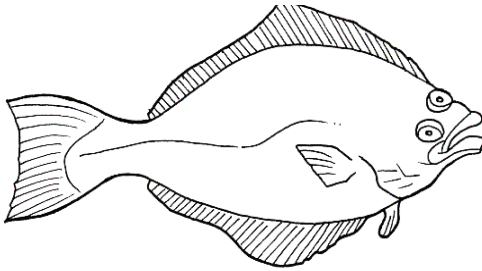




Backgrounder: Pacific Halibut

The Fish

Pacific halibut (*Hippoglossus stenolepis*) are large flatfish found on the continental shelf from California to the Bering Sea. Pacific halibut have flat, diamond-shaped bodies, can weigh up to 500-700 pounds, and can grow to nine feet long. Pacific halibut are quite different than California halibut (*Paralichthys californicus*). They range further north and are more diamond-shaped than California halibut, which are more oval or lemon-shaped. Pacific halibut always have eyes on the right side of their head, while California halibut can have eyes on either side of their head.



Recent Management and Harvest

Halibut are one of the most valuable fish species in the northern Pacific, and are popular with commercial, tribal, and sport fishers. The demand for halibut sport fishing is so high that closed seasons, bag limits, and possession limits are all used to control the recreational fishery and extend the season as long as possible.

Total catch of Pacific halibut is determined by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC), but the Council allocates portions of the halibut catch to the various fisheries it manages. Each year the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) estimates abundance and potential yield of the Pacific halibut stock using commercial fishery data and scientific surveys. In January, the IPHC updates its Halibut Catch Sharing Plan, a framework that dictates the total allowable catch (TAC) for Oregon, Washington, and California (Area 2A) halibut fisheries. Allocations between some recreational areas are subject to inseason and other changes.

The Pacific halibut harvest in Area 2A is divided among the tribal fishery (commercial, ceremonial and subsistence), the sport private and charter fishery, the non-Indian commercial directed longline fishery, the incidental salmon troll fishery, and in some years, the incidental sablefish longline fishery. The non-Indian commercial directed halibut fishery uses a derby fishery system of 10-hour seasons and fishing period limits set by the IPHC. Other halibut seasons are set in the Catch Sharing Plan.

Most halibut management activity in the Council process takes place during the fall. Prior to the Council's September meeting, the Council solicits proposed changes to the Catch Sharing Plan, then accepts comments between the September and November meetings. In November, the Council makes final recommendations for changes to the Catch Sharing Plan. The proposed changes are described in the Council Newsletter and in the September Decision document. To propose a change or comment on proposed changes, you may submit comments by mail, fax, or email, marked to the attention of Chuck Tracy, Pacific halibut staff officer. The incidental retention limits in the salmon troll and sablefish longline fisheries are set at the March and April Council meetings.

Halibut Life History

Halibut migrate long distances from shallow summer feeding grounds to deeper winter spawning grounds. Larval halibut feed on plankton, while adults are carnivorous. Adult halibut prey on cod, pollock, sablefish, rockfish, turbot, sculpins, other flatfish, sand lance, herring, octopus, crabs, clams, and occasionally smaller halibut. Adult halibut are sometimes eaten by marine mammals, but are rarely preyed upon by other fish.

The number of eggs halibut lay depends on the female's size. A 50-pound female can produce about 500,000 eggs, while a female over 250 pounds can produce four million eggs. The eggs float freely and drift in deep ocean currents. They hatch after 12-15 days, and the larvae drift to shallow waters on the continental shelf. Larvae begin life in an upright position with eyes on both sides of their head. When they are about an inch long, the left eye migrates over the snout to the right side of the head, and the color of the left side fades. When the young fish are about six months old, they settle to the sea floor, where the protective coloring on their "eyed" side effectively camouflages them. Female halibut mature at around 12 years, while males mature at around 8 years. The oldest halibut on record was 55 years old.



History of Management

Halibut have been fished for hundreds of years by West Coast tribes. The U.S. commercial fishery started in 1888, when halibut were first landed in Tacoma, Washington. Because halibut can be kept for a long time without spoiling, they soon became a popular target for commercial harvesters. The commercial halibut fishery was pioneered by fishers of Norwegian ancestry, many of whom had fished halibut in Norway. Many Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders have also participated in the West Coast halibut fishery. In the 1890s, a fleet of sailing vessels with two-man dories fished for halibut along the West Coast. Large steam-powered vessels soon entered the industry, and by the 1910s it became clear that halibut stocks were suffering from overfishing. In 1923 the U.S. and Canada signed a convention on halibut, leading to the eventual creation of the International Pacific Halibut Commission. In 1924 the Commission implemented a three-month closure - the first management action to affect halibut. In 1979, Canada implemented a limited entry system and an individual fishing quota (IFQ) system for the halibut fishery. Alaska implemented an IFQ system in 1995. Pacific halibut fishing is still important to many tribes, and many tribal members participate in commercial, ceremonial and subsistence fisheries. In 1995, the U.S. prohibited directed non-treaty commercial fishing north of Pt. Chehalis, Washington in order to allow the

tribes to harvest their allocation of halibut.

How Do I Get Involved?

- Contact the staff officer for Pacific halibut: Chuck Tracy (Chuck.Tracy@noaa.gov) phone (503) 820-2280 ext. 415 or toll free (866) 806-7204.
- Read the Council newsletter on the Council website (www.pcouncil.org).
- Read the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan on the NMFS website (<http://tinyurl.com/23woesp>)
- Comment via email, mail, or at a Council meeting.
- Visit the IPHC website (<http://www.iphc.int/>)

Regulations

- NMFS Area 2A Halibut Hotline (for sport fishing): (800) 662-9825, press 5
- Commercial catch information is available at <http://www.iphc.int/commercial.html>

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