



# FACT SHEET: PACIFIC HALIBUT

## THE HALIBUT FISHERY

Halibut are one of the most valuable fish species in the northern Pacific. Longlining is the main commercial gear used to target halibut, although there is some allowance for incidental catch in the commercial salmon troll and the primary sablefish fisheries. In 2016, just under 42 million pounds of halibut were removed from the population coastwide from all removals.

Halibut is also a very popular target for sport fishers. Oregon, Washington, and California have catch limits for recreational halibut fishing, as with commercial and tribal halibut fishing. The demand for halibut sport fishing is so high that closed seasons, bag limits, and possession limits, are all used to control the recreational fishery and extend the season as long as possible.

Pacific halibut fishing is an important part of several tribal cultures, and many tribal members participate in commercial, ceremonial and subsistence fisheries. Directed, non-treaty commercial fishing north of Pt. Chehalis, Washington is prohibited in order to allow the tribes to harvest their allocation of halibut.

## THE FISH

Pacific halibut (*Hippoglossus stenolepis*) are large flatfish found on the continental shelf from California to the Bering Sea. Halibut have flat, diamond-shaped bodies, can weigh up to 500 pounds, and can grow to eight feet long.

Adult halibut migrate long distances from shallow summer

feeding grounds to deeper winter spawning grounds. Larvae begin life in an upright position with eyes on both sides of their head. When they are about an inch long, the left eye migrates over the snout to the right side of the head, and the color of the left side fades.

When the young fish are about six months old, they settle to the sea floor, where the protective coloring on their “eyed” side effectively camouflages them. Female halibut mature at around 12 years, while males mature at around eight years. Adult fish tend to remain in the same area year after year, except for their migration to deepwater spawning grounds. The oldest halibut on record, both male and female, is 55 years old. Adult halibut are sometimes eaten by marine mammals and sharks, but are rarely preyed upon by other fish.

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

To propose or comment on a change to the Catch Sharing Plan, please submit comments to Kelly Ames (Kelly.ames@noaa.gov), Pacific halibut staff officer, or to pfmc.comments@noaa.gov; or send a letter to the address below.

## MANAGEMENT

The U.S. West Coast non-Indian commercial directed halibut fishery uses a derby fishery system of ten-hour seasons and fishing period limits. Total catch is set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC), and the Council then allocates that total among the following sectors: treaty Indian commercial and ceremonial & subsistence, sport, commercial non-Indian, directed longline, incidental salmon troll, and incidental longline in the primary sablefish fishery, north of Point Chehalis, Washington.

Each year the IPHC conducts a stock assessment to estimate the abundance of Pacific halibut using commercial fishery data and scientific surveys.

The IPHC uses a decision table to report the results of the annual stock assessment, effectively separating the science from policy. The decision table presents the IPHC Commissioners with a range of coastwide harvest levels, each with estimates of risk in terms of stock and

## WHERE TO FIND REGULATIONS

NMFS Area 2A Halibut Hotline (for sport fishing): 1-800-662-9825, press 5

Commercial catch information from the International Pacific Halibut Commission (<http://tinyurl.com/nznjcd5>)

Sport catch information from the International Pacific Halibut Commission (<http://tinyurl.com/qeoqbnl>)

Oregon sport halibut fishery regulations (<http://tinyurl.com/pkv5jzr>)

Washington sport halibut fishery regulations (<http://tinyurl.com/nc69g69>)

California sport halibut fishery regulations (<http://tinyurl.com/yb2x96dm>)

# FACT SHEET: HALIBUT

fishery trend and status metrics.

The stock assessment is performed at a coastwide scale, but IPHC sets catch limits based on regulatory areas. Area-specific biomass estimates are derived by dividing up the coastwide estimate using the observed survey catch rates and bottom area, and accounting for hook competition from other species, and the timing of the survey and fishery removals. The Commissioners consider this data and the current harvest policy in determining the final catch targets for each year.

Currently, area-specific harvest rate targets are used to determine how many fish may be caught in a specific area. Area 2A is where halibut fisheries managed by the Pacific Council occur. The harvest rate is 21.5% for Areas 2A-3A (West Coast, British Columbia, Southeast Alaska, Gulf of Alaska), and 16.125% for Areas 3B-4CDE (Alaska peninsula, Aleutian chain, Bering Sea).

These rates are applied to the biomass estimates to generate a “total constant exploitation yield” (TCEY). Non-directed removals (such as recreational, personal use or subsistence removals, commercial fishery wastage, and bycatch in non-target fisheries) are then subtracted from the TCEY. The result is the “fishery constant exploitation yield” (FCEY), which is the amount available for harvest by the directed fisheries. The FCEY is then used by the regulatory agencies in each region to determine allocations and specific quotas.

For more information on how the FCEY is divided off the West Coast (Area 2A), see the Halibut Catch Sharing Plan, below, and How are Halibut Catch Limits Determined? (<http://tinyurl.com/o9rjxs6>) from the IPHC.

Date	Halibut management action
January	International Pacific Halibut Commission sets the total allowable catch.
September Council meeting	Council solicits proposed changes to the Catch Sharing Plan
Between Sept. & Nov. meetings	Council takes comments on proposed changes to Catch Sharing Plan.
November meeting	Council makes final recommendations for changes.

## HALIBUT HISTORY

Halibut have been fished for hundreds or thousands of years by native Americans on the West Coast. The U.S. commercial fishery started in 1888, when halibut were first landed in Tacoma, Washington. Many of these fishermen had fished halibut in Norway. Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders are also found in the West Coast halibut fishery.

Because halibut can be kept for long periods of time without spoiling, they were a popular target. In the 1890s, a fleet of sailing vessels with two-man dories fished for halibut from the West Coast. Large steam-powered vessels soon entered the industry, and by the 1910s it became clear that halibut stocks were suffering from overfishing.

In 1923 the U.S. and Canada signed a convention on halibut, creating what was eventually called the International Pacific Halibut Commission. In 1924 the Commission implemented a three-month winter closure – the first management action to affect halibut.

The convention was revised several times over the years. The most recent change occurred in 1979, when each government was allowed to establish more restrictive regulations. Canada created a limited entry system in 1979 and an individual vessel quota system in 1991. Alaska created an individual fishing quota system in 1995, similar to the Canadian program, except that shares were issued to individuals instead of vessels. Also in 1995, non-tribal commercial fishers in Oregon, Washington, and California had to make a choice: participate in the sport charter industry for halibut, the commercial directed fishery, or the halibut incidental fishery in the salmon troll fishery.

## CATCH SHARING PLAN

The Halibut Catch-Sharing dictates how the IPHC and National Marine Fisheries Service will divide the total allowable catch (TAC) for Oregon, Washington, and California halibut fisheries (Area 2A). The total TAC is set each January by the IPHC, which also endorses the Catch Sharing Plan allocations set by the Council. Allocations between some recreational areas are subject to inseason and other changes. For a description of how the halibut harvest is shared, see the 2017 Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan for Area 2A (<http://tinyurl.com/y7lox37y>) which was adopted by the Council and recommended for NMFS implementation.

*Updated July 2017*