

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON
PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN FOR 2006

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) held its annual recreational halibut meeting to develop and consider proposed changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council's catch sharing plan for 2006, in Olympia, on August 12. Unfortunately, there were only a few fishermen present at the meeting.

However, we had a series of meetings prior to this one (on November 23, 2004, in Forks; January 6, 2005, in Montesano; and February 22, 2005, in Olympia) to develop alternative season structures and regulations for the coastal halibut fisheries, and the results of these meetings have been posted on the Department's website since February. In response, we have received a considerable number of comments and suggestions via e-mail and telephone about these proposed alternatives, including comments about an annual bag limit.

Therefore, at this time, we would support the following alternatives to be approved for public review. Proposed changes to the catch sharing plan language follow. WDFW staff will brief the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission at their October meeting on these proposed changes, and will have another public meeting in mid-October to solicit input on these alternatives.

Statewide

1. Implement an annual bag limit of five halibut per angler, which would apply to halibut caught in U.S. waters only.

Rationale – The annual bag limit would accomplish the objective of providing an opportunity for more individuals to participate in the recreational halibut fisheries. Each year, we are contacted by anglers who, because of schedule conflicts or unavailability of local accommodations, did not get a chance to go halibut fishing before the quota in a particular area was attained. We have also received suggestions to place limits on charter boat “crew fish” and/or non-paying charter boat passengers (e.g., friends of the skipper). Placing an annual limit on all anglers would treat everyone in the same fashion, and would be more likely to accomplish the objective.

Additionally, selecting a limit amount, which is less than the amount of days open to fishing, could potentially extend the season. There are anglers who, by their own admission, will fish every day the north coast area, for example, is open; this could be up to 9-14 fish per angler, in recent years.

If this measure were adopted, then the Department would require all anglers to complete a catch record card for halibut caught in all marine areas (currently only required in Puget Sound), for catch monitoring and enforcement purposes. This requirement would be considered through our sport fishing rule making process, which requires approval by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission.

North Coast

- 2. For the May fishery, reduce the number of days open per week from five consecutive days (Tue-Sat) to three staggered days (Tue, Thur, Sat).**

Rationale – The Department held a series of meetings focused on identifying and exploring options with the objective of lengthening the north coast halibut season over a longer period of time, and the attendees at those meetings favored this option. The idea is that some anglers, who used to fish several days in a row when the season was open for five consecutive days per week, may decide to not stay over if the season days were staggered. This potential reduction in effort may allow other anglers the opportunity to fish and/or may lengthen the season.

The Department plans to post calendars on our website, which identify the dates (based on available quota and pre-season catch projections) that we believe will be open to halibut fishing; there will also be tentative dates listed, which may be open if sufficient quota remains.

- 3. For the June fishery, specify the opening date as the 1st Thursday after June 17.**

Rationale – The primary purpose of scheduling a fishery in late June is to provide a fishing opportunity after school has ended for the year. This change would result in the fishery opening as early as June 18, and as late as June 24, which encompasses the majority of the public school ending dates in Washington. Also, there was some confusion with the current wording of “opening the third week in June”—whether this meant the third full week, or the third week occurring in the month—this proposed modification should alleviate this confusion.

- 4. In June, reduce the number of days open per week from five to two staggered days (Thur, Sat).**

Rationale – If the overall quota remains around the current level, following the quota division for the May and June fisheries, there would likely be sufficient quota to open for only two days in June, and, in 2005, the Department implemented a staggered Thursday/Saturday fishery in June, which seemed to work well. If sufficient quota remains, we could continue to keep the fishery open on the Thursday/Saturday schedule. Again, as mentioned above, the Department will post calendars on our website, which identify the specific dates (based on available quota and pre-season catch projections) that we believe will be open to halibut fishing; there will also be tentative dates listed, which may be open if sufficient quota remains.

South Coast

- 5. Remove the reference to the automatic 7 days per week season, beginning July 1, and specify that the northern nearshore area will reopen to accommodate incidental halibut catch on Fridays and Saturdays only.**

Rationale – In recent years, the south coast fishery has not been able to remain open (much) past July 1. The initial purpose of this provision was to have an automatic action, so as to not require an inseason conference call to provide halibut fishing opportunity on Fridays and Saturdays, after the salmon season has started (which is usually around the first of July). However, upon further consideration, it would be easier to monitor the fishery if it were only open on Fridays and Saturdays. In order for this provision to apply, there could not be sufficient quota to reopen the offshore fishery (i.e., there would have to be less than 4,000 lbs). Therefore, it would be easier to monitor the attainment of this small amount if the nearshore area were open only on these two days.

- 6. Modify the definition of the northern nearshore area to: from 47°25.00' N. lat. south to 46°58.00' N. lat., and east of 124°35.00' W. long.**

Rationale – Includes a few spots south of the currently defined northern nearshore area (which ends at 47°00.00' N. lat.) where halibut are caught incidentally on targeted bottomfish trips, while excluding “targetable” halibut areas. By excluding areas known to produce halibut, the integrity of the five-day targeted fishery is maintained, and monitoring of incidental catches (post-offshore season) against a relatively small quota is much easier.

Columbia River

- 7. Allow the retention of bottomfish, except rockfish, with a halibut onboard in the Columbia River subarea (from Leadbetter Pt., WA to Cape Falcon, OR).**

Rationale – Current language specifies that all bottomfish, except sablefish, cannot be retained with a halibut onboard, which was originally proposed as a measure to discourage targeting of rockfish. This has led anglers to discard species such as arrowtooth flounder, Pacific cod, and lingcod, which are caught incidentally while targeting halibut. Changing the regulation to still prohibit the retention of rockfish will allow anglers to retain these healthier species, while still discouraging targeting of rockfish.

(f) SPORT FISHERIES

(i) Washington inside waters (Puget Sound) subarea.

This sport fishery subarea is allocated 23.5 percent of the first 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) allocated to the Washington sport fishery, and 32 percent of the Washington sport allocation between 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) and 224,110 lb (101.7 mt) (except as provided in section (e)(3) of this Plan). This subarea is defined as all U.S. waters east of the mouth of the Sekiu River, as defined by a line extending from 48°17.30' N. lat., 124°23.70' W. long. north to 48°24.10' N. lat., 124°23.70' W. long., including Puget Sound. The structuring objective for this subarea is to provide a stable sport fishing opportunity and maximize the season length. To that end, the Puget Sound subarea may be divided into two regions with separate seasons to achieve a fair harvest opportunity within the subarea. Due to inability to monitor the catch in this area inseason, fixed seasons, which may vary and apply to different regions within the subarea, will be established preseason based on projected catch per day and number of days to achievement of the quota. Inseason adjustments may be made, and estimates of actual catch will be made postseason. The fishery will open in April or May and continue until a date established preseason (and published in the sport fishery regulations) when the quota is predicted to be taken, or until September 30, whichever is earlier. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will develop recommendations to NMFS on the opening date and weekly structure of the fishery each year. The daily bag limit is one fish per person, with no size limit, **with an annual bag limit of five halibut per person.**

(ii) Washington north coast subarea.

This sport fishery subarea is allocated 62.2 percent of the first 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) allocated to the Washington sport fishery, and 32 percent of the Washington sport allocation between 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) and 224,110 lb (101.7 mt) (except as provided in section (e)(3) of this Plan). This subarea is defined as all U.S. waters west of the mouth of the Sekiu River, as defined above in paragraph (f)(1)(i), and north of the Queets River (47°31.70' N. lat.). The management objective for this subarea is to provide a quality recreational fishing opportunity during May and the latter part of June. To meet this objective, the north coast subarea quota will be allocated as follows: 72% for the month of May and 28% for the latter part of June. The fishery will open on the first Tuesday between May 9 and 15, and continue **§ 3** days per week (Tuesday, **Thursday, and through** Saturday) until the May allocation is projected to be taken. The fishery will then reopen **during the third week** in June **on the first Thursday following June 17**, and continue until the remaining quota is projected to be taken, **§ 2** days per week (**Thursday and Tuesday through** Saturday.) No sport fishing for halibut is allowed after September 30. If the fishery is closed prior to September 30, and there is insufficient quota remaining to reopen this subarea for another fishing day, then any remaining quota may be transferred inseason to another Washington coastal subarea by NMFS via an update to the recreational halibut hotline. The daily bag limit in all fisheries is one halibut per person with no size limit, **with an annual bag limit of five halibut per person.** A “C-shaped” yelloweye rockfish conservation area that is closed to recreational groundfish and halibut fishing is defined by the following coordinates in the order listed:

48° 18.00' N. lat.; 125° 18.00' W. long.;

48° 18.00' N. lat.; 124° 59.00' W. long.;

48° 11.00' N. lat.; 124°59.00' W. long.;
48° 11.00' N. lat.; 125° 11.00' W. long.;
48° 04.00' N. lat.; 125° 11.00' W. long.;
48° 04.00' N. lat.; 124° 59.00' W. long.;
48° 00.00' N. lat.; 124° 59.00' W. long.;
48° 00.00' N. lat.; 125° 18.00' W. long.;
and connecting back to 48° 18.00' N. lat.; 125° 18.00' W. long.

(iii) Washington south coast subarea.

This sport fishery is allocated 12.3 percent of the first 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) allocated to the Washington sport fishery, and 32 percent of the Washington sport allocation between 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) and 224,110 lb (101.7 mt) (except as provided in section (e)(3) of this Plan). This subarea is defined as waters south of the Queets River (47°31.70' N. lat.) and north of Leadbetter Point (46°38.17' N. lat.). The structuring objective for this subarea is to maximize the season length, while maintaining a quality fishing experience. The fishery will open on May 1. If May 1 falls on a Friday or Saturday, the fishery will open on the following Sunday. The fishery will be open Sunday through Thursday in all areas, except where prohibited, and the fishery will be open 7 days per week in the area from ~~Queets River~~ **47°25.00' N. lat.** south to **47°00.00' 46°58.00' N.** lat. and east of **124°40.00' 124°35.00' W.** long. ~~Beginning July 1, the halibut fishery will be open 7 days per week.~~ The fishery will continue until September 30, or until the quota is achieved, whichever occurs first. Subsequent to this closure, if there is insufficient quota remaining to reopen the entire subarea for another fishing day, then any remaining quota may be used to accommodate incidental catch in the nearshore area from ~~Queets River~~ **47°25.00' N. lat.** south to **47°00.00' 46°58.00' N.** lat. and east of **124°40.00' 124°35.00' W.** long. **on Fridays and Saturdays only,** or be transferred inseason to another Washington coastal subarea by NMFS via an update to the recreational halibut hotline. The daily bag limit is one halibut per person, with no size limit, **with an annual bag limit of five halibut per person.**

(iv) Columbia River subarea.

This sport fishery subarea is allocated 2.0 percent of the first 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) allocated to the Washington sport fishery, and 4.0 percent of the Washington sport allocation between 130,845 lb (59.4 mt) and 224,110 lb (101.7 mt) (except as provided in section (e)(3) of this Plan). This subarea also is allocated from the Oregon/California sport allocation the number of pounds equal to the Washington contribution. Oregon's contribution will be 2.0 percent of the total Oregon/California sport allocation. Any additional pounds needed to equal the number of pounds contributed to the Columbia River subarea from the Washington allocation will come from the Oregon Central Coast subarea allocation. This subarea is defined as waters south of Leadbetter Point, WA (46°38.17' N. lat.) and north of Cape Falcon, OR (45°46.00' N. lat.). The fishery will open on May 1, and continue 7 days per week until the subquota is estimated to have been taken, or September 30, whichever is earlier. Subsequent to this closure, if there is insufficient quota remaining in the Columbia River subarea for another fishing day, then any remaining quota may be transferred inseason to another Washington and/or Oregon subarea by NMFS via an update to the recreational halibut hotline. Any remaining state's quota would be transferred to that state. The daily bag limit is one halibut per person, with no size limit, **with an annual bag limit of five halibut per person.** No ~~groundfish~~ **rockfish** may be landed, ~~except sablefish when allowed by groundfish regulations~~, if halibut are on board the vessel.