

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN FOR THE 2015 FISHERY

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) solicited public input via e-mail, phone, and public meetings to discuss proposed changes to the Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for fisheries off of Oregon in 2015. The public meetings occurred on August 5 in Brookings, August 6 in North Bend (Coos Bay), and August 11 in Newport, which also was available as a webinar. Based on public input, ODFW recommends the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council) approve the following alternatives for public review:

Allocations

Oregon Subarea Allocations

Currently, Oregon contributes an amount equal to the Washington contribution to the Columbia River Subarea, and the newly created Southern Oregon Subarea is allocated 2 percent of the Central Oregon Coast Subarea allocation, taken from the spring all-depth allocation. Based on recent changes in the fisheries in the Oregon subareas, ODFW is proposing modifying the allocations to the three Oregon Subareas.

Alternatives

No Action: Oregon contributes an amount to the Columbia River Subarea equivalent to the Washington contribution. The remainder of the Oregon allocation goes to the Central Oregon Subarea which is then split 61 percent to the Central Coast spring all-depth, 25 percent to the summer all-depth, 12 percent to the nearshore, and two percent to the Southern Oregon Subarea

Alternative 1: Oregon contributes an amount to the Columbia River Subarea equal to 75 percent of the Washington contribution. The remainder is allocated 96 percent to the Central Oregon Subarea and four percent to the Southern Oregon Subarea. The Central Oregon Subarea is then split 63 percent to the spring all-depth, 25 percent to the summer all-depth, and 12 percent to the nearshore.

Alternative 2: Oregon contributes an amount to the Columbia River Subarea equal to 50 percent of the Washington contribution. The remainder is allocated 96 percent to the Central Oregon Subarea and four percent to the Southern Oregon Subarea. The Central Oregon Subarea is then split 63 percent to the spring all-depth, 25 percent to the summer all-depth, and 12 percent to the nearshore.

	No Action	Alternative 1	Alternative 2
Columbia River	equal to WA contribution	75% of WA contribution	50% of WA contribution
Central Oregon Coast		96%	96%
Spring All-Depth	61%	63%	63%
Summer All-Depth	25%	25%	25%
Nearshore	12%	12%	12%
Southern Oregon	2%	4%	4%

shaded cells are percentages of the Central Oregon Coast Allocation

Rationale

Currently 50 percent of the Columbia River Subarea allocation comes from the overall Oregon sport allocation. However, landings into Oregon account for less than 35 percent of the total landings into that subarea annually. Additionally, in recent years, there has been little effort or landings after mid-July, leaving 2,500 to 3,500 pounds un-harvested.

Beginning in 2010, catch and landings in the Oregon portion of the former South of Humbug Subarea began increasing. In 2014 the South of Humbug Subarea was separated creating the Southern Oregon Subarea (Humbug Mountain to the OR/CA Border) and the California Subarea, with the South of Humbug allocation going to the California Subarea. To accommodate the new subarea in Oregon, two percent of the Central Coast spring all-depth allocation was set-aside for the Southern Oregon Subarea. The small allocation to the Southern Oregon Subarea was seen as a first step, to get the season framework in place.

Lowering the Oregon contribution to the Columbia River Subarea and modifying the allocation to the other subareas should allow the opportunity to more fully utilize the Oregon Sport quota. The additional quota for the Southern Oregon Subarea will then partially come from the quota returned from the Columbia River, and partially from the overall Central Coast quota, instead of solely from the Central Coast spring all-depth quota (i.e. everyone contributes a little bit).

Management Measures

Columbia River and Central Oregon Coast Subareas

Retention of Other Species

Current rules prohibit retention of groundfish species except for Pacific cod and Sablefish during all-depth halibut days for the Central Coast and Columbia River Sub-areas. The purpose of the rule is to reduce yelloweye rockfish discard mortality from the all-depth halibut fisheries. If halibut anglers were permitted to retain groundfish associated with deep reef habitats (e.g., lingcod and shelf rockfish species), they would be expected to intentionally target deep reefs in order to catch these groundfish species during their halibut trip, which would consequently increase yelloweye rockfish discard mortality.

Since the Oregon recreational fisheries currently catch at or near their entire harvest guideline for yelloweye rockfish each year, any additional mortality of yelloweye rockfish from the halibut fisheries would have to come at the expense of greater restrictions or closures elsewhere to the recreational halibut and groundfish fisheries. As such, ODFW has been extremely precautionary regarding take of non-halibut species during all-depth halibut days, limiting take to only species that are not associated with deep reef habitat (i.e., tuna, salmon, sablefish, and Pacific cod).

However, the current rule, which restricts take of all groundfish except sablefish and Pacific cod during all-depth fisheries, also excludes halibut anglers from retaining bycatch of groundfish species that have healthy populations and are not associated with deep reef habitat (e.g., flatfish species). Since the purpose of this rule is to dissuade targeting of deep reefs, modifying the current rule to prohibit groundfish species associated with deep reef habitats, namely lingcod and rockfish species, would increase harvest opportunities with little risk of increasing yelloweye rockfish discard mortality.

Alternatives

Status Quo: During all-depth Pacific halibut days, most species may not be taken along with Pacific halibut except for salmon, sablefish, Pacific Cod, tuna, and offshore pelagic species

Alternative 1: All groundfish, with the exception of rockfish and lingcod are allowed to be retained during all-depth halibut days

Alternative 2: Expand the status quo alternative to also include flatfish species

Rationale

Yelloweye rockfish discard mortality is expected to be the same for all alternatives because all prohibit the take of deep reef associated groundfish (i.e., rockfish species and lingcod), thereby reducing the incentive for halibut anglers to target groundfish over deep reefs before or after halibut fishing.

In terms of increasing the list of allowable species, alternative one is the least restrictive because it allows all groundfish (where legal) except for those associated with deep reefs, whereas alternative three only expands the current list to include flatfish. However, the only practical difference between alternatives one and two, upon examination of groundfish bycatch species encountered in the halibut fishery (Figure 1), is that alternative one would allow anglers to keep spiny dogfish and flatfish, whereas they would not be allowed to keep spiny dogfish with alternative two.

In terms of rule complexity, alternative one is simpler than the other alternatives. While all alternatives are written to accomplish the same goal (i.e., preventing overfished species bycatch), status quo and alternative two requires an entire paragraph, whereas alternative one needs a single sentence. Further, the language of alternative one is more positive (i.e., “everything is open except...”) compared to the other alternatives (i.e., “everything is closed, except...”).

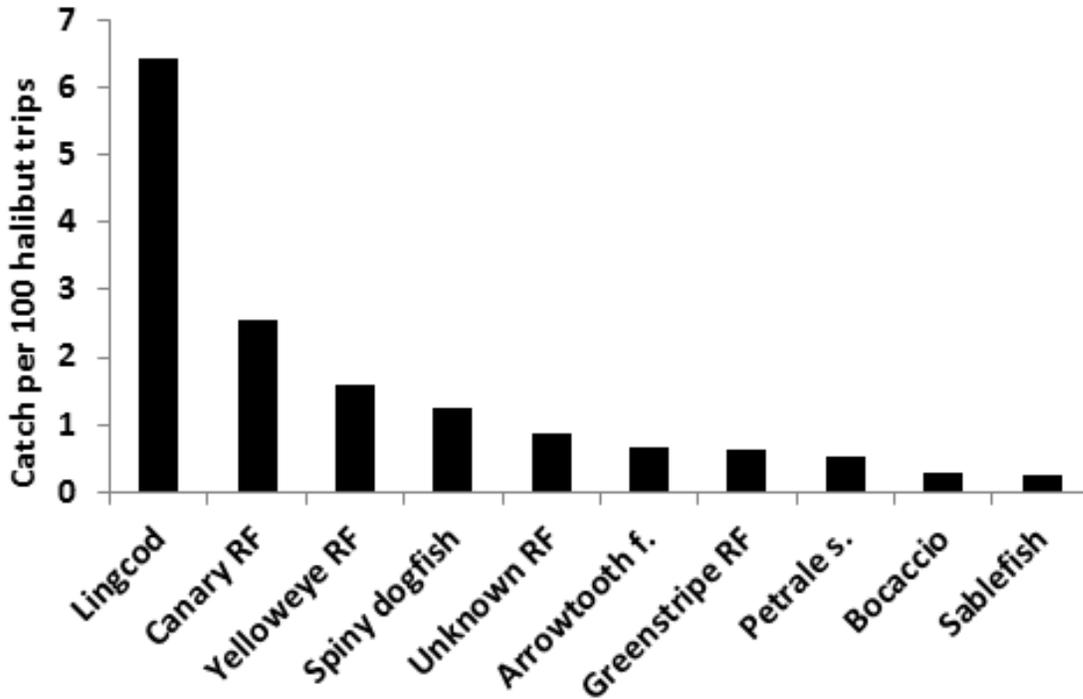


Figure 1: Groundfish species incidentally encountered in Oregon all-depth halibut fisheries, ranked in order from highest to lowest encounter rates.

Columbia River Subarea

No recommendations were received for any changes to the management of the Columbia River Subarea. However, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) informed ODFW that they had received several proposals for this area, and would be submitting them in a state report. The two states will work jointly between September and November to get public input on any proposals forwarded by the Council.

Central Coast Subarea

All-Depth Seasons

The Central Oregon Coast Subarea all-depth fishery is currently broken into a spring and a summer season. During the public meeting process, a proposal was received to combine the spring and summer quotas into one all-depth quota that would open the first Friday in May and run Friday and Saturday every other week until the entire all-depth quota is attained. A minor change to that proposal was also suggested, rather than beginning the season on the first Friday in May, beginning it on the first Friday in May that avoids coincidence of open days with large negative tides.

Alternatives

No Action: Spring all-depth season opens 2nd Thursday in May, three days per week (Thursday –Saturday), until quota caught. Weeks can be skipped due to adverse tides.

Summer all-depth season opens first Friday in August, two days per week (Friday and Saturday) every other week until quota is attained.

Alternative 1a: Combine the spring and summer all-depth quotas/seasons, open May 1 every other Friday and Saturday until the entire all-depth quota has been attained.

Alternative 1b: The same as Alternative 1a, except begin on the first weekend in May, that avoids open dates which align with large negative tides, especially in the spring.

Rationale

As the halibut fishery developed, season lengths became shorter, with few halibut fishing opportunities later in the summer (i.e., August). The all-depth season was separated into Spring and Summer seasons to ensure quota and open days were available later in the summer (August). Anglers requested the summer season due to generally better weather conditions later in the summer and because school is out and more families take vacations in August than in May. The intended goal of Alternative 1 is to continue to spread the halibut opportunities out, as well as provide some consistency for planning. By reducing the number of days open in the early part of the season, it is thought that the quota will extend longer into June or July. Increasing the quota by combining the spring and summer portions should also allow the season to extend longer.

During 2013 and 2014, during spring all-depth openings, approximately 25 percent of the total effort occurred on Thursdays, 32 percent on Fridays, and 43 percent on Saturdays. Eliminating Thursdays as open days will shift some of that effort to Friday and/or Saturday, but some of that effort will not occur. The reduction in effort (boat or angler trips) each opening is intended to allow for more openings spread out through the season.

The albacore tuna sport fishery off of Oregon has exploded in popularity since 2007. Tuna often become available off of Oregon sometime in July, and anglers turn their attention to tuna. Additionally in good salmon years, such as 2014, anglers also turn their attention to coho salmon fishing in July. Therefore some anglers have expressed the desire to have halibut opportunities prior to salmon and tuna. Prior to this year, ODFW had been hearing that many anglers had wanted more quota moved to the summer all-depth season to allow for more fishing in the late summer, which was not raised this year.

Southern Oregon Subarea

Season Start Date

The Southern Oregon Subarea is currently open May 1, seven days per week until the quota is attained. At the Brookings public meeting, there was some discussion about changing the start date to later in the year.

Alternatives

No Action: open May 1, seven days per week until the quota is attained

Alternative 1: open June 1, seven days per week until the quota is attained

Alternative 2: open July 1, seven days per week until the quota is attained

Rationale

The Southern Oregon Subarea season currently opens May 1 until October 31 or the quota is attained. If effort and catches are high early in the season, which is highly dependent on salmon opportunities and local current conditions, the quota could be caught by mid-summer. The Southern Oregon Subarea is somewhat opposite of the other Oregon subareas in that salmon opportunities are more available in the late spring and early summer, with little in the late summer. Changing the starting date is intended to ensure a greater chance of having halibut fishing opportunities later in the summer, when salmon fishing dies off. In 2014, the fishery opened May 1, and has attained 73 percent of the 3,712 pound quota (2,713 pounds) through August 10.

Additional Proposals

Additional proposals received from the public but not forwarded for consideration are included in the Appendix.

Catch Sharing Plan Language

Due to the range of alternatives presented above, ODFW does not have proposed changes to the language in the Catch Sharing Plan for 2015 for the above items. As the range of alternatives is finalized, ODFW will provide draft language revisions to the Catch Sharing Plan, in consultation with staff at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) West Coast Region.

Appendix: Additional Proposals Received but not Forwarded for Consideration at this Time

Issue Tags for Individual Pacific Halibut, Similar to Big Game Tags

Comments were received to issue tags for individual Pacific halibut, based on a lottery draw, in a manner similar to the management of big game hunting. In other words, to change the recreational halibut fishery from open access to a limited permit fishery. By converting to tag based management, anglers believe they would have greater flexibility regarding when they choose to fish for halibut, which might increase safety and alleviate the derby mentality.

While ODFW acknowledges there could be advantages to a tag based system there would be numerous issues that would have to be resolved in order convert to a tag based system. First, issuing tags similar to big game hunting tags, rather than the current combined angler tag would have to be approved by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Oregon Legislature. It is not something that can be changed through the annual halibut catch sharing plan process. Second, unlike salmon, or big game, halibut is managed in pounds of net weight not number of fish. Determining the correct number of tags to issue will be highly dependent on projecting the average weight of landed fish, and would likely need to include buffers to prevent exceedance of the quota. Regardless of the pros and cons of changing the tag system, this is an issue that is under the sole jurisdiction of the State of Oregon and is not applicable to the current decision making process.

Change the Central Coast Subarea Spring All-Depth Open Dates from Thursday-Saturday to Friday-Sunday

Modifying the days of the week open for the Central Coast subarea spring all-depth season is requested by several anglers each year. This year it was discussed at length with those in attendance at the public meetings. Some anglers believe that a Friday-Sunday opening would allow more people with regular work schedules to participate in the fishery for more than one day each opening, without having to take time off of work. This may allow those anglers that are able to fish multiple days per weekend but cannot take weekdays off to more efficiently harvest their allowed halibut. Additionally the Thursday-Saturday opening is seen by some as a bias towards anglers fishing off of charter boats.

The discussion at the meeting primarily focused on what changing the days of the week might do to the overall season length, both in terms of the number of open periods as well as the total number of days that will be open. Exchanging Sunday for Thursday will not only shift the Thursday effort to Sunday; it has the potential to increase the effort on both Saturday and Sunday, the highest angler effort days for all fisheries combined. Some in anglers at the meeting estimated that changing to a Friday-Sunday opening would cut the number of open days for the spring fishery in half.

While ODFW believes that there is merit in providing for efficiency in recreational fisheries, the costs of this proposal in terms of fewer open days per year outweigh the benefits of improved efficiency. Fewer open days per year would disadvantage those anglers who may not be able to participate in the fishery on a presumably small number of open days due to, for example, family or work commitments. Therefore, at this time ODFW is not forwarding this modification to the open days of the week for the spring all-depth season.

Combine the Central Coast Subarea All-Depth and Nearshore Quotas into One Season Open May 1, Seven Days per Week

ODFW received a proposal at one of the public meetings to combine the Central Oregon Coast all-depth and nearshore quotas into one quota/season that would open on May 1, seven days per week, until the quota was attained. This fishery would be open to all-depths. The intent of this proposal was to allow anglers to fish for halibut whenever and wherever they chose, hopefully eliminating the current “derby mentality”. The proposer believed that if this were the case, anglers may not rush out to catch their halibut, sometimes in less than favorable weather conditions.

ODFW is not supportive of this idea at this time. In recent years many anglers have expressed the desire to keep the nearshore and all-depth fisheries separate, including repeated requests to add additional quota to the nearshore fishery. Many anglers are in favor of having halibut opportunities spread throughout the summer, to better accommodate weather, as well as individual anglers schedules.