

News Release



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Agenda Item G.1.a

Attachment 1

March 2015

February 9, 2015

HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2015 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its 91st Annual Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, on January 30, 2015, with Mr. Paul Ryall presiding as Chair. More than 250 halibut industry stakeholders attended the meeting, with over 75 more participating via the web. All of the Commission's public and administrative sessions during the meeting were open to the public and broadcast on the web.

The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2015 totaling 29,223,000 pounds. The Commission is responding to stock challenges with a risk-based precautionary approach and a review of the current harvest policy to ensure the best possible advice. The Commission also addressed other regulatory issues and took actions regarding assessment survey expansion and bycatch management.

A news release issued January 30, 2015, announced the catch limits and fishing seasons for 2015, and that information is repeated in this news release. Documents and presentations from the Annual Meeting can be found on the Annual Meeting page of the IPHC website:

<http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html>.

Stock Assessment and Harvest Advice

As in 2012 and 2013, this year's stock assessment is based on an ensemble of models incorporating the uncertainty within each model as well as the uncertainty among models. This approach reduces the potential for abrupt changes in management quantities and provides a stronger basis for risk assessment. There were two new additions to this year's ensemble of models: long and short time-series models treating Areas As Fleets (AAF). The AAF approach models the population as a coastwide stock, while allowing for region-specific selectivity and catchability. It is a commonly applied method for dealing with populations showing evidence of spatial structure, but without explicitly modeling recruitment distribution and migration rates among areas. For 2014, the stock assessment ensemble included short and long time-series models based on both the coastwide and the AAF approaches. This combination of models included uncertainty in natural mortality rates, environmental effects on recruitment, and other model parameters.

The assessment indicates that the Pacific halibut stock declined continuously from the late 1990s to around 2010. That trend is estimated to have been a result of decreasing size at age as well as smaller recruitments than those observed through the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, the estimated female spawning biomass appears to have stabilized near 200 million pounds, with flatter trajectories estimated in coastwide models and slightly increasing trends estimated in AAF models.

An executive summary of the 2014 stock assessment is posted on the IPHC website at http://iphc.int/meetings/2014im/02_2014_Assessment_Executive_summary.pdf.

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The complete report of the 2014 stock assessment is available at http://www.iphc.int/publications/rara/2014/rara2014_11stockassessment.pdf.

As it has been since 2013, the 2015 IPHC staff harvest advice was presented in the form of a decision table that estimates the risks to stock and fishery status and trend metrics from different levels of harvest. The final version of the decision table for 2015, incorporating the adopted catch limits, is posted on the IPHC website at <http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html>.

Catch Limits and Seasons

Catch Limits

The Commission received harvest advice for 2015 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies, and recommends to the two governments the following catch limits for 2015:

IPHC Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington)	970,000
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	164,529
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	29,035
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	10,347
Treaty Indian commercial	307,700
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	31,800
Sport – Washington	214,110
Sport – Oregon	187,259
Sport – California	25,220
Area 2B (British Columbia) (includes sport catch allocation)	7,038,000
Area 2C (southeastern Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport) ¹	4,650,000
Commercial fishery	3,799,000
Guided sport fishery	851,000
Area 3A (central Gulf of Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport) ¹	10,100,000
Commercial fishery	8,210,000
Guided sport fishery	1,890,000
Area 3B (western Gulf of Alaska)	2,650,000
Area 4A (eastern Aleutians)	1,390,000
Area 4B (central/western Aleutians)	1,140,000
Areas 4CDE	1,285,000
Area 4C (Pribilof Islands)	596,600
Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea)	596,600
Area 4E (Bering Sea flats)	91,800
Total	29,223,000

¹The combined total includes estimated mortality from regulatory discards of sublegal halibut and lost gear in the commercial fishery, plus discard mortality in the guided sport fishery, as mandated in the U.S. Catch Sharing Plan.

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Notes Regarding the Catch Limits for Specific Regulatory Areas

Area 2A

The Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for Area 2A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. The overall catch limit for Area 2A in 2015 is sufficient to permit non-treaty incidental harvest of halibut during the limited-entry sablefish longline fishery, under the provisions of the CSP.

Area 2B

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada (DFO) will allocate the Area 2B catch limit between commercial and sport fisheries.

Areas 2C and 3A

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) CSP for Areas 2C and 3A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for Areas 2C and 3A. That CSP sets the allocation between the commercial and charter sport sectors in those two Regulatory Areas. Note that since 2014, the IPHC catch limits for Areas 2C and 3A include both sectors (commercial and recreational charter), plus discard and lost gear mortality estimates, as noted above in the table footnote. The Area 2C commercial fishery allocation is 3,679,000 pounds for the commercial fishery catch and 120,000 pounds estimated for incidental mortality within the fishery. The Area 3A commercial fishery allocation is 7,790,000 pounds for the commercial fishery catch and 420,000 pounds estimated for the incidental mortality within the fishery.

Area 4CDE

The IPHC sets a combined catch limit for Area 4CDE. The individual catch limits for Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the 4CDE CSP adopted by the NPFMC. The CSP also allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E, and Area 4C Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ to be fished in Areas 4D and 4C.

Fishing Season Dates

The Commission approved a season of March 14 – November 7, 2015, for the U.S. and Canadian Individual Quota fisheries. Seasons will commence at noon local time on March 14 and terminate at noon local time on November 7, 2015 for the following fisheries and areas: the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States IFQ and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E. All Area 2A commercial fishing, including the treaty Indian commercial fishery, will take place between March 14 and November 7, 2015. The Saturday opening date was chosen to facilitate marketing.

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery south of Point Chehalis, Washington are recommended: June 24, July 8, July 22, August 5, August 19, September 2, and September 16, 2015. All fishing periods will begin at 8 a.m. and end at 6 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits announced at a later date.

Area 2A fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with the limited-entry sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis and the salmon troll fishing seasons will be established under U.S. domestic regulations by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The remainder of the Area

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2A CSP, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. Further information regarding the depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut fishery, and details for the sport fisheries, is available at the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825). The Area 2A IPHC licensing procedures did not change.

Regulatory Changes

Charter Halibut Sector Management Measures for Areas 2C and 3A

The Commission received a request from the NPFMC to adopt charter halibut sector management measures in accordance with the NMFS CSP for Areas 2C and 3A. This proposal is designed to keep removals by the charter fishery within the limits of the CSP. After consideration of the advice of the Council, Commission staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fisheries agencies, the Commission approved the following measures:

In Area 2C, 1) a one-fish daily bag limit, and 2) a reverse slot size limit restriction (≤ 42 inches or ≥ 80 inches).

In Area 3A, 1) a two-fish daily bag limit, 2) a maximum size limit for the second fish of 29 inches, 3) a five-fish annual limit, 4) a vessel limit of one trip per calendar day, and 5) a one-day-per-week closure of halibut charter fishing on Thursdays from June 15 through August 31, 2015.

Charter Fishing Regulations in Areas 2C and 3A

The Commission approved changes to the IPHC regulations for Areas 2C and 3A to mirror the U.S. federal regulations for sport fishing guide services, which were recently revised to align with State of Alaska regulations, and made additional changes to clarify regulations as requested by NMFS. These changes include the following:

Remove the requirement that the charter vessel guide be on board the same vessel as the charter vessel angler, in order to be designed as providing sport guide services. Anglers who receive assistance from a compensated guide will be required to follow charter fishing regulations, and the harvest is to be counted within the charter allocation.

Clarification that the charter guide shall be liable for any violations of IPHC Regulations by an angler, whether on board the same vessel or not.

A requirement that all retained halibut are to remain on the vessel on which they are caught until the end of the chartered fishing trip.

Removing the requirement from the IPHC Regulations to retain the filleted carcass on board the vessel until all fillets are offloaded. This requirement appears in federal regulations and is no longer necessary in the IPHC management measures, but it will be noted in the annual IPHC Regulations document for the convenience of anglers.

Authorized Officer Definition

The Commission approved adding California Department of Fish and Wildlife officers to the list of officers authorized to enforce IPHC regulations.

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Other Actions

Minimum Size Limit

The Commission received a staff report on the potential implications of changing the current minimum size limit for the commercial fishery from 32 in to 30 in. The Commission's Conference Board and Processor Advisory Board recommended not changing the size limit at this time. With that advice and the significant uncertainty concerning the behavior of the fishery in response to such a change, the Commission assigned further investigation of the issue to its Management Strategy Advisory Board.

Expanded Survey

The Commission approved the next in a series of expansions to the Commission's standardized stock assessment survey. In 2014, the surveys in Regulatory Areas 2A and 4A were expanded into deeper and shallower waters, as well as filling in some previously unsurveyed areas within the survey's normal depths. For 2015, the Commission's survey in Areas 4CDE will be expanded, including a calibration survey with the NMFS Eastern Bering Sea trawl survey. The purpose of the expansion series across the regulatory areas is to reduce potential biases in the surveys among regulatory areas and to encompass depths to which the commercial fishery has recently expanded. The Commission will review survey expansion at the next Annual Meeting.

Halibut Bycatch

The Commission's Halibut Bycatch Working Group completed its report to the Commission. The group was tasked with the following specific objectives at the 2012 IPHC Annual Meeting:

- To gain a better understanding of the amount of halibut bycatch occurring in each regulatory area;
- To gain a better understanding of the impact of bycatch on the conservation and allocation of the halibut resource and on the available harvest;
- To explore options for reducing the overall level of halibut bycatch; and
- To explore options for mitigating the impact of bycatch in one regulatory area on the available harvest in other regulatory areas.

The report is available on the IPHC website at <http://www.iphc.int/research/245-bycatch.html>. The Commission will be using the results in its continuing process to gain reductions in bycatch mortality.

The Commission received presentations from five Alaska groundfish harvesting organizations. Two organizations provided testimony identifying specific reductions that they believe could be achieved from their fleets, although recognizing that achieving them would be difficult. Part of these reductions would be achieved through an Experimental Fishing Permit (EFP), currently being reviewed by NMFS, permitting deck sorting. The Commission also received a letter from the NMFS Assistant Administrator which urged approval of catch limits above the Blue Line in Area 4CDE and indicated a commitment to reduce BSAI bycatch mortality.

The Commission received the following advice from both the Conference Board and the Processor Advisory Group regarding bycatch reduction:

- Support industry efforts to secure halibut bycatch reduction in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) through voluntary measures in 2015;
- Urge the NPFMC to address BSAI halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) cap reductions on a sector-specific basis and to reduce BSAI halibut PSC caps to levels that provide benefits to the directed halibut fishery; and
- Utilize all regulatory authority of the Council and NMFS to implement reductions in 2016.

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In addition, the Conference Board recommended that management bodies continue to pursue bycatch reduction targets for Areas 3 and 4 that reflect the Magnuson-Stevens Act principle of reducing bycatch “to the extent practicable,” including focusing on approaches that provide incentives for individual harvesters to reduce bycatch, implementation of robust monitoring programs, and reviewing the discard mortality rates assigned to bycaught halibut.

The Commission directed the IPHC staff to take this advice into consideration in its continuing work on bycatch issues during the coming year. The Commission met with the NPFMC on February 5, 2015 to explore ways that the authorities of the two bodies can be used to reduce halibut bycatch mortality in Alaskan fisheries.

Conference Board Rules of Procedure

The Commission approved the draft rules of procedure submitted by the Conference Board. Rules of procedure for the Processor Advisory Group were approved by the Commission in September, 2014.

IPHC Merit Scholarship

The Commission honored Ms. Katie Koolman of Sooke, British Columbia, as the thirteenth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Due to class commitments, Ms. Koolman was unable to be present to accept the scholarship, which was announced at the opening public session of the Annual Meeting.

Upcoming Meetings

The 2015 Interim Meeting of the Commission will be held December 1-2, 2015, in Seattle, Washington. As in 2014, this year’s Interim Meeting will be held in a larger venue in order to make it more accessible to the public. The next Annual Meeting of the Commission is planned for January 25-29, 2016 in Juneau, Alaska. The 2017 Annual Meeting is tentatively slated for January 23-27 in Victoria, British Columbia.

Commission Membership

United States Government Commissioner Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska, was elected Chair for the coming year. Canadian Government Commissioner Paul Ryall of Vancouver, British Columbia, was elected Vice-Chair. The other Canadian Commissioners are David Boyes of Courtenay, British Columbia, and Ted Assu of Campbell River, British Columbia. The other United States Commissioners are Robert Alverson of Seattle, Washington, and Donald Lane of Homer, Alaska.

Executive Director

Dr. Bruce M. Leaman has served as the Commission’s Executive Director since October, 1997 and his current contract with the Commission expires in early 2016. During 2015 the Commission will be searching for a new Executive Director to succeed Dr. Leaman.

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