

SUMMARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) meeting was held in Juneau, Alaska the week of January 19, 2004. Pacific Fishery Management Council, NOAA Fisheries, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and tribal fishery managers from Area 2A attended the meeting. The primary issues affecting Area 2A that were discussed include: whether to move to a Conditional Constant Catch harvest policy; what the appropriate total allowable catch (TAC) in 2004 for Area 2A would be in the absence of changing the harvest policy; whether to consider a 10.5-month season, which would affect 2A tribal halibut fisheries; and the proposed elimination of the IPHC setline survey in 2A.

With regard to the Conditional Constant Catch harvest policy, IPHC staff had a proposal to move halibut fisheries in all areas under this new harvest policy. This policy would set a ceiling on the amount of halibut that could be harvested. For Area 2A, this ceiling would be 1.69 million pounds. When the setline constant exploitation yield (CEY) is within 90% of this ceiling, the resulting TAC would be set at the ceiling level. When the setline CEY is < 90%, then the TAC would be set at the setline CEY. When the setline CEY is above the ceiling, the TAC would remain at the ceiling.

The U.S. and Canadian Commissioners, as well as the industry members present, expressed concern over the proposed Constant Catch harvest policy, and requested IPHC staff develop TAC recommendations using the current setline CEY harvest policy. As a result, IPHC staff recommended the Area 2A TAC be increased to 1.48 million pounds in 2004 (from 1.31 million pounds in 2003). The increase is a result of a decrease in the estimate of mortality of legal-sized halibut in the trawl groundfish fishery (reduced from 530,000 pounds in 2001 to 286,000 pounds in 2002) combined with the results of the 2003 setline survey off the West Coast. The Halibut Commission adopted the IPHC staff-recommended TAC and approved the Pacific Fishery Management Council's Halibut Catch Sharing Plan for Area 2A.

A working group made up of agency, tribal, and industry representatives met last summer and recommended that IPHC consider a 10.5-month season for 2004 and consider a 12-month season in the future. After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sectors, the Commission adopted a 10.5-month season for this year; therefore, the treaty Indian commercial fishery in Area 2A will begin on February 29, and all halibut fisheries must close by November 15.

To accommodate budget reductions, IPHC staff recommended the setline survey in Area 2A be eliminated in 2004. This has caused concern for fishery managers who rely on the survey to assist in estimating bycatch in the halibut and groundfish longline fisheries. Further, state agency staff have been able to collect biological samples of the incidental catch of rockfish, particularly yelloweye, by meeting the research vessel shoreside. These data are no longer available from fisheries and have been used to support the yelloweye rockfish stock assessment. IPHC staff are interested in exploring other funding avenues to continue this valuable research in Area 2A.

The 2005 IPHC meeting is scheduled for January 18-21 in Victoria, BC, Canada.