

REPORT ON THE 2018 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (Commission, or IPHC) held its annual meeting in Portland, Oregon during the week of January 22, 2018. Area 2A was well represented by a number of treaty Indian tribes, all three state agencies, NOAA Fisheries, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, and stakeholders from California, Oregon, and Washington. The U.S. Commissioners remained the same as last year and included Jim Balsiger, Bob Alverson and Linda Behnken. This was Dr. David Wilson's second annual meeting since being selected as the Executive Director of the Commission.

The Commission again held expanded public sessions compared to past practices that included reports from IPHC staff regarding stock status, survey results, apportionment methodology, a shift to Total Constant Exploitation Yield (TCEY) values in place of Fishery Constant Exploitation Yield (FCEY, i.e., directed fishery catch limit) values for each area, and extensive discussions around low recruitment across all regions. Dr. Alan Hicks provided an update on the Management Strategy Evaluation work associated with revising the Commission's harvest policy.

The Commission agenda included an opportunity for the PFMC, NOAA Fisheries, and the state agencies to report on the 2017 fisheries and changes to the Catch Sharing Plan that were adopted by the Council. Phil Anderson (PFMC), Kathryn Blair (NOAA), LCDR Greg Cassad (USCG), Robert Jones (NWIFC), Heather Reed (WDFW), Lynn Mattes (ODFW), and Marci Yaremko (CDFW) all provided comments to the Commission. The Commission adopted the Council's 2018 Catch Sharing Plan as proposed at its Friday session.

IPHC continues to use an ensemble of four equally weighted models (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 2018 appears to be stable for now, but downward trends in the total biomass was estimated from the results of indices including fishery independent set-line survey weight per unit of effort (WPUE), directed longline WPUE, and Number of fish per Unit of Effort (NPUE).

A focal area of concern for Area 2A managers and stakeholders were the results of the 2017 survey. The areas of concern included, in part:

- 1) There was a substantial difference in the timing of the survey, for example the most northerly survey stations off of Washington have generally occurred in early June, this year they were surveyed in mid to late August.
- 2) The survey WPUE values off of Washington were down 70 percent from 2016 while the WPUE in the tribal fishery was up 22 percent.
- 3) A significant hypoxic event took place off of Washington and Northern Oregon in the summer of 2017 coinciding with when the set-line survey was done. Northwest Fisheries Science Center information indicates that the lowest oxygen levels observed over the past 12 years were observed.

- 4) In 2016 all the survey stations off of Washington had at least one fish whereas in 2017, 38 stations off of Washington recorded no halibut.

Combined, these extraordinary issues associated with the survey caused 2A representatives to voice concerns about relying on the survey for setting the 2018 2A TCEY.

During the staff's presentation, Dr. Stewart spent a significant amount of time talking about the various data that pointed to poor recruitment for the stock overall. The data indicates that 2005 was the last strong year class that is evident in the population. He pointed to data sources from each regulatory area that was absent of evidence of another strong year class. He noted that some of the more recent year classes haven't been observed yet, however he stressed that from what they can see, future yield will likely be declining.

The Commission heard an update on the ongoing Management Strategy Evaluation process (MSE) which is examining the harvest policy and apportionment methodology. Results and/or recommendations are not expected until 2019 at the earliest. Michele Culver and Tom Marking are participants in the MSE process from Area 2A.

The Conference Board presented its recommendations relative to the 2018 area-specific quotas (TCEY) to the Commission totaling 38.22 million pounds, but were unable to reach bilateral agreement on the TCEY value for Canada. The Processor Advisory Board also brought forward recommendations for TCEY values, based on a split vote (10 to 7), totaling 35.89 million pounds. Both the Conference and Processor Boards supported status quo TCEY (1.47 million pounds) for Area 2A.

There was considerable attention paid to the risk tables that staff had prepared to help inform the decision of setting the TCEYs. The risk table indicated that there is a 91 percent chance the spawning biomass would decline (<5 percent) in 2019 if the TCEY was set at 35.5 million pounds. From a fishery perspective, the risk table indicated that there is a 59 percent chance that the FCEY will be 10 percent less in 2019 if the 2018 TCEY is set at 35.5 million pounds.

Unfortunately, the Commission was unable to reach bilateral agreement for the 2018 TCEYs. Each Party put on the table the values that they supported on the final day of the meeting absent agreement. For Area 2A, the U. S. Commissioners supported a catch limit (FCEY) of 1.19 million pounds; however, it is unclear at this point whether this value will be the final number used for Area 2A in 2018.

PFMC
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