

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON
SCOPING OF CATCH SHARING PLAN CHANGES AND INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC
HALIBUT COMMISSION DATA REQUEST REPORT

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) would like to offer the following summary of our recreational halibut seasons for this year and some preliminary thoughts on the stakeholder proposals for changes to the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for the Council's consideration. Specifically, the stakeholder proposals include revising the Washington recreational seasons for 2018, removing the allocation of incidental halibut for the sablefish fishery, and requesting a change to the International Pacific Halibut Commission's (IPHC's) management areas.

2017 Recreational Seasons

First of all, WDFW is pleased to report on our success in keeping the Washington recreational halibut fisheries within their quotas this year. The major change that was made to the Catch Sharing Plan for this year was the restructuring of the subarea seasons such that the North Coast, South Coast, and Puget Sound would be open concurrently as a "statewide season." As a result, all of Washington's subareas were open for the first four days (May 4, 6, 11, and 21) and the North Coast and Puget Sound were open for (at least) three more days (May 25, June 1, and 4). While the South Coast season was similar in length to last year, there were a notable differences in the North Coast and Puget Sound seasons, as we anticipated their quotas would be taken within 4-5 days (Table 1).

Table 1. The number of recreational halibut season days by Washington subarea. (Note: 2017 is preliminary and includes openings through June 4.)

	Puget Sound	North Coast	South Coast
2012	26	7	5
2013	14	4	6
2014	11	4	5
2015	11	3	4
2016	8	6	4
2017	7	7	4

While we had proposed changes to the Catch Sharing Plan for 2017 to schedule the statewide season, we had not considered formal revisions relative to sharing amongst Washington recreational subareas. In practice, however, a slight overage in the South Coast was covered by an underage in the North Coast and Puget Sound. To address this for next year and beyond, WDFW has a couple of alternatives that we describe at the end of this report. These have not been vetted through a public process, but if the Council believes these may be reasonable approaches, then WDFW would solicit stakeholder input prior to the September and November Council meetings with the intent of providing a summary of the feedback and our recommendations at the appropriate time.

Additionally, from a data standpoint, by having a statewide season, we were able to improve our estimates of overall halibut angler effort. As effort is measured in trips, when the seasons were staggered, we could not determine the number of unique individuals participating in the fishery. While we have only one year of information, this gives us a better understanding of the number of anglers within our total sport license database who fish for halibut and how effort changes throughout the season (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of Washington anglers per day, by subarea.

Date	Puget Sound	North Coast	South Coast	Columbia R.	Total
4-May	5,211	2,316	1,067	82	8,676
6-May	4,601	1,961	940	85	7,587
11-May	2,170	786	750	34	3,740
21-May	3,345	1,071	1,116	44	5,576
25-May	1,479	287	Closed	22	1,788
1-Jun	N/A	N/A		Closed	N/A
4-Jun					

Factors that drive angler participation appear to be the timing within the season, weather conditions, timing of commercial fisheries, and other recreational fishing opportunities. Opening day has drawn and continues to draw the highest effort. May 11th and 25th had poor weather, whereas May 21st had great weather conditions.

Stakeholder Season Proposal for 2018

The Council has received a proposal for a Washington (and, potentially, West-Coast-wide) season structure that includes an annual bag limit of six halibut per angler coupled with a seven-month season (mid-March through mid-October). While on the surface this proposal appears to have merit, we do not believe it is a viable option for Washington.

With regard to the proposed annual bag limit of six fish, WDFW has had a catch record card system in place for several years whereby anglers submit their cards at the end of each license year. Our analysis of the catch recorded in 2008-2011 indicates that 84% of Washington’s anglers catch two or fewer fish, and 63% report catching only one. Therefore, having an annual limit of six fish would have very little effect. WDFW is certainly willing to consider an annual bag limit and, in the past, we have suggested a limit of two fish; however, the majority of our stakeholders had been reluctant to have a limit that low.

Relative to lengthening the season, we agree that angler safety is very important and the derby-style fishery in place now is far from ideal; however, we do not understand how a seven-month season could be accommodated given the recent 2A total allowable catches (TACs, or quotas), angler effort, and catch per unit of effort (CPUE) we have measured in the Washington sport fishery. Additionally, based on sampling data from previous years when the Puget Sound fishery opened in April, the CPUE tends to be considerably higher prior to May, which is contrary to the intent of extending the season length. However, WDFW does have an alternative described below, which may help spread the season over a longer period and address some of these safety concerns.

In addition to the comments received by the Council, WDFW also received dozens of comments from stakeholders who were dissatisfied with the season dates being too far apart (i.e., staggered, rather than consecutive), too few weekend days, and unpredictability in when the next opening would be announced.

Allocation of Incidental Halibut to the Primary Sablefish Fishery North of Pt. Chehalis

As we noted in our report in November 2016 (Agenda Item E.1.a, Supplemental WDFW Report 2, November 2016), we were interested in considering whether revisions to the sablefish incidental allocation are warranted. Given that the Puget Sound recreational halibut fishery has exceeded its quota since 2011 as described in our June 2016 report (Agenda Item E.1.a, Supplemental WDFW Report, June 2016), we would note that, in most years, the underage in the sablefish incidental fishery has helped offset this overage.

While we understand that the intent of the proposed alternative to revert the sablefish incidental allocation back to the Washington sport fishery is to potentially lengthen the recreational seasons, it would appear that the Puget Sound fishery has been utilizing (albeit post-season) a much higher proportion of the 70,000-pound set aside for the sablefish incidental fishery than that which would be allocated (i.e., 32% or 22,400 pounds) if the proposed change had been in effect (Table 3). If the maximum 70,000-pound set aside were allocated to the Washington recreational fishery, it could provide one additional fishing day in each subarea.

Table 3. Comparison of halibut catches relative to quotas in the incidental sablefish and Washington recreational fisheries.

	Incidental Sablefish			WA Recreational Subarea Catch Results			
	Quota	Catch	Difference	Puget Sound	North Coast	South Coast	Columbia R.
2012	21,173	4,867	16,306	-27,856	2,551	-3,728	5,990
2013	21,410	14,529	6,881	-36,557	174	653	7,218
2014	14,274	12,067	2,207	-49,158	-3,972	-3,164	4,265
2015	10,348	9,763	585	-38,198	13,332	6	2,198
2016	49,686	29,499	20,187	-45,306	613	-1,046	1,224

Needless to say, there are many issues to consider relative to adjusting or removing the incidental allowance for the sablefish fishery including the history of its development, which is described in our report from September 2010 (Agenda Item D.3.b, WDFW Report, September 2010), and the economic importance of this incidental allowance to the limited sablefish participants and Washington communities. For the past five years, the ex-vessel price for halibut in this fishery has ranged from \$6.63-\$11.56/pound with an average of \$8.66/pound. Given inter-annual variability in the incidental allowance and sablefish availability, this opportunity has provided an average of \$123,388 in ex-vessel revenue in recent years, but could produce over \$600,000 in revenue if the full 70,000-pound allowance were landed.

In addition to the potential economic impact, it is important to recognize that halibut catches are to a large degree unavoidable in the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis; therefore, the incidental catch would likely continue to occur, but it would all become “bycatch” or discarded, rather than catch that could be retained and sold, and that incidental catch would be deducted “off the top,” affecting the quotas for all West Coast halibut fisheries.

Stakeholder Proposal to Revise the IPHC Management Areas

With regard to the request for the IPHC to combine Management Areas 2A and 2B (and, potentially, with 2C), WDFW acknowledges that the boundary between 2A and 2B is political and not necessarily biologically based. However, it is important to note that, while the Halibut Convention does not specify national allocations, the sharing of the halibut resource—particularly between the U.S. and Canada—is a topic of significant interest for both parties.

Given that: 1) Area 2A has a relatively small proportion of the coastwide halibut TAC, 2) Area 2B typically has a TAC that is six to nine times higher than 2A, and 3) the stakeholder season proposal that accompanies this request would result in catch that is considerably higher than the 2A TAC, we do not see how this is a viable option. Canada would have nothing to gain, and could have a substantial loss under this proposal.

In general, 2B representatives have taken a favorable view toward the management practices in 2A, expressing an appreciation for the trawl halibut bycatch reduction we have achieved and, in spite of tensions between the U.S. and Canada relative to halibut sharing, IPHC Commissioners from both countries have shown support for slight increases in the 2A TAC in recent years. WDFW believes it is important we maintain our credibility and positive relationships we have built through the IPHC process and would recommend that the Council not advocate for any proposals regarding the allocation of halibut between the U.S. and Canada at this time.

Potential CSP Alternatives for 2018

As we noted above, WDFW has two preliminary alternatives to revise the CSP for 2018 relative to Washington recreational fishery allocations and season structure:

1. Maintain the current season structure (i.e., identify specific dates preseason that the season would be open) and provide flexibility relative to recreational sharing of quota among Washington subareas.

To maximize the geographic extent of the area that is open, increased flexibility relative to recreational sharing within Washington is needed. In particular, while the South Coast has relatively low effort, it also has a relatively high CPUE (Table 4), and does not have a proportional amount of quota.

Table 4. Daily CPUE, by Washington subarea, for 2017.

Date	Puget Sound	North Coast	South Coast	Columbia R.
4-May	0.12	0.63	0.89	0.98
6-May	0.08	0.62	0.92	0.78
11-May	0.13	0.68	0.89	1.18
21-May	0.11	0.71	0.88	0.80
25-May	0.10	0.54	Closed	1.00
1-Jun	N/A	N/A		Closed
4-Jun				

This alternative could be coupled with a sub-option—for example, pooling the subarea quotas for Puget Sound, North Coast, and South Coast (for 2017, this would be 230,868 pounds) to provide a five- or six-day statewide season, then reverting back to historical sharing for any remaining quota.

2. Provide a harvest opportunity that includes a statewide season in May, which would be limited by the Washington recreational quota, taking into account anticipated angler effort, CPUE, and varying weather conditions.

In general, the average weight of halibut tends to be higher in Puget Sound (25 pounds) compared to the North and South Coasts (15 pounds). For 2017, this would translate to about 2,600 fish in Puget Sound and 11,060 fish for the North and South Coasts combined. If the level of effort, CPUE, and weather patterns were the same, these amounts of halibut would provide for 8 days of fishing for Puget Sound and the North Coast, and 5 day for the South Coast. However, by including a couple of additional measures—reducing the possession limit in the field to one fish in any form and an annual bag limit of two halibut per angler—the season length could be extended to provide more time for each angler to harvest up to two fish.

Example Seasons for 2018 (using the 2017 quota):

1. Statewide opening day of the first Saturday in May (for 2018, this would be May 5) with a possession limit of one fish and annual bag limit of two fish.
2. Puget Sound and North Coast – Open every Saturday and Sunday in May and the first four weekends in June, which would be a total of 16 days. With the reduced bag and possession limits and more time for anglers to catch their fish, and given the typical weather patterns for this timeframe, this season structure could reasonably result in achieving, but not exceeding, the quota.
3. South Coast – Given the CPUE and high percentage of charter trips, we came up with two options:
 - a. Open the first Saturday in May, and every Sunday in May thereafter, for a total of 5 days; or
 - b. Open every Saturday and Sunday in May coupled with a restriction that each charter vessel be allowed to target halibut on only one of those days each week.

Again, as we noted above, these alternatives have not been vetted through a public process yet, but if the Council believes these may be reasonable approaches, then our intent would be to have stakeholder meetings prior to the September and November Council meetings and provide a summary of the feedback and our recommendations at that time.