more documentation on whale interactions from the survey and where the depredation is taking place. He would also like more documentation on halibut bycatch, i.e. the methods and the numbers behind the numbers. Staff agreed to send out a background document on bycatch estimation that was prepared several years ago but which describes the methods of estimation currently used. The last item he mentioned was pursuing a catchability experiment – a discussion on this ensued.
- Rob Wurm – Rob was wondering if the appearance of larger fish in 2B has anything to do with the lack of large fish in 3B. He voiced concerns that overfishing might be a possible cause for the decreased numbers of fish in 3B. It was suggested that it might also be a direct result of decreased growth rates.
- Tony Blore – He would also like to see more outreach in educating fishermen on how mortality from whale depredation is accounted for in the stock assessment. He also suggested that putting profilers on commercial vessels at different times of the year would provide a more comprehensive picture of different oceanographic elements year round rather than just the snapshot we get from the survey. Bruce explained that such deployments were considered in prior funding requests but they proved too expensive to implement in a systematic manner.
- Lou – reiterated how poor the fishing was in 3B and 4D. He wonders if the survey numbers are correct and if the catch limit needs to decrease to bring back the biomass as it was in previous decades.

Staff research in 2010

Staff briefly reviewed several notable research projects conducted in 2010, e.g., POST, archival tagging, profiler deployments, and the EM study conducted in the AK halibut fishery.

IPHC research proposed for 2011

Bruce and the staff reviewed several projects being proposed for 2011. The RAB was asked for their views and opinions.

- 1) Survey expansion – Beggs suggested that a committee be formed comprised of fishermen that fish the different areas extensively. For areas that aren't fished, a little prospecting might have to be done. He suggested that to make setting of gear in the expanded areas repeatable, the depths used should be the same as the depths where one would set in bad weather.

Some criteria that were discussed for the different areas were:

Deeper Waters	Skippers need to have the expertise;
	More weight is needed on the groundline even if weighted groundline is already used;
	Form a committee from the Conference Board and get volunteers for the different 'new, expanded' areas;
	Some of the current survey boats already have experience fishing deeper waters in 4A and 4B (F/V Kema Sue, F/V Pacific Sun, and F/V Clyde).

Shallow Waters

No need to go inside 10 fathoms;
Around St. Matthew Island, Lou mentioned that halibut are found all along the shallow beaches in about 10-12 fathoms.

- 2) Bait study – With IPHC being priced out of the standard #2 chum salmon, alternatives need to be examined. Several RAB members mentioned they use squid and pink salmon. The area of origin of the squid is very important, as some Atlantic species are not as good to use as AK or South American. Using local squid was considered the best idea. Hebert mentioned that squid could be pricey in 2011, and that he uses pollock. Beggs said that herring and squid don't work well with increasing depth, and that herring doesn't stay on the hook very well or for very long. Several variables to consider are high/low halibut catch rates, big/small halibut, and bycatch species.
- 3) Productivity – Bruce reviewed the idea presented to him by Sig Mathisen (Petersburg) that Area 2C is more 'productive' than other areas because of the lack of trawling. How would one test productivity, or measure it? A discussion ensued in which the meaning of productivity was debated, i.e., the productivity of recruits or growth of fish once recruited, etc.?

Closing Comments

Various comments were made in closing, which seemed to focus on season dates: a later opening date (mid-March), an earlier closing date (Nov. 1), a staff preference for an April 1 opening date. At this point, Art mentioned that in 2010, with a March 6 opening, he checked all his halibut and they had all spawned out. However, he did not check this in previous years. Lou mentioned that all the males were ripe on his last two Bering Sea trips in November.