

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2017 ANNUAL REGULATIONS

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) met with recreational halibut anglers on September 1, and October 11, 2016. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss proposed changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for 2017, and refine the proposals adopted for public review at the September PFMC meeting.

We recommend the following changes to the Pacific halibut CSP for 2017, section (f) SPORT FISHERIES. These changes are consistent with those adopted by the Council for public review.

1. Statewide Season Dates:

Revise the CSP language for the all of the Washington subareas, except the Columbia River subarea, to have consistent season dates that are established through an annual public process to gather public input and provide recommendations to NMFS. The season setting process and season structure would be guided by the following principles:

- Seasons would be developed by the end of November each year for the following year
- Seasons would open in early May while still providing a few days of offshore bottomfish fishing opportunity prior to the halibut season
- Provide up to two days per week—one weekday and one weekend day—with a minimum of two closed days between open days
- Schedule periodic “management closures” to assess the remaining quota for each subarea
- If sufficient quota remains, then follow the season structure described below for additional openings

Based on the input we received from all subareas, WDFW recommends the Council adopt the following season dates for the South Coast, North Coast, and Puget Sound subareas for 2017:

- Saturday, May 6; Tuesday May 9; and Saturday, May 13.

If sufficient quota remains, the seasons would continue as follows:

- Sunday, May 21; Tuesday, May 23; Sunday June 4; and Tuesday, June 6

Rationale: The intent of the changes is for anglers to choose where they want to fish for halibut, rather than fishing in multiple areas under a season structure where season dates are staggered. The changes are necessary to increase flexibility, address increased fishing effort and shorter fishing seasons, and maximize stakeholder input and help set season dates that provide meaningful opportunity.

While the majority of stakeholders support the concept of consistent season dates and see the idea as a positive change, the majority of the discussion during the public review process focused on the pros and cons of the one weekend day being a Saturday or a Sunday. There is a long

history of the North Coast season being open on Thursdays and Saturdays while the South Coast seasons have been open on Sundays and Tuesdays. In addition, the Puget Sound region has been open on weekends with several consecutive days open in recent years, and some advocated for consecutive days or every other day-type seasons. In addition to the historical perspective, there are differences in the logistics of getting to and from the ports, which are located in more remote areas of the state. While none of the subareas are getting their ideal seasons, the proposed season dates for 2017 reflect significant compromises for charter boat operators and anglers from all three subareas.

2. Manage the Puget Sound Subarea through inseason quota monitoring:

Revise the CSP language to reflect changes to the WDFW sampling approach for the Puget Sound region that will allow for inseason quota monitoring.

Rationale: Beginning in 2017, the WDFW Puget Sound Sampling Program will begin an intensive sampling program in the Puget Sound region, similar to what is in place in the coastal region. Through this sampling approach, halibut catch and effort will be available on a weekly basis. Inseason quota management will improve WDFW's ability to track catch and recommend season closures upon projected quota attainment and will allow the Puget Sound season structure to be established during the Council process to consider changes to the CSP similar to other Washington subareas. Changes to the CSP language are necessary to reflect these changes.

3. Allow the retention of lingcod on halibut trips in the Columbia River Subarea:

Revise bottomfish restrictions to allow lingcod retention on halibut days during the month of May in the Columbia River subarea north of the Washington-Oregon border.

Rationale: This change would attract anglers to fish for halibut out of Ilwaco and would create a recreational opportunity that is comparable to other Washington management areas where lingcod retention on halibut trips is already allowed. Input from stakeholders indicated their preference for allowing lingcod retention on a limited basis as a first step. Discussions during the public review process identified a few issues associated with monitoring lingcod catch against a subarea-specific quota, the ability for WDFW to take inseason action absent a lingcod conservation concern, and the timeliness of such an action. Therefore, the preferred approach to limiting lingcod catches on halibut trips for 2017 is to allow lingcod retention on halibut days only during the month of May.

Restricting lingcod retention to the area north of the Washington-Oregon border would alleviate concerns with increased encounters with yelloweye rockfish in the halibut fishery adjacent to Oregon. Restricting the time period when lingcod can be retained in waters adjacent to Washington would provide some indication on the potential for lingcod targeting and increased encounters with yelloweye.

4. Proposed Changes to the South Coast Subarea:

Revise the CSP language for the South Coast subarea to specify that the nearshore area will open on the Saturday after the quota for the primary season has been achieved.

Rationale: A portion of the South Coast subarea allocation is set aside to allow for incidental halibut retention when halibut are caught in the nearshore area while anglers are targeting bottomfish. Currently, the nearshore fishery is open seven days per week and opens concurrently with the primary fishery. In recent years, the nearshore incidental opportunity has shifted to more of a targeted fishing opportunity on days the when the primary season is not open which has resulted in early attainment of the nearshore set aside. This change would open the nearshore fishery after the primary season to preserve the original intent of the nearshore fishery as an incidental allowance during the bottomfish fishery. Stakeholder input during the public review process indicated a preference for having a specified day that the nearshore fishery would open. Given the quota management nature of the halibut fishery and uncertainties due to weather and fishing success, it would be difficult to identify a specific date when the primary fishery would close and the nearshore fishery might open. Revising the season structure to specify that the nearshore fishery would open on the Saturday after the primary season is over would provide a degree of predictability as to when the nearshore fishery would open and would allow sufficient time for catch accounting following the primary fishery to determine the amount of quota remaining for the nearshore fishery.