

ODFW REPORT ON THE NON-TRIBAL COMMERCIAL DIRECTED HALIBUT FISHERY

In June 2019, the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) agreed to proceed with transitioning management of the non-tribal commercial directed halibut fishery from the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) to the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and determined that it would use its September and November 2019 meetings to develop recommendations to the IPHC for management measures for the 2020 season. To help facilitate public awareness and input to the Council, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) held four public meetings in August (Astoria, Newport, Port Orford, and Coos Bay) to share information on the management transition and solicit input on fishing periods and trip limits for 2020. Twenty-two halibut industry members attended, including fishermen and processors, and several individuals unable to attend the meetings provided input directly to ODFW staff. This report provides a summary of all public input received by ODFW for the Council's consideration as it begins developing recommendations to the IPHC.

2020 Fishing Period Duration

ODFW staff and meeting participants discussed fishing period length and reviewed information provided by the IPHC for its 2019 annual meeting¹, including estimated trip limit reductions associated with longer fishing period alternatives, as well as the results of the IPHC's 2018 survey of license holders in which the majority of respondents favored longer periods. Discussion focused on the proportional reduction in trip limits associated with each fishing period duration, rather than the actual trip limit poundages which were based on the 2017 allocation.

Input heavily favored retaining status quo 10-hour fishing periods. A majority of fishermen did not want an extended period if the only other change is reduced trip limits. Additional comments on longer fishing periods included:

- Longer periods are expected to attract more participation, which would lead to still lower trip limits than initially estimated. Many fishermen considered the IPHC estimates to be optimistically high for that reason.
- A 2-day (48 continuous hours) period could worsen crowding on the halibut grounds, as fishermen would hear where fish are being caught, and have enough time to retrieve gear and move to those locations.
- A 2-day period could put small boats at a relative disadvantage, as they are less likely to have the hold space and/or quantity of gear to fish a 48-hour period without returning to port, offloading, and rebaiting. Some fishermen reported that it generally takes three days to gear up for one 10-hour opener, regardless of vessel size.
- A 2-day period could also disproportionately disadvantage small boats if the weather prevented them from fishing the first opener but large boats fished and took the entire

¹ <https://www.iphc.int/uploads/pdf/am/2019am/iphc-2019-am095-propa2.pdf>

sector allocation. In that event, small boats would not have any opportunity to fish (IPHC noted that a 2-day period might have status quo trip limits, but only one open period).

- Any period that extends overnight could increase wastage due to predation on hooked fish overnight.

Some fishermen requested extending the current periods by several hours (to 12 or 14 hours) to allow for additional catch. Others opposed this idea due to concerns that the additional catch would result in lower trip limits in subsequent fishing periods, or fewer periods.

A small number of fishermen preferred a 5 day fishing period, on the basis that it would likely allow vessels to choose the day(s) within that period with better weather, and might result in some relief of crowding by allowing the fishing pressure to spread over multiple days.

No support for fishing periods of other durations was expressed at the ODFW public meetings.

2020 Fishing Period Start

The first open fishing period has been the last Wednesday in June in recent years. Some fishermen proposed moving the first open fishing period to earlier in the year, such as to the last Wednesday in May, on the following rationale:

- Halibut are more available seaward of the 100 fathom boundary of the non-trawl rockfish conservation area (RCA) earlier in the year, and fishing earlier could reduce crowding if the halibut are more widely distributed and the fleet can spread out, as well as possibly increasing catch rates.
- Fewer interactions with blue sharks earlier in the year could reduce wastage from sharks cutting off gear while it is being retrieved.
- Better ability to participate in other summer fisheries (primarily albacore) in addition to halibut.
- Possible higher ex-vessel prices from getting halibut from this fishery on the market earlier.

Input on starting the fishery earlier was mixed. Some fishermen raised concerns about conflict with the recreational sector. Several recalled that in the late 1980's and 1990's there was significant conflict between the sectors and an eventual agreement that the primary recreational halibut fisheries would open first (in May) and then the commercial fishery would open in June; they recommended maintaining this approach.

ODFW mentioned the potential for earlier commercial fishing at separate public meetings with recreational fishermen, and received mixed feedback. Some thought it would not be a problem because there is little overlap between recreational and commercial halibut fishing grounds, given the current RCAs. Others were concerned that the commercial fishery might take more halibut before they migrate into shallower depths where most recreational fishing occurs, potentially reducing recreational catch rates and setting up real or perceived conflict between the sectors.

2020 Fishing Period Scheduling

All fishermen present unanimously, strenuously, and colorfully opposed the idea of two, 10-hour fishing periods on back-to-back days that was proposed by IPHC in the spring of 2019. Fishermen said they would all have to try to fish both days so as not to forego the income, but raised significant concerns about safety and logistical issues associated with the need to return to port, offload, rebait, and return to sea in such a short time between openers.

Meeting participants were satisfied with fishing periods open every other week.

Some fishermen suggested that crowding could be reduced by keeping 10-hour fishing periods, but splitting the fleet within each port into two groups with different fishing days – for example, half fish one week, and half fish the next. ODFW staff shared this idea at subsequent meetings; participants generally thought the concept is worth further consideration for 2020 or 2021. Initial questions raised included how the group assignments would be made (random, license holder choice, etc.), and whether this would affect trip limits.

Trip Limits

ODFW discussed the approach long used by IPHC to setting trip limits based on vessel size classes, and the change in allocation between size classes made by IPHC in 2019, which raised trip limits for smaller vessels and left them the same as 2018 for the largest size class. Some fishermen had concerns that the substantially higher limits for the smaller size class could be an incentive for new boats to enter the fishery. **The majority of fishermen preferred the trip limit distribution approach used by IPHC in 2019.**

Additional Issues

Several additional topics were raised at the public meetings:

Request to revise IPHC offload rule: All fishermen and buyers present at the meetings requested that the IPHC rule requiring that all halibut be offloaded to one processor be removed for this fishery in 2020. Currently, this IPHC rule states:

“The operator of any vessel that fishes for Pacific halibut during a fishing period when fishing period limits are in effect must, upon commencing an offload of Pacific halibut to a commercial fish processor, completely offload all Pacific halibut on board said vessel to that processor and ensure that all Pacific halibut is weighed and reported on State fish tickets.”

Many fishermen want the ability to deliver to multiple buyers, and small buyers want the option of buying only a partial load. Both felt this would offer valuable flexibility, and fishermen felt that it could allow them to obtain higher prices for some of their catch. State and federal rules regarding commercial fish landings would still apply to halibut landings if the IPHC rule were revised or removed, and are sufficient to ensure that all landed halibut are accounted for.

Request to consider establishing a control date: Although meeting participants understood that the Council does not intend to make changes to the management structure of the fishery until transition from IPHC is complete, many fishermen requested or supported consideration of

establishing a control date as soon as that would be possible. Fishermen were generally in agreement that it would be important to consider historic participation in this fishery if future changes are made, for example to limited entry permits or an individual fishing quota (IFQ) system.

Incidental fishery: Most fishermen expressed an interest in seeing the Council continue to explore the creation of an opportunity to retain halibut incidentally caught in fixed gear groundfish fisheries, by using a portion of the directed fishery allocation for this purpose². Proponents expect that this would reduce wastage of halibut caught in the groundfish (sablefish) longline fishery, and reduce pressure in the directed halibut fishery if participants had to choose either the directed or incidental opportunity.

ODFW thanks the NMFS West Coast Groundfish Observer Program for attending the public meetings and sharing information with fishermen on the upcoming streamer line requirements when fishing for groundfish with longline gear to mitigate seabird impacts, as well as participating constructively in the halibut discussions.

² https://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/D3b_ODFW_SEPT2010BB.pdf; https://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/D3b_SUP_ODFW2_SEPT2010BB.pdf; and https://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/D3b_SUP_ODFW_PPT_SEPT2010BB.pdf