

## REPORT ON THE 2016 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) held their annual meeting in Juneau, Alaska, on January 25-29, 2016. This report is intended to summarize major points of interest to the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) regarding halibut management. Overall, the Area 2A halibut resource is healthy and growing in abundance. The 2016 2A quota of 1.14 million pounds is an improvement from 970,000 pounds in 2015. All of the fishery-dependent and fishery-independent data were higher in 2015 than 2014, although year-to-year variability in these indices was noted. The reduction of Pacific halibut bycatch in the West Coast trawl fishery through the implementation of bycatch quota continues to be applauded and is contributing to higher directed fishery allocations in 2A.

### **2A Representation**

Area 2A was represented on the Conference Board by 8 treaty Indian Tribes from the Pacific Northwest, the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, and stakeholders from California port areas and sport fishing organizations. In addition, several members of 2A's fixed gear fleet and processing sector were present. There was a notable absence of stakeholders from Washington and Oregon. Agency representatives from the states of California, Oregon, and Washington provided reports on state sport fisheries and enforcement activities.

### **IPHC Changes and Process**

There were changes in the individuals representing the United States on the Commission. Bob Alverson was recently reappointed; however, Donald Lane from Alaska was replaced by Jeff Kaufmann who also is from Alaska. From a process perspective, this was the fourth year of implementing an improved process that provided more opportunity for public input and public sessions with the Commission and web casting. This continued to be a great improvement and provided increased transparency to the decision-making process.

This was also the last meeting of the IPHC with their long-standing executive director Dr. Bruce Leaman. Bruce has been a longtime friend of the PFMC and we had a chance to wish him well.

### **Stock Assessment**

Creating robust, stable, and well-performing stock assessment models for the Pacific halibut stock has historically proven problematic due to the highly dynamic nature of the biology, distribution, and fisheries. The stock assessment process has evolved through many different modeling approaches over the last 30 years. Although recent modeling efforts have created some new alternatives, no single model satisfactorily approximates all aspects of the available data and scientific understanding. In 2014, an ensemble of four stock assessment models representing a two-way cross of short vs. long time series and aggregated coastwide vs. Areas-As-Fleets models was used to explore the range of plausible current stock estimates. The ensemble approach recognizes that there is no perfect assessment model and that robust risk assessment can be best achieved via the inclusion of multiple models in the estimation of management quantities and the uncertainty about these quantities. The four models were implemented using the stock synthesis

software, a widely used modeling platform developed at the National Marine Fisheries Service (Methot and Wetzel 2013).

Comparison with previous assessments indicates that the estimates of spawning biomass from the 2015 ensemble are very similar to those from 2012-2014. Future expansion of the ensemble approach will continue to improve uncertainty in the estimates, and create assessment results that are robust to changes in individual models, data sets, and other sources of historical changes in stock assessment results from year to year. The overall spawning stock biomass increased from 209.3 mt in 2015 to 219 mt in 2016. For Area 2A, both the weight per unit effort and the net per unit effort values were up 36 percent and 45 percent, respectively. There are also indications that the stock biomass has shifted east resulting in a higher abundance of halibut in Southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and the West Coast. The "Blue Line" area-specific values reported by staff support increases in Area 2A harvest quotas for 2016.

### **Harvest Levels**

The 2A representatives worked well together throughout the week and sought to take consensus positions on harvest quota recommendations. Our delegation considered all of the scientific information available in addition to the behavior of our respective 2015 fisheries. We considered the blue line value for 2A of 1.020 million pounds contained in the staff documents along with status quo values and alternative values based on harvest rates and spawning potential ratio rates. The "blue line" values reflect the IPHC's current harvest policy that includes fishery constant exploitation yield (FCEY; the amount of allowable harvest) resulting from the current harvest rate policy (i.e., 21.5 percent harvest rate for areas 2A-3A and 16.1 percent in areas 3B-4CDE; 19.7 percent coastwide) applied to the estimated biomass. Based on those considerations, the 2A representatives on the Conference Board (CB) recommended a FCEY for 2A of 1.33 million pounds. That value compares to a 2015 FCEY of 970,000 pounds. Both the CB and the Processor Advisory Group (PAG) developed their FCEY recommendations starting with the "blue line" harvest levels and then made adjustments to specific areas based on the technical data provided by IPHC staff, including a risk assessment analysis and their own expertise. Full PAG and CB reports can be found online at <http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting/documents.html>

On January 29, IPHC approved an FCEY of 1.14 million pounds for Area 2A. The Commission selected this value based on the desire to maintain the same spawning potential ratio as realized in 2015. The resulting sub-area quotas applicable to the PFMC's Catch Sharing Plan are displayed Agenda Item H.1, Attachment 1.

PFMC  
02/09/16