

## *News Release*

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### **HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2004 ANNUAL MEETING**

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its Eightieth Annual Meeting in Juneau, Alaska, with Dr. James Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska presiding as Chair. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States, catch limits for 2004 totaling 76,505,000 pounds, an increase from a comparable value of 75,990,000 pounds in 2003.

The Commission staff reported on the assessment of the Pacific halibut stock in 2003. There were some significant changes in the assessment, including the first separate assessment of the male and female components of the stock. Lower growth rates of halibut in recent years and different growth rates between the sexes prompted the staff to perform the separate assessments and insure that mortality on the females was not excessive. Staff also undertook the first analytic assessments of Areas 3B, 4A, and 4B. Changes in the rate at which fish, especially males, recruit to the fishing gear will require additional analyses over the coming year, to determine if the existing 32-inch size limit is still appropriate. In addition, over the coming year the Commission staff will continue to investigate a new harvest policy that may result in greater stability in the yield from the fishery and insulate the process of setting catch limits from technological changes in the assessment. A joint industry – Commission working group will address and report on this issue during 2004. The halibut stock is healthy in the central and southern portions of the range (Areas 3A through 2A) but is believed to have declined in Areas 3B through Area 4, and lower catch limits are required in those areas.

#### **Seasons and Catch Limits**

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2004 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission will recommend to the governments the following catch limits for 2004 in Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington), Area 2B (British Columbia), Area 2C (southeastern Alaska), Area 3A (central Gulf), Area 3B (western Gulf), Area 4A (eastern Aleutians), Area 4B (western Aleutians), Area 4C (Pribilof Islands), Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea), and Area 4E (Bering Sea flats):

## 2004 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Point Chehalis)	252,475
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	44,554
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Point Chehalis)	70,000
2A Treaty Indian commercial	523,600
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	19,400
2A Sport – North of Columbia River	272,942
<u>2A Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>297,029</u>
Area 2A total	1,480,000
2B (includes sport catch allocation)	13,800,000
2C	10,500,000
3A	25,060,000
3B	15,600,000
4A	3,470,000
4B	2,810,000
4C	1,720,000
4D	1,720,000
<u>4E</u>	<u>345,000</u>
<u>Area 4 total</u>	<u>10,065,000</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>76,505,000</b>

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

The catch limits for Regulatory Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the catch-sharing plan implemented by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC), which allows the Commission to set biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4C-D-E. The catch-sharing plan allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E.

The catch-sharing plan implemented by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) for Area 2A was adopted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. Area 2A fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons and the incidental commercial halibut fishery during the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis will be established under United States domestic regulations established by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The remainder of the Area 2A catch-sharing plan, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. For further information of the depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut fishery, incidental halibut during the sablefish fishery, and the sport fisheries, call the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825).

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 23, July 14, July 28, August 11, August 25, September 15, and September 29, 2004. All fishing periods will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits announced at a later date.

The staff reported to the Commission on a joint agency – industry meeting that investigated the logistic issues that must be addressed to extend the halibut fishing season. The working group agreed generally that a 10.5-month season could be implemented with approximately one year lead time but a 12-month season was significantly more difficult to implement. To facilitate a potential future extension of the commercial halibut season, the Commission will recommend to NMFS that the Quota Share regulations be amended to reference the dates of the halibut and sablefish seasons, rather than specific dates of the year. The Commission conducted extensive discussions on the season extension issue and received several industry proposals and public testimony. After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sector, the Commission voted on a season similar to 2003. Further, it was agreed to open the season on a Sunday to facilitate marketing. Therefore, the treaty Indian commercial fishery in Area 2A, the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E will all commence at 12 noon local time on February 29 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2004. The IPHC staff was directed to evaluate March landings including daily landing patterns, fish quality, and fish size. The staff was also instructed to review the possibilities of winter tagging work to further evaluate migratory concerns.

#### Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission approved changes to the regulations that define tag fish retention. The changes included defining the tag as an external tag, and clarifying that any fisher at any time can retain a halibut that has an IPHC tag attached. The halibut needs to have the tag attached at the time of landing and it will be made available to the Commission or an authorized officer. Only commercially licensed halibut vessels can sell legal-sized tagged halibut.

For the U.S. fishery, the requirement to mark the setline or skate marker buoys was revised to state that the vessel name could be in addition to a vessel's state license or registration number but not used as the only marking.

The Commission revised the regulation referring to the Prohibited Species Donation Program administered by NMFS to state that a person can "retain, possess, and dispose" of halibut from this program. The change allows the offal of halibut donated under this program to be used as fish meal and oil.

The Commission removed an obsolete regulation that made implementation of the Customary and Traditional Fishing Regulations in Alaska contingent on NMFS' publication of regulations for this fishery. Other regulations pertaining to the Customary and Traditional Fishery in Alaska remain in effect.

## Other Actions

There were several issues discussed that the staff will be continuing to review in 2004, including a hook size study, as the fleet's gear has changed over the last several years, and a review of the 32-inch size limit.

The staff proposal to require an IPHC permit for retaining halibut for research was not approved. The Commission agreed with the intent of the proposal but wished to consider the impacts of this requirement on other agency activities. The Commission asked staff to work with other agency staff to review the current permitting process and provide additional information for further evaluation.

The Commission reviewed the request from the Alaska Food Coalition for a food bank donation program in the Gulf of Alaska. There were some concerns with the proposal, and the staff was directed to provide the Alaska Food Coalition with feedback on the proposal.

The Commission honoured Mr. Lawren Best of Sooke, British Columbia as the second recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Best attended the meeting and was presented with a certificate and plaque, as well as the scholarship of \$2,000 (U.S.). The Commissioners expressed their continued support for the scholarship program and commended the Scholarship Committee for their efforts in assessing the candidates.

The Commission noted that halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries was reduced slightly in 2003, continuing the trend initiated by the 1991 Commission agreement to achieve lower bycatch mortality levels. However, the Commission agrees that further reductions are desirable and that current levels of mortality reduce yield to the directed halibut fisheries. The Commission will continue to work with agencies of the two governments to achieve reductions in halibut bycatch mortality.

The recommended regulations for the 2004 halibut fishery will become official as soon as they are approved by the Canadian and United States Governments. The Commission will publish and distribute regulation pamphlets.

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission is planned for Victoria, British Columbia from January 18 to 21, 2005. The Canadian Government commissioner, Dr. Richard Beamish, was elected Chair for the coming year. The United States Government commissioner, Dr. James Balsiger, was elected as Vice Chair. Other Canadian commissioners are Clifford Atleo and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Phillip Lestenkof. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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