

REPORT ON THE 2015 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) held their annual meeting January 26-30, 2015 in Vancouver, British Columbia. Overall, Area 2A fared relatively well due to biological considerations, and demonstrable socio-economic concerns. The reduction of Pacific halibut bycatch in the west coast trawl fishery, through the implementation of bycatch quota, continues to be applauded.

While things look positive in 2015, work with IPHC staff to improve the understanding of the portion of the stock in Area 2A and update the assessment, apportionment and harvest policy to better reflect what we see in our area is needed. Socio-economic information was critical to the arguments representatives from Area 2A presented to IPHC, the Conference Board (CB; harvester advisory group), and Processor Advisory Group (PAG). Providing a documented coastwide view of the socio-economic and cultural importance of all of the halibut fisheries in Area 2A would be greatly beneficial in 2016 and future years.

Stock Assessment

Ensemble modeling was employed again this year. A total of four models were developed combining long and short time series with geographic structures of coastwide and “areas as fleets”. In the “areas as fleets” models, biomass estimates were still calculated coastwide and each area was treated in the model as an individual fishing fleet, allowing area differences in selectivity, catchability, and survey to be incorporated into the stock assessment.

The results of the 2014 stock assessment were characterized as more “optimistic” (Figure 1; Figure 3, page 134, 2015 IPHC Annual Meeting Handout “Blue Book”). The models indicated a flat or slightly increasing biomass, and project a flat or gradually increasing trajectory through 2018 with removals equal to or less than 40 million pounds. The results of the 2014 assessment were very similar to those from the 2013 assessment, which agrees with the projection. The stock seems to be holding steady.

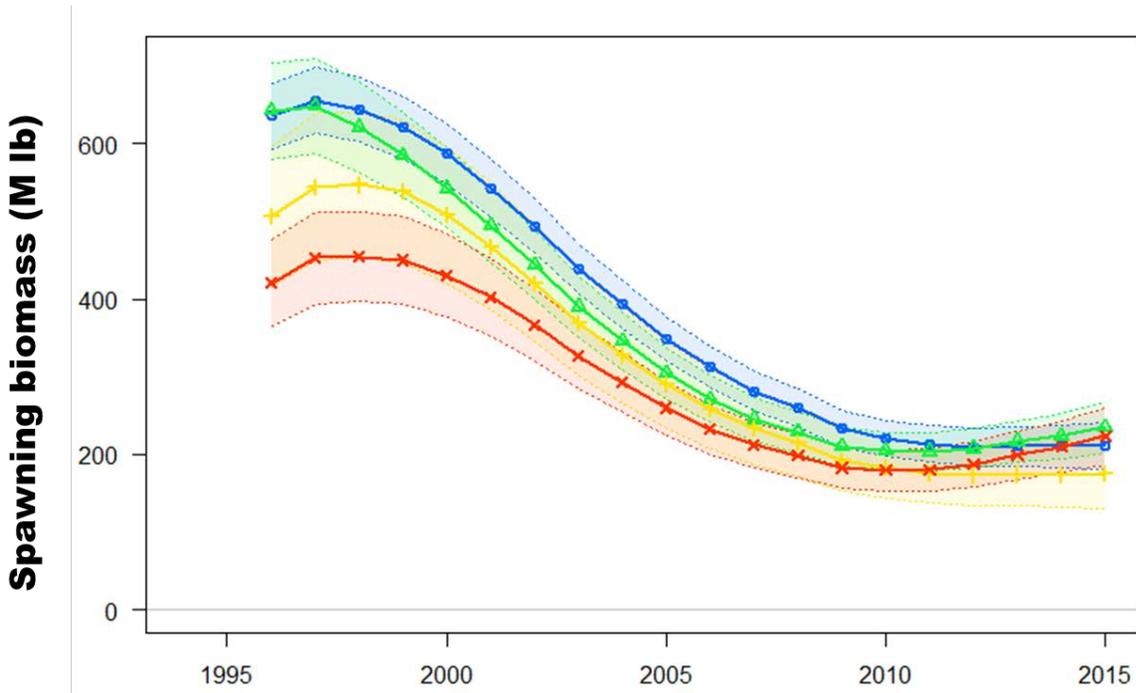


Figure 1. Comparison of models included in the 2014 stock assessment. Solid lines with points indicate point estimates, dashed lines and shading approximate 95% confidence intervals reflecting within-model uncertainty. (Figure 3, page 134, 2015 IPHC Annual Meeting Handout “Blue Book”)

Harvest Levels

Several alternative harvest regimes, ranging between status quo catch limits and the application of existing harvest policy to the new assessment results (i.e., “blue line” recommendation) were considered in detail by the advisory bodies and IPHC Commissioners. The “blue line” recommendation reflects the fishery constant exploitation yield (FCEY; the amount of allowable harvest) resulting from the current harvest rate policy (i.e., 21.5% harvest rate for areas 2A-3A and 16.1% in areas 3B-4CDE; 19.7% coastwide) applied to the estimated biomass. Both the CB and the PAG began the development of their recommendations with the harvest levels resulting from the “blue line”, and made adjustments to specific areas. Full PAG and CB reports can be found online at <http://www.iphc.int/meetings/2015am/bb/PAGMeetingMinutes2015.pdf> and <http://www.iphc.int/meetings/2015am/bb/CBMeetingMinutes2015.pdf>. These reports include the recommendation and rationale for each area. Table 1 compares status quo catch limits with the “blue line” recommendation, the CB and PAG recommendations and the levels ultimately approved by IPHC.

Table 1. Comparison of the 2014 catch limits, the “blue line” recommendations (in millions of pounds) consistent with current harvest policy, the recommendations of the Conference Board and Processor Advisory Group, and the Commission adopted FCEY by area.

Area	2014 Catch Limit	Blue Line	Conference Board	Processor Advisory Group	IPHC Approved
2A	0.96	0.75	0.96	0.96	0.97
2B	6.85	4.96	7.038	7.038	7.038
2C*	4.16	4.30	5.00	5.30	4.65
3A*	9.43	10.10	10.10	10.10	10.10
3B	2.84	2.46	2.65	2.46	2.65
4A	0.85	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39
4B	1.14	0.73	1.14	1.14	1.14
4CDE	1.285	0.52	1.285	1.285	1.285
Total	27.515	25.21	29.563	29.673	29.223

* Beginning in 2014 the catch limits for area 2C include commercial fishery wastage and guided recreational fishery components, consistent with the Catch Sharing Plans for those areas.

Final decisions reflected the “blue line” recommendation in areas 3A and 4A. All other areas had increases in their FCEY, in order to take into account socio-economic needs of fishing communities. Area 2A saw an increase of 10,000 pounds over 2014 in order to ensure the trigger allowing retention of halibut in the incidental sablefish fishery would be met. In area 4CDE, while the overall total allowable impact level increased compared to 2014, bycatch in the area also increased, resulting in a substantial increase in the total removals even at the 2014 fishery catch limit. Discussions are underway between industry, IPHC, and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to develop measures to reduce bycatch in the area.

Research

The 2013 and 2014 set-line survey expansions in Area 2A will not be continued in 2015. Updating the information in Area 2A was the start of a multi-year effort to update survey information coastwide. IPHC will be focusing on other areas over the next few years. The goal of the expansion was to update the Puget Sound addition that was first done in 2011, determine the southern extent of the Pacific halibut range, and fully expand the survey seaward to 400 fathoms and shoreward to 10 fathoms. That was successfully completed in 2014. There is interest in exploring use of the West Coast Trawl Survey to supplement information in area 2A. Trawl survey information could be calibrated with the deep sea stations (2011, 2014) and the California stations to create an index for those areas in years they are not included in the standard survey.

Catch Sharing Plan/Management Measures

The IPHC adopted the Area 2A Catch Sharing Plan without modification. The resulting allocations to fisheries/subareas are nearly identical to those in 2014, but reflect a 10,000 pound increase in the FCEY and the increased allocation to the California fishery.

The treaty and incidental commercial fisheries will open March 14, 2015 and run through November 7, 2015, or quota. The directed commercial fishery will open on June 24, 2015 and continue every other Wednesday through September 16, 2015, or attainment of the quota. Open periods will be 10 hours in length and trip limits (determined by IPHC staff) will be in effect.