

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON THE 2020 RECREATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT FISHERY

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) announced the closure of the recreational Pacific halibut fishery on Tuesday, August 11 at 11:59 p.m. for the remainder of 2020. Based on the most recent catch projections, it is expected the 2020 California recreational quota of 39,000 pounds has been taken.

The quota amount is determined annually through an international process and is largely driven by results from the annual stock assessment conducted by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC). CDFW tracks the progress of the fishery each year, to ensure catch amounts do not exceed the California quota.

May/June Catch

California Recreational Fishery Survey (CRFS) sample data and estimates for May and June are not available due to COVID. Staff used average catch estimates for those months from 2017-2019 and reduced those values using empirical but limited information from visual observations of anglers, boats and trailers which are a good indicator of fishing effort. Preliminary average proxy values for May and June are 4,877 net pounds.

July 1-July 26 Catch

CRFS resumed modified recreational fishery monitoring on July 1, and weekly catch projections resumed. During this time 91 fish were reported kept by anglers. As of the catch update through July 26 projected catch (including the May/June proxy averages) was 14,760 net pounds, or 38 percent of the quota.

July 27-August 2 Catch

During the week of July 27-August 2, an unprecedented 256 Pacific halibut were reported kept by anglers. This is a record-high weekly value (Figure 1) leading to new monthly high totals for July 2020 as well. For comparison, prior to this event the record *monthly* high total sampled fish was 198 fish sampled in July 2014. Anecdotal information on the recreational Pacific halibut fishery in July and early August 2020 back up extremely favorable conditions and success for anglers.

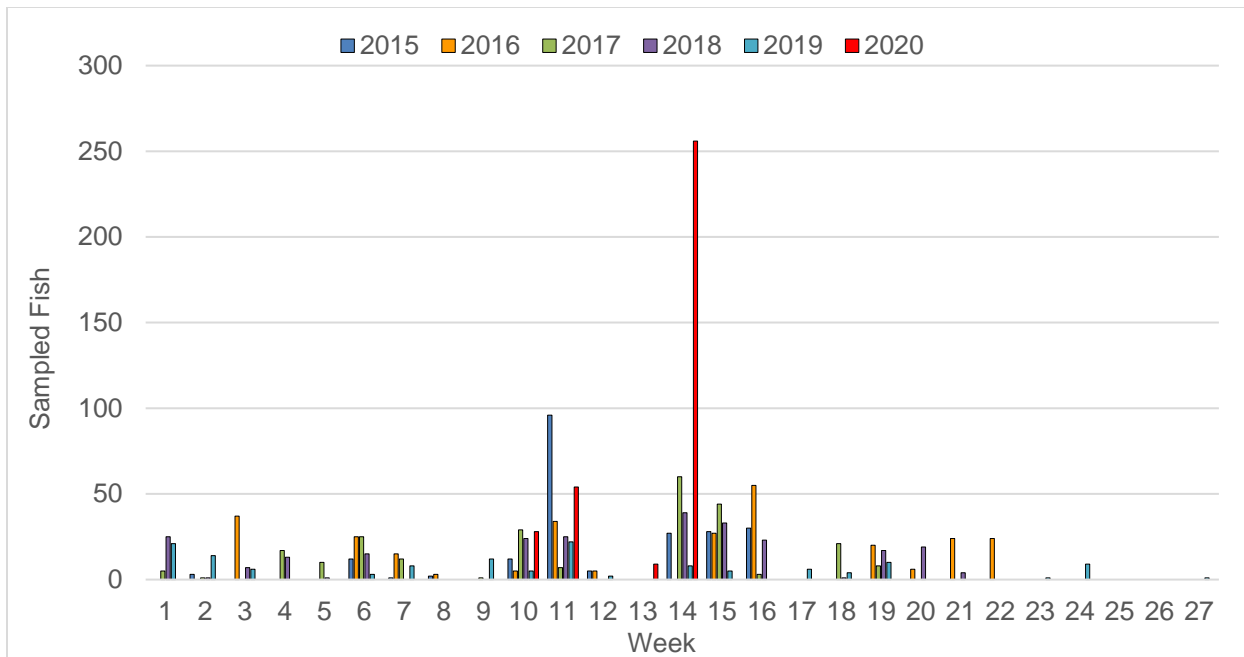


Figure 1. Weekly number of sampled Pacific halibut from 2015-2020. Week 1 begins May 1 and Week 27 ends October 31. The fishery closed due to projected quota attainment on August 13 in 2015, September 24 in 2016, September 11 in 2017, and September 21 in 2018. Sampling activities during May and June 2020 were cancelled due to COVID. Data are from CDFW.

Catch Compared to Quota

Current catch projections, including May/June average proxies, are **42,561 net pounds, or 109 percent** of the 39,000 net pound quota amount (Table 1 and Figure 2). Based on the current season projection, **it is expected the quota was attained on Sunday, August 2. On August 6 and August 7, CDFW consulted with the IPHC, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and Pacific Fishery Management Council to discuss take to date and determine a closure date. Formal authority to close the fishery resides with NMFS, which took action to close the fishery following consultation with CDFW.**

Unfortunately, the closure is likely to catch some by surprise, as California did not need to close the fishery in 2019 due to quota attainment. People also may be fishing more now, after postponing trips earlier in the spring during shelter-in-place orders. The recreational ocean salmon fishery in northern California (KMZ) will close August 10, further limiting the fishing opportunities on California’s north coast.

Reports from the recreational and commercial fisheries this year indicate many fish being caught off California are smaller than the average seen in prior years (20-25 pounds) with this year’s fish potentially being in the 10-pound range. However, CRFS samplers are not examining (measuring/weighting) the fish this year due to social distancing requirements necessary to maintain staff health and safety during the COVID pandemic. Following standard estimation methods, in the absence of weight data, CDFW will use prior year average fish sizes when calculating monthly catch estimates for this year. This may result in over-estimation of catch (pounds) in July and August 2020.

Table 1. Preliminary 2020 Pacific halibut catch estimates in California by month through August 2, 2020. Data are preliminary and subject to change.

Month	CDFW Projection (net pounds)	Preliminary Avg Proxy Value (net pounds)
May	NA	2,521
June	NA	2,356
July	26,064	-
August	11,620	-
September	-	-
October	-	-
Total	42,561	

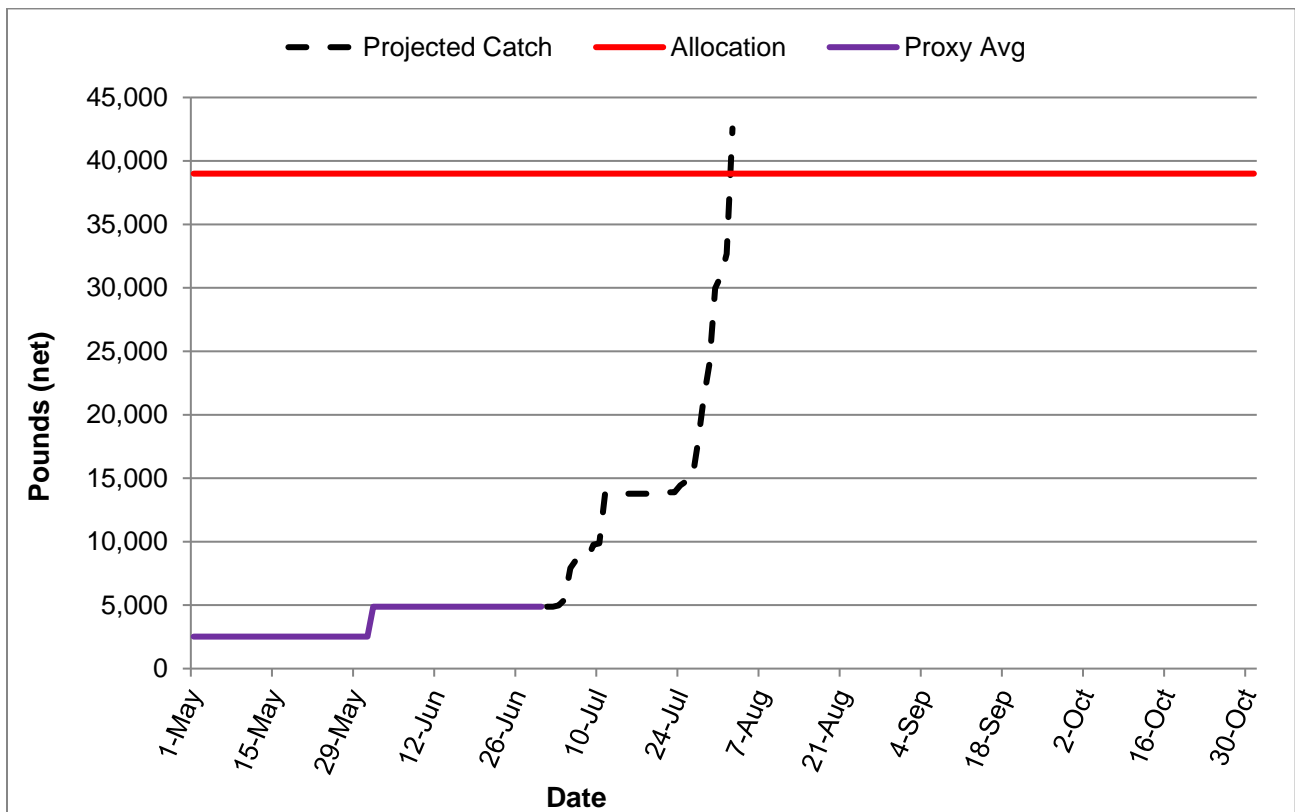


Figure 2. Pacific halibut inseason catch tracking for 2020 recreational season compared to the quota. The 2020 quota amount is 39,000 pounds. Data are from CRFS and CDFW through August 2, 2020. Data are preliminary and subject to change.