



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northwest Region
7600 Sand Point Way N.E., BLDG. 1
BIN C15700
Seattle, Washington 98115-0070

February 14, 2002

Dear Sablefish Endorsement Holder:

As you know, the primary sablefish season structure has had many changes in the past year. You may remember that last year the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) published a set of proposed and final rules to set the basic permit stacking provisions in place for the 2001 season. You may also remember that in 2001, longliners with sablefish endorsements fishing north of Pt. Chehalis, WA were allowed to retain some incidentally-caught halibut. This letter describes some of the permit stacking provisions that we are working on for 2002 and provides information about retaining incidentally-caught halibut in 2002.

When NMFS published the initial permit stacking program regulations, we reserved some of the more complex provisions for a second set of rules, to be published in 2002:

1. Setting the primary season for April 1 through October 31
2. An owner-on-board requirement for permit owners who did not own sablefish endorsed permits on November 1, 2000
3. Permit owners would be required to document their ownership interests in their permits so that the agency can ensure that no person holds more than three permits
4. Vessels that do not meet minimum frozen sablefish historic landing requirements would not be allowed to process sablefish at sea

2002 season: Of these four items, only the April through October season will occur in 2002. We have some questions regarding the intent of the other measures and will be asking the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) to clarify their intent at its March and April 2002 meetings. To ensure that we would have the longer primary sablefish season in 2002, NMFS published the April 1 through October 31 season as part of its proposed rule for the 2002 groundfish specifications and management measures (January 11, 2002, 67 FR 1555). In that proposed rule, we also published proposed tier limits: Tier 1, 36,000 lb; Tier 2, 16,500 lb; Tier 3, 9,500 lb. All limits are in round weight. We are expecting to finalize the overall groundfish specifications and management measures, including the primary sablefish season and limits, in early March.

If you want to transfer a permit (change in vessel registration) to be effective for the April 1 start of season, the Permits Office must receive your current permit and a complete transfer form by **February 28, 2002**. If we receive your transfer request after February 28 and before April 30, the

permit will be reissued with an effective date of May 1. If you have questions about permit transfers or need permit transfer forms, please call our Permits Office at (206) 526-4353.

Halibut: As in 2001, longline vessels with sablefish endorsed permits that are operating north of Pt. Chehalis, WA, will be allowed to land halibut taken incidentally during the primary sablefish fishery. The Pacific Fishery Management Council will be discussing 2002 incidental halibut limits at its March and April 2002 meetings. Incidental halibut retention would *not* be permitted until after the Council has set the limits and NMFS has published those limits in the Federal Register.

If you wish to land halibut taken incidentally in the limited entry, fixed gear primary sablefish fishery north of Pt. Chehalis, you must have a commercial halibut license from the IPHC. To apply for a commercial halibut license with the IPHC, you can download the application from their website at: (<http://www.iphc.washington.edu/halcom/2aapp.htm>) or call the IPHC at (206) 634-1838. The application and the license are free and there are no qualification requirements for a license. To receive an IPHC license, you must apply by **April 30, 2002**. IPHC also requires that all commercial halibut vessels carry, and vessel owners complete, an IPHC halibut logbook. If you need an IPHC logbook please contact the IPHC at the above telephone number. If you are recording halibut information from the Alaskan fishery in an IPHC halibut logbook, you may use that same logbook for West Coast halibut fisheries.

If you think that you would like to land halibut during the sablefish season, please remember these basic points:

1. It is illegal to land commercially-caught halibut south of Pt. Chehalis unless you are participating in the directed halibut fishery or in the salmon troll fishery.
2. It is illegal to have halibut on board if you have any gear other than longline gear on board your vessel.
3. It is illegal to have halibut on board your vessel north of Pt. Chehalis unless you have *both* a limited entry permit and an IPHC halibut license.

Thank you for your patience as we work through some of the difficult permit stacking regulations.

Sincerely,



William L. Robinson
Assistant Regional Administrator
for Sustainable Fisheries