

REPORT ON THE 2017 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC or Commission) held its annual meeting in Victoria, British Columbia the week of January 23, 2017. Area 2A was well represented by a number of treaty Indian tribes, state agencies, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC), and stakeholders from California, Oregon, and Washington. The Commission welcomed two new members from Canada and Linda Behnken from the United States. This was also Dr. David Wilson's first annual meeting since being selected as the Executive Director of the Commission.

The Commission held three public sessions that included reports from IPHC staff regarding stock status, apportionment methodology, Fishery Constant Exploitation Yield (FCEY, i.e., directed fishery catch limit) values for each area based on the current harvest policies, a report on the management strategy evaluation work associated with revising the Commission's harvest policy, and finally the determination of FCEY's for each of the management areas.

The Commission agenda included an opportunity for the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), NOAA Fisheries, and the state agencies to report on the 2016 fisheries and changes to the Catch Sharing Plan for Area 2A (CSP) that were adopted by the Council. In addition to myself, Gretchen Hanshew (NOAA), Lt. Cmd. Greg Cassad (United States Coast Guard), Robert Jones (NWIFC), Michele Culver (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife), Maggie Sommer (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife), and Jacque Hostler-Carmesin (California Fish and Wildlife Commission) provided comments to the Commission. The Commission adopted the Council's CSP as proposed at its Friday session.

IPHC uses an ensemble of four equally weighted model (two long-time series models and two short-time series models) to assess the stock status of halibut. The level of spawning stock biomass at the beginning of 2017 is consistent with the recent slow increase in the primary stock indices including fishery independent set-line survey weight per unit of effort (WPUE) and directed longline WPUE.

Considerable discussion was focused on how the overall FCEY is apportioned or distributed between catch areas. Commissioners expressed a desire to eliminate references to the Blue Line as a result of the frustration with the methodology of area apportionment. Area 2A in particular was placed at a distinct disadvantage because of the reduction in the overall percentage area 2A was provided under the current methodology of the overall FCEY.

Looking at the stock distribution overall and the fishery performance, Areas 2A, 2B, and 2C all showed strength in terms of the biomass and strong fishery performance. There is some concern with poor recruitment in recent years from a coastwide perspective and caution was expressed about excessive harvest rates in any particular year having the potential to lead to lower harvest quotas in the future.

The Commission has undertaken a management strategy evaluation process which will examine the harvest policy and apportionment methodology. Results and/or recommendations are not expected until 2018 at the earliest. Michele Culver is the Council's representative on that group and serves as co-chair with her Canadian counterpart.

The Commission utilized a risk table developed by the stock assessment authors to assist them in setting the coastwide harvest level. The risk table indicated that the risk to the stock of experiencing future declines increases at a fairly rapid rate if the total removals exceed 42 million pounds.

The Conference Board presented its recommendations relative to the 2017 area specific harvest quotas to the Commission that totaled 32.455 million pounds, which would result in a total removal of just over 44 million pounds when combined with projected bycatch and wastage. At a total removal level of 41.6 million pounds, the risk table suggested that there is a 68 percent chance the stock will decline by < 5 percent in 2018 and a 6 percent chance the stock would decline by >5 percent in 2018. After considering the Conference Board's recommendations and the other information presented by IPHC staff, the Commission adopted FCEY's for each management area that summed to 31.40 million pounds (with total removals projected to be 43.11 million pounds), including a 2A harvest quota of 1.33 million pounds.

The Commission also discussed the Area 2A survey with a particular focus on the number and distribution of survey stations. The discussion centered on two areas including the potential of adding up to 34 stations off California for the purpose of determining the southern extent of halibut distribution and adding up to 20 stations off Washington to cover the area between 100 -150 fathom and increasing the density of the area surveyed.

In summary, Area 2A was well represented at the IPHC annual meeting. The 2A delegation worked well together and was responsible for gaining support from the Commissioners to raising the halibut quota for Area 2A in 2017.

PFMC
02/14/2017