

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN FOR THE 2017 FISHERY

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) solicited public input via e-mail, phone, webinar, and public meetings to discuss proposed changes to the Pacific halibut (halibut in remainder of report) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for fisheries off of Oregon in 2017. The public meetings occurred on August 1 in Brookings, August 2 in Coos Bay, August 3 in Salem, and August 15 in Newport. Based on public input, ODFW recommends the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) approve the following alternatives for public review:

Oregon-Overarching

Bycatch of Yelloweye Rockfish

During recreational halibut seasons, anglers incidentally catch yelloweye rockfish when targeting halibut. More specifically, during some years the bycatch mortality of yelloweye rockfish from all-depth halibut trips can be quite high. Currently the CSP only allows for changes to the halibut fisheries/seasons due to halibut quota attainment. It does not allow closure due to other factors such as bycatch of constraining species. Therefore, if management action is necessary to reduce overall recreational yelloweye rockfish impacts in Oregon, those management measures must be taken in other fisheries, in this case the recreational groundfish fishery.

During 2016, ODFW staff have heard concerns from many anglers about the halibut fishery being “a big part of the problem” of high yelloweye rockfish mortality, while being held harmless in terms of further restrictions. Anglers have requested ODFW explore mechanisms to allow changes to the recreational halibut fisheries to occur in response to yelloweye rockfish bycatch, in addition to halibut allocation attainment.

We anticipate having some sort of trigger in the CSP such that when yelloweye rockfish bycatch in the recreational halibut fishery reaches a certain percentage of the Oregon recreational yelloweye rockfish mortality guideline, a specified total yelloweye rockfish mortality level, or a certain encounter ratio (yelloweye rockfish/landed halibut) that the seasons may be modified inseason. Such measures would be intended to reduce the likelihood that other recreational fisheries will be constrained due to unusual yelloweye rockfish bycatch levels in the recreational halibut fishery. ODFW has not yet identified specific trigger metrics or language, and would like guidance from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on the feasibility of this type of mechanism.

Columbia River Subarea

No proposed changes

Central Coast Subarea

Seasons and allocations

The Central Oregon Coast Subarea is currently broken into three fishery seasons: 1) nearshore, 2) spring all-depth, and 3) summer all-depth. ODFW received a proposal near the end of the 2015 public input process which suggested reallocating the summer all-depth allocation 75 percent to the spring all-depth season and 25 percent to the nearshore season, thus eliminating the summer all-depth season.

Alternatives

Status Quo: The Central Oregon Coast Subarea allocations are 12 percent for the nearshore, 63 percent for the spring all-depth, and 25 percent for the summer all-depth.

Alternative 1: The summer all-depth allocation would be reallocated 75 percent to the spring all-depth and 25 percent to the nearshore. The Central Oregon Coast allocations would then be 81.75 percent for the spring all-depth and 18.25 percent for the nearshore. There would then be no summer all-depth season. Additionally the nearshore start date would be May 1.

Rationale

The Central Oregon Coast Subarea is currently divided into three fishery seasons (nearshore, spring all-depth, and summer all-depth) to provide a variety of halibut fishing opportunities. The summer all-depth season was set up to allow for all-depth halibut fishing later in the summer, when the weather is often better and more families have vacation time. From 2009-2015, the summer all-depth season lasted 2-4 days. This was due to a combination of good weather and opportunities to also catch other species, such as albacore tuna, encouraging more participation.

During the summer all-depth season, encounters with yelloweye rockfish have been reported to be higher than during the spring all-depth season. This may be due to a combination of the yelloweye rockfish being either more prevalent in the area, more “on the bite”, or with short seasons, anglers may not be as willing to move from known halibut grounds when they do encounter yelloweye rockfish.

Most regulations and restrictions in Oregon recreational halibut and bottomfish fisheries are designed to minimize impacts to yelloweye rockfish, an overfished species. The current annual bycatch mortality of yelloweye rockfish from bottomfish and halibut fisheries combined is very close to the yelloweye rockfish limit for Oregon recreational fisheries. Even a slight increase to those impacts has the potential to require additional management restrictions, or possible closure of Oregon recreational bottomfish fisheries. This has led some to question whether summer all-depth halibut fishing (2-4 days) are worth risking additional significant management restrictions in the bottomfish fishery.

This proposal to eliminate the summer all-depth season was supported by ODFW’s Sport Advisory Committee, and garnered enough discussion during public processes in 2015 and 2016 that ODFW believes it is worth including for further consideration and public input.

Allow Bottomfish Retention on All-Depth Openings when Bottomfish is also All-Depth

Retention of most species of bottomfish is prohibited during days open to all-depth halibut fishing to limit encounters with and mortality of yelloweye rockfish. The proposal is to allow retention of bottomfish on days open to all-depth halibut fishing if, and only if, the bottomfish fishery is also open to all-depth (within the other restrictions in bottomfish regulations such as species, bag limits, length limits, etc.).

Alternatives

Status Quo: Retention of most species of bottomfish, except Pacific cod, sablefish, and other flatfish species, are prohibited when halibut are onboard a vessel during all-depth openings.

Alternative 1: Retention of most species of bottomfish, except Pacific cod, sablefish, and other flatfish species, are prohibited when halibut are onboard a vessel during all-depth openings, unless bottomfish is also open to all-depth.

Rationale

In most years, the all-depth halibut openings occur during months when the recreational bottomfish fishery has depth restrictions (inside 30 fathoms from April-September). However, for the first time since 2006, the summer all-depth halibut allocation allowed all-depth halibut openings into October in 2015. The recreational bottomfish fishery depth restriction ended on September 30, and was open to all-depth from October 1 through December 31. Angler effort and yelloweye rockfish encounter rates are low during these off months, meeting the intent of the CSP provision, however current language prohibits anglers from retaining both halibut and most species of bottomfish on the same trip, even if the bottomfish fishery is open in all-depths. ODFW received several calls and e-mails expressing frustration in this regulation.

The prohibition on retaining most species of bottomfish on all-depth halibut days and the seasonal bottomfish depth restrictions are in place to reduce bycatch mortality of yelloweye rockfish. While this situation is not common, when both fisheries are open to all-depth, such as in October 2015, the prohibition of bottomfish with halibut on all-depth days during those times provides no benefit to reducing total yelloweye rockfish mortality and is therefore unnecessary.

Due to weather conditions, schools being in session, and many outdoors people moving on to hunting starting in September, the number of angler trips for both bottomfish and halibut decrease rapidly after Labor Day. In 2015, there were 230 angler trips targeting halibut on all-depth days in October (which was 0.74% of the annual effort for recreational halibut). This action is not anticipated to cause an increase in effort for either bottomfish or halibut, thus no additional impact on yelloweye rockfish mortality is expected.

Allow Retention of Other Flatfish Species When Participating in the Nearshore Fishery

The nearshore halibut fishery is currently restricted to shoreward of a line approximating the 40 fathom curve, as defined by waypoints. The bottomfish fishery is restricted to shoreward of a line approximating the 30 fathom curve from April-September in state regulations, and may be brought

inside 20 fathoms in some years to manage bycatch rates, including in 2016. Similar to all-depth days, this proposal would allow retention of other species of flatfish (flounders, soles, sanddabs) seaward of the seasonal bottomfish depth restriction when nearshore halibut fishing.

Alternatives

Status Quo: Bottomfish may only be retained in areas legally open to fishing for bottomfish

Alternative 1: Bottomfish may only be retained in areas legally open to fishing for bottomfish, except that other flatfish species are allowed outside of the seasonal bottomfish depth restriction when participating in the nearshore halibut fishery.

Rationale

Similar to allowing other flatfish species on all-depth days, this alternative allows retention of flatfish outside of the seasonal bottomfish depth restriction when participating in the nearshore halibut fishery. Sanddabs, soles, and flounders tend to live over soft substrate, away from the harder structure that yelloweye rockfish tend to prefer. Because yelloweye rockfish encounter rates are very low in flatfish habitat, this alternative will allow additional opportunity and should not result in any additional impacts to yelloweye rockfish.

This change would also allow for more consistent regulations between the all-depth and nearshore seasons.

Southern Oregon Subarea

No proposed changes

Catch Sharing Plan Language

ODFW does not have proposed changes to the language in the Catch Sharing Plan for the above items at this time. As the alternatives are finalized, ODFW will draft the appropriate language revisions to the Catch Sharing Plan, in consultation with staff at the NMFS West Coast Region.