

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN FOR THE 2012 FISHERY

The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) reviewed recreational fishery data on Pacific halibut in California in consideration of possible changes to the catch sharing plan for the 2012 fishery. The following report summarizes the recreational fishery for Pacific halibut in California, California Recreational Fisheries Survey (CRFS) data and methods, and CDFG's understanding of the south of Humbug Mountain allocation based on the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) stock assessment.

The Recreational Fishery in California

The recreational fishery for Pacific halibut is currently open from May through October, and generally operates offshore in deeper depths (~200 ft). The primary effort in this fishery occurs in Humboldt County and a small amount occurs in Del Norte and Mendocino counties. In California, fishing activity for Pacific halibut cannot co-occur with groundfish fishing because state and federal regulations (fishery depth constraints, transit and fish onboard provisions) do not authorize take or retention of groundfish at these depths during the open groundfish seasons in northern California. However, anglers can target Pacific halibut first, and then move to shallower waters and fish for groundfish. Alternatively, anglers can target both salmon and Pacific halibut in the same fishing areas, though when targeting Pacific halibut, anglers use gear specifically selected for such a purpose.

CRFS Data and Methods

The Pacific halibut fishery is routinely sampled during the open season from May 1- October 31 as part of the state's comprehensive CRFS sampling efforts. About 80-90 percent of the sampled Pacific halibut catch is taken by anglers fishing on private boats, with the remainder taken by anglers fishing on commercial passenger fishing vessels (CPFVs)¹.

In Humboldt, Del Norte and Mendocino counties, approximately 20 percent of the private boat trips originating from launch ramps are sampled per month. CDFG has high confidence in the CRFS sample data because of these high coverage rates, and because Pacific halibut is a unique species easily identified by both samplers and anglers.

Based on data from 2004 to 2010, the number of Pacific halibut caught off California appears to have increased in recent years. The number of Pacific halibut examined by CRFS samplers has increased (Table 1), the number of anglers reporting Pacific halibut as their primary target during CRFS field sampling has increased (Table 1), CPFV log book data show a trend of increased catches, and anecdotal information also suggests that interest in targeting Pacific halibut has expanded in recent years, possibly due to reduced opportunities for groundfish and salmon.

¹ CPFVs targeting Pacific halibut are required to carry a permit issued by the IPHC; however there is no requirement to submit catch information to IPHC.

Table 1. Number of examined Pacific halibut and number of anglers reporting Pacific halibut as their primary target in California from 2004 to 2010 (CRFS data extracts).

Year	Pacific Halibut Examined by CRFS Samplers	Anglers Reporting Pacific Halibut as Primary Target
2004	3	12
2005	10	45
2006	65	180
2007	91	153
2008	236	576
2009	459	1,167
2010	247	616

Although catches have increased in recent years, CDFG recognizes that any total catch estimate provided by the state could significantly influence catch sharing discussions this year and in future years if California catches are to be considered in the mix. CDFG’s initial review of the available data suggests that more work is needed to resolve questions surrounding effort estimates and expansions, length/weight conversions, and other data-related factors that might influence the outcome of a total recreational catch estimate before finalizing our estimation methodology for this species.

IPHC Stock Assessment – Area 2A and PFMC Catch Sharing Plan (CSP)

The IPHC setline survey does not extend into California waters (i.e., south of 42° N latitude); therefore the quantity and quality of California data informing the assessment and the Area 2A allocation is unknown².

It is CDFG’s understanding that annual CSPs were developed beginning in 1988 and a long-term catch sharing plan was recommended by PFMC and implemented by NMFS in 1995. At this time, CDFG has not been able to ascertain what data was used to inform the current CSP and in particular, the allocation south of Humbug Mountain.

Role of California Recreational Catches in Overall Pacific Halibut Management

Recreational catches for Pacific halibut in California have been treated equivalent to an “off-the-top” incidental set-aside in the groundfish fishery. Neither IPHC nor the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) has ever requested that CDFG provide its estimate of recreational Pacific halibut catch for purposes of catch tracking or for management. Of note, the only previous management interest in California’s recreational fishery was in 2005 when it was requested that the season be extended by one month and the size limit removed, for consistency with other regulations on Pacific halibut beyond California.

Additionally, CDFG does not have any information from the IPHC indicating an intention that the recreational allocation south of Humbug Mountain was to be treated as a hard cap on landings. The IPHC public comment letter submitted in September 2011 (Agenda Item I.1.b,

² CDFG staff attempted to contact the stock assessment author and other IPHC staff to better understand how California’s contribution to Area 2A is calculated. IPHC responded that it would be providing follow-up information to the PFMC.

IPHC Report) also does not provide any additional clarification or explicit detail on how to treat the allocation south of Humbug Mountain.

As recreational management for Pacific halibut off California has never been impacted by the catch sharing plan, CDFG has not participated in any discussions with NMFS or other states, nor held public meetings to solicit input from stakeholders regarding the current catch sharing plan.

Future Steps

CDFG has plans in place to improve data collection and tabulation methodologies in 2012 to enhance our ability to estimate the number of trips where Pacific halibut are specifically targeted. In addition, CDFG will continue to have further discussions with IPHC, NMFS, other states, and California constituents to help inform future management of Pacific halibut.

Recommendation:

CDFG recommends maintaining the status quo catch sharing plan for the 2012 fishery based on the following:

- CDFG has not finalized its estimate of recreational Pacific halibut catch in California.
- Data used to inform the stock assessment and the allocation south of Humbug Mountain needs to be more thoroughly investigated to ensure that it is appropriate, accurate, and valid before it is used for management in the California recreational fishery.
- CDFG has never been formally asked to provide catch estimates for management purposes or for total catch accounting by any agency.
- There is no documentation from IPHC outlining the explicit treatment of the allocation south of Humbug Mountain and whether it should be treated as a hard cap.