

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON THE 2019 HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN AND ANNUAL REGULATIONS

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) received an overview of the Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) agenda item from Ms. Robin Elke (Pacific Fishery Management Council [Council] staff) on our August 23 webinar. The GMT normally does not provide comment on changes to the CSP; however, the GMT has concerns about changes to the directed halibut fishery being included as part of the 2019 CSP process. This report highlights potential groundfish, economic, and management implications for the Council to consider when adopting options for public review.

Implications from changing the season structure of the directed halibut fishery

There have been several ideas about how to modify the directed commercial fishery, with a primary option being changing the length of time open (e.g., from a ten-hour opener every other week to a five day season) while maintaining the vessel-size-based trip limits. From a groundfish perspective, the GMT discussed the ability to assess what the potential yelloweye rockfish impacts might be amongst the season structure options previously brought forward by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC); ([Agenda Item J.1. Attachment 4, September 2018](#)). The West Coast Groundfish Observer Program (WCGOP) began deploying observers on directed commercial Pacific halibut vessels in 2017. This has provided one year of limited bycatch data in the directed commercial fishery, resulting in 0.68 mt of yelloweye rockfish bycatch, with seven percent of landings observed. The WCGOP also observed this fishery in 2018 and plans to continue through at least 2019, so additional data will be available in coming years. The GMT believes this data would be useful in assessing impacts amongst alternatives.

The proposal to increase the length of the directed commercial fishery could have significant impact on the current economics of the fishery because a longer season would require smaller vessels limits. As more time is added into the fishery, vessels will have an increased ability to move locations to more productive fishing grounds if fishing is poor at their first location. Trip limits may need to be adjusted lower due to the anticipated catch being spread throughout the fleet, instead of few highliners landing halibut. The GMT also has concerns about the economic viability of a longer season and associated lesser trip limits, as there has been testimony that the current, higher trip limits in the derby fishery barely cover trip costs for some.

Workload considerations of changing the management of the directed fishery

The GMT does have some concerns on the potential workload, and who will conduct that work, under each of the levels of engagement presented by IPHC, especially given the timing of final action on changes to the 2019 CSP in November 2018. Depending on the structure of the fishery, trip limit models may need to be developed and the fishery actively tracked inseason, unless IPHC continues to do that. The GMT workload is already heavy, and adding Pacific halibut management would make providing critical guidance to the Council on groundfish, as well as halibut, challenging. Furthermore, the Council does not have dedicated Pacific halibut advisory bodies. Current advisory panel membership on the Salmon Advisory Subpanel (SAS) and Groundfish

Advisory Subpanel (GAP) represents some, but not all, stakeholders that participate in the directed halibut fishery that would be impacted by the management scenarios considered.

Finally, Pacific halibut currently falls under the Groundfish Branch of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) West Coast Region (WCR). Any additional workload on Pacific halibut would need to be taken into consideration and prioritized with the groundfish items and rule makings. Some aspects of proposed changes would also impact the Permits Branch, such as issuance of licenses, and likely require additional resources over current levels.

PFMC
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