



# Backgrounder: Pacific Halibut

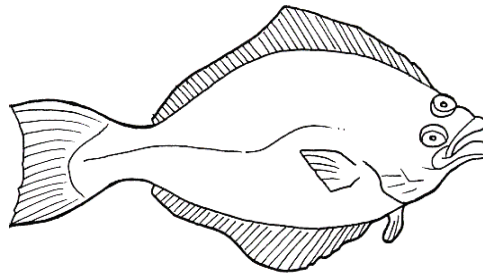
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## The Fish

Pacific halibut (*Hippoglossus stenolepis*) are large flatfish found on the continental shelf from California to the Bering Sea. Halibut have flat, diamond-shaped bodies, can weigh up to 500-700 pounds, and can grow to nine feet long.

## Reproduction

Halibut migrate long distances from shallow summer feeding grounds to deeper winter spawning grounds. The number of eggs they lay depends on the female's size. A 50-pound female can produce about 500,000 eggs, while a female over 250 pounds can produce four million eggs. The eggs float freely and drift in deep ocean currents. They hatch after 12-15 days, and the larvae drift to shallow waters on the continental shelf. Larvae begin life in an upright position with eyes on both sides of their head. When they are about an inch long, the left eye migrates over the snout to the right side of the head, and the color of the left side fades. When the young fish are about six months old, they settle to the sea floor, where the protective coloring on their "eyed" side effectively camouflages them. Female halibut mature at around 12 years, while males mature at around 8 years. Adult fish tend to remain in the same area year after year, except for their migration to deepwater spawning grounds. The oldest halibut on record was 55 years old.



## Prey and feeding

Larval halibut feed on plankton, while adults are carnivorous. Adult halibut prey on cod, pollock, sablefish, rockfish, turbot, sculpins, other flatfish, sand lance, herring, octopus, crabs, clams, and occasionally smaller halibut. Halibut are sometimes eaten by marine mammals, but are rarely preyed upon by other fish.

## The Management Context

Halibut have been fished for hundreds of years by native Americans on the West Coast of the U.S. The U.S. commercial fishery started in 1888, when halibut were first landed in Tacoma, Washington.

Because halibut can be kept for a long time without spoiling, they soon became a popular target for commercial harvesters.

In the 1890s, a fleet of sailing vessels with two-man dories fished for halibut from the West Coast. Large steam-powered vessels soon entered the industry, and by the 1910s it became clear that halibut stocks were suffering from overfishing. In 1923 the U.S. and Canada signed a convention on halibut, leading to the eventual creation of the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC). In 1924 the Commission implemented a three-month closure - the first management action to affect halibut. In 1979, Canada implemented a limited entry system and an individual fishing quota (IFQ) system for the

halibut fishery. Alaska implemented an IFQ system in 1995. The same year, non-tribal commercial fishers in Oregon, Washington, and California had to make a choice: participate in the sport charter industry for halibut, the commercial directed fishery, or the halibut incidental fishery in the salmon troll fishery. Today, the U.S. West Coast non-Indian commercial directed halibut fishery uses a derby fishery system of 10-hour seasons and fishing period limits. Total catch is set up by the IPHC, but the Council allocates portions of the halibut catch to the following user groups:

- Commercial non-Indian
  - Incidental salmon troll
  - Directed longline halibut fishery
  - Incidental longline sablefish fishery
- Sport
- Treaty Indian commercial and ceremonial & subsistence

Each year the IPHC estimates abundance and potential yield of the Pacific halibut stock using commercial fishery data and scientific surveys. The exploitable biomass (the portion of the stock that may be taken) in Areas 2B (off British Columbia), 2C (off southern Alaska) and 3A (off central Alaska) is estimated by fitting a detailed population model to the data from that area. A biological target level for total removals is then calculated by applying a fixed harvest rate (20%) to the estimate for exploitable biomass. The target level for directed setline catches is calculated by subtracting estimates for all other removals - sport catches, bycatch of legal-sized fish, wastage of legal-sized fish in the halibut fishery, and fish taken for personal use. The exploitable biomass for areas other than 2B, 2C and 3A are calculated based on relative bottom areas and average catch-per-unit-effort in recent surveys. For example,



the Area 2A exploitable biomass for 2002 was estimated at 14% of the Area 2B exploitable biomass.

## The Fishery and Gear

The commercial halibut fishery on the West Coast was pioneered by fishers of Norwegian ancestry, many of whom had fished halibut in Norway. Many Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders have also participated in the West Coast halibut fishery.

Halibut are one of the most valuable fish species in the northern Pacific. Longlining is the main commercial gear used to target halibut, although some allowance for incidental catch in the commercial salmon troll fishery. In 2002, about 98 million pounds of halibut were removed from the population through directed and incidental catch.

Halibut is also a very popular target for sportfishers. Oregon, Washington, and California have catch limits for recreational halibut fishing, as with commercial and tribal halibut fishing. The demand for halibut sport fishing is so high that closed seasons, bag limits, and possession limits, are all used to control the recreational fishery and extend the season as long as possible.

Pacific halibut fishing is an important part of several tribal cultures, and many tribal members participate in commercial, ceremonial and subsistence fisheries. In 1995,

the U.S. prohibited directed non-treaty commercial fishing north of Pt. Chehalis, Washington in order to allow the tribes to harvest their allocation of halibut.

## Halibut catch sharing plan

The Halibut Catch Sharing Plan is a framework that dictates how the IPHC will divide the total allowable catch (TAC) for Oregon, Washington, and

California halibut fisheries (Area 2A). This TAC is set each January by the IPhC. Allocations between some recreational areas are subject to inseason and other changes. For a description of how the halibut harvest is shared, see the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan at <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Groundfish-Halibut/Pacific-Halibut/>.

Each year the Council solicits proposed changes to the Catch Sharing Plan for its September meeting and takes comments on proposed changes between its September and November meetings. The Council then makes final recommendations for changes at its November meeting. The proposed changes are described in the Council Newsletter and in the September Decision document. If you would like to propose a change or comment on proposed changes, you can submit comments by mail, fax, or email, marked to the attention of Chuck Tracy, Pacific halibut staff officer.

## How Do I Get Involved?

- Contact the staff officer for Pacific halibut: Chuck Tracy (Chuck.Tracy@noaa.gov) phone (503) 820-2280 ext. 415 or toll free 1-866-806-7204.
- Read the Council newsletter on the Council website ([www.pcouncil.org](http://www.pcouncil.org)).
- Read the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan on the NMFS website (address at left)
- Comment via email, mail, or at a Council meeting.
- Visit the IPhC website (<http://www.iphc.washington.edu/halcom/>)

## Regulations

- NMFS Area 2A Halibut Hotline (for sport fishing): 1-800-662-9825, press 5
- Commercial catch information is available at <http://www.iphc.washington.edu/halcom/>