

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE 2005 PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN

As a result of the input we received during our public meeting process, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is not supporting any of the changes to the Catch Sharing Plan that we proposed in September. The proposed changes and our rationale for not supporting them, are:

1. Changing the opening date of the north coast subarea from the first Tuesday between May 9-15 to May 1 of each year. If May 1 falls on a Sunday or Monday, then the fishery will open on the first Tuesday after May 1.

Rationale: The current language in the plan refers to opening on the first Tuesday between May 9 and 15; in 2005, this fishery would open on May 10. If the start date were changed to May 1, the fishery would, in effect, open on May 3 (as the fishery is closed on Sunday and Monday in this area). Given that under either of the start date proposals there is little chance of the season extending through the Memorial Day weekend, and the diverse opinions on this issue, the Department does not believe changing the start date is warranted.

2. In the south coast subarea, close the fishery when 2,000 lbs are projected to remain in the subarea quota. Subsequent to this closure, the nearshore area (northern and southern) would reopen on Friday and Saturday only, until the remaining quota is projected to be taken.

Rationale: From 1996-2000, there was a provision in the catch sharing plan that set aside 1,000 lbs of halibut for the northern nearshore area for the purpose of accommodating incidental halibut catches while fishers were targeting bottomfish. This set aside was feasible as there are not targetable halibut areas within the northern nearshore area; however, there are targetable areas in the southern nearshore area which makes attainment of the set aside difficult to monitor and predict with the accuracy required by state, federal, and international management entities. Under this proposal, the subarea (offshore and nearshore) would close when 2,000 lbs were projected to remain in the quota. The nearshore areas (northern and southern) would then reopen on Fridays and Saturdays only until the remaining quota was taken. With targetable halibut areas in the southern nearshore area, this small set aside amount could easily be exceeded on the first weekend it reopened. Therefore, the Department does not favor the proposal to expand the nearshore area fishery. We continue to support the seven days per week nearshore opportunity provided under the current plan north of Grays Harbor, and we believe we can accommodate the incidental catches for the northern nearshore area as an inseason measure under the current language in the plan. The southern nearshore area will again be open five days per week consistent with the other offshore target areas.

3. Add a statement to the north coast and south coast subareas that sets an annual bag limit of five halibut per person, per calendar year. The Department would require its Catch Record Card (currently required in Puget Sound) to apply to the coastal marine areas for halibut as well. Recreational fishers would be required to record their catches on the Catch Record Card, which can be inspected by enforcement staff during the season and is turned in to the Department at the end of the season.

Rationale: The Department recognizes the significant increase in effort in the north coast area over the past few years and believes that the issue of the short season needs to be addressed. However, there are issues, such as enforcement of the Department's current Catch Record Card, that still need to be thoroughly discussed, and other management tools which may be available for the Department to use. To that end, the Department plans to hold additional public meetings dedicated to identifying and discussing the management tools available to the Department to lengthen the north coast halibut season, which may include a weekly and/or annual bag limit. Following that discussion, if there are management tools that we would like to use, then the Department could pursue changing the state recreational halibut regulations through our Fish and Wildlife Commission process for implementation in 2005 or 2006.

4. Add a statement to the north coast and south coast subareas that sets an annual bag limit of five halibut per person, per calendar year, with an additional weekly limit of two halibut per person, per calendar week. Again, the Department would require anglers to complete a Catch Record Card to record their halibut catch.

Rationale: Again, the Department plans to have additional public meetings to develop management tools to address lengthening the north coast halibut season and this proposal could be considered through our Fish and Wildlife Commission process for implementation in 2005 or 2006.

Regarding the changes proposed by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for the Columbia River area: 1) splitting the subarea quota between the two states; and 2) removing the 32-inch minimum size limit, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife received comments against both of these proposals.

In reviewing the quota contributions for the past five years, it appears that Washington has consistently contributed a greater proportion to the subarea quota than Oregon, and it was expressed that equitable contributions to this shared quota should be pursued.