GROUNDFISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON PRELIMINARY ALTERNATIVES FOR INCIDENTAL CATCH RETENTION OF PACIFIC HALIBUT IN THE LIMITED ENTRY AND OPEN ACCESS FIXED GEAR SABLEFISH FISHERIES

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) reviewed the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) report (Agenda Item F.3.b, ODFW Report), and received a briefing by ODFW staff and offers the following comments and considerations.

Considerations of the Purpose and the Need
This subject was initiated in response to an industry request to transfer 5% of the non-tribal directed Pacific halibut (halibut) fishery quota to allow for incidental halibut retention in the limited entry (LE) sablefish primary fishery, LE sablefish daily trip limit (DTL) fishery, and open access (OA) sablefish DTL fishery in the area between 40°10’ N. lat. and Point Chehalis (46°53.30’ N. lat.), Washington.

The purpose and need is based on the management/policy objectives, legal requirements, and other evaluation criteria and factors that are important to the decision-makers. These factors include the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) significant impact to the human environment, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP), International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) regulations, and the Area 2A Halibut Catch Sharing Plan (CSP).

The ODFW report states that at least part of the purpose is to utilize the available halibut resource in a more economically efficient manner. As the directed fishery has been reduced to only a couple of days in recent years (one ten-hour opening in 2010), there may be a need to consider changes in how the non-tribal directed halibut fishery quota is allocated. Industry may be able to provide more information concerning at what level of halibut quota (and associated season length and trip limits) it is no longer economically viable to participate in the directed fishery.

A transfer of a portion of the directed fishery halibut quota to the sablefish fishery could benefit other users of the halibut resource by allowing incidentally caught halibut to be converted from discarded halibut into retained halibut. Additional economic benefits could be realized by providing fresh halibut throughout the year rather than in short pulses. However, the benefit to participants in the sablefish fishery may come at the cost to others such as participants in the non-tribal directed halibut fishery or processors that are set up to handle the current derby-style directed fishery (Agenda Item F.3.b ODFW Report, March 2011).

Industry, the Public and the Council may also have other thoughts on purpose and need to develop this action, should it move forward.
Considerations on alternatives
The range of alternatives is designed to compare and contrast options compared to No Action, and the range is developed based on the purpose and need.

The ODFW report provided an initial range of alternatives that includes No Action, an alternative that provides options for transferring a fixed percentage of the directed halibut fishery quota for incidental halibut retention in sablefish fisheries and an alternative that allows for incidental halibut retention when the directed halibut fishery quota is at certain levels.

When considering the alternatives, mentioned in the ODFW report, or any additional alternatives, the Council may wish to consider the following relative to the potential scope of action:

- What areas of the coastal non-trawl sablefish fishery to include in the halibut retention allowance (e.g. the request to go as far south as 36° N. lat.)?
- Individual retention amounts that may prevent targeting (by area or gear adjustments).
- Consideration of different sectors that would be allowed to retain halibut. (E.g., are considerations needed for vessels that are operating under gear-switching provisions to use non-trawl gear to fish their individual fishing quotas?)

The GMT notes that all of the action alternatives may need to consider impacts such as:

- Potential for changes in fishing behavior by the sablefish vessels (e.g., targeting halibut)
- Changes in bycatch of overfished groundfish species caught incidentally in the non-trawl sablefish fisheries. The GMT notes that some information from the incidental retention fishery north of Point Chehalis may be available to help inform potential impacts.
- Potential for changes in the level of participation in the open access sablefish fishery if halibut retention is allowed.
- Changes to data available for the IPHC halibut stock assessment, such as weight per unit effort (WPUE) and age and length data from the directed fishery.

Considerations for content of a NEPA compliant decision document
The Council and its advisory bodies will need input from the NMFS Northwest Region on any other considerations for what should be included in an analysis document.

Considerations for schedule and process expectations
The GMT notes that if this issue moves forward through the Council process, there may be a need for the Council to consider the distribution and magnitude of workload and timing of implementation relative to other actions (including regulatory changes, FMP amendments, the biennial SPEX process, etc.). The Council will also need to consider how this fits in with the timing and content of the CSP.

PFMC
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