



# FACT SHEET: PACIFIC HALIBUT

21

## THE FISH

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

Eggs and larvae drift passively in ocean currents, generally to the north and west. To counter this drift, young Pacific halibut migrate long distances to the east and south. By the time they are large enough to be caught in the commercial fishery, much of this counter-migration has taken place, but many adult Pacific halibut continue to migrate along the continental shelf. The stock also tends to move to deeper depths in winter for spawning and to shallower waters in summer for feeding.

Female Pacific halibut mature at around 12 years, while males mature at around eight years. The oldest Pacific halibut on record, both male and female, is 55 years old.

## WHERE TO FIND REGULATIONS

Commercial catch information from the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC): <https://iphc.int/management/fisheries/directed-commercial-fisheries/directed-iphc-regulatory-area-2a>

Recreational catch information from IPHC: <https://iphc.int/management/fisheries/sport-recreational-fisheries/sport-iphc-regulatory-area-2a>

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

Sport halibut fishery regulations:

Oregon: [tinyurl.com/pkv5jzr](https://tinyurl.com/pkv5jzr)

Washington: [tinyurl.com/nc69g69](https://tinyurl.com/nc69g69)

California: [tinyurl.com/yb2x96dm](https://tinyurl.com/yb2x96dm)

Adult Pacific halibut are sometimes eaten by marine mammals and sharks, but are rarely preyed upon by other fish.

## THE FISHERY

Pacific 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 2018, just under 39 million pounds of Pacific halibut were removed from the population coastwide from all removals.

Pacific halibut fishing is an important part of several tribal cultures, and many tribal members participate in commercial, ceremonial and subsistence fisheries.

## MANAGEMENT

Total catch is set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission ([iphc.int](http://iphc.int)), 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 scientific surveys and commercial fishery data.

The IPHC uses a decision table to report the results of this 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 fishery trend and status metrics.

The stock assessment is performed at a coastwide scale, but IPHC sets catch limits based on regulatory areas. Area-

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

To propose or comment on a change to the Catch Sharing Plan, please submit comments to Robin Ehlke ([robin.ehlke@noaa.gov](mailto:robin.ehlke@noaa.gov)), Pacific halibut staff officer, or send a letter to the address below. To comment on Council agenda items, see our e-Portal (<https://pfmc.psmfc.org/>)

# FACT SHEET: HALIBUT

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.

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.

The catch level set by the Commission for each IPHC Regulatory Area is expressed as “total constant exploitation yield” (TCEY). For IPHC Regulatory Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington), non-directed removals for commercial fishery discards and bycatch in non-target fisheries are then subtracted from the TCEY to produce the “fishery constant exploitation yield” (FCEY), which is the amount available for harvest by the directed fisheries. The

FCEY is then used by the PFMC Catch Sharing Plan to determine allocations and specific quotas.

## CATCH SHARING PLAN

The Halibut Catch Sharing Plan dictates how the IPHC and National Marine Fisheries Service will divide the total allowable catch (TAC) for Washington, Oregon, and California Pacific halibut fisheries (Area 2A). The TAC is set each January by the IPHC, noting the Catch Sharing Plan allocations set by the Council. Allocations between some recreational areas are subject to in-season and other changes. For a description of how the Pacific halibut harvest is shared, see the Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan for Area 2A.

*Updated January 29, 2019*

## 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.