

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON 2021 DIRECTED COMMERCIAL HALIBUT FISHERY RECOMMENDATIONS

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) will consider and adopt management measures for the commercial nontribal directed halibut fishery in Area 2A (Washington, Oregon, and California) in 2021 via its interim and annual meeting process; see <https://www.iphc.int/>. The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) may develop recommendations to the IPHC regarding 2021 management measures at the Council's September and November meetings. In order to facilitate public input on this topic, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) held a public webinar with commercial halibut industry members on July 29, 2020. This report summarizes input received at that meeting and via additional phone calls from fishermen who could not attend. Some of the input may be outside the scope of topics the Council may wish to consider addressing in a recommendation to IPHC on the 2021 fishery; however, it is documented here to present a full picture of the issues and ideas raised, and may be useful as a future reference. Agenda Item I.3.a ODFW Report 2 presents a preliminary ODFW recommendation for consideration at this meeting.

ODFW distributed a meeting notice by email to all IPHC 2A commercial directed halibut license holders with Oregon mailing addresses. Approximately 16 halibut industry members participated, including fishermen and buyers. The range of input includes feedback on the 2020 season and ideas for 2021 and beyond, presented below. ODFW would like to thank meeting participants and callers for constructive, creative, and solution-focused discussions.

The primary concern expressed by almost everyone was that the 2020 trip limits were too low, especially for the first opening. This caused some fishermen to sit out the first opening because it wasn't worth gearing up for. Discussion focused largely on the high number of licenses issued in 2020 as the cause of the low trip limits, and multiple ideas on how to address this were suggested.

During the public meeting, ODFW explained that we anticipate that the IPHC is likely to consider only relatively minor adjustments to the fishery for 2021. Some of the suggestions documented in this report may be more appropriate for future consideration after transition of management from the IPHC to the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service is complete, at which time the Council may decide whether, how, and when to evaluate possible additional changes to the fishery.

If the Council chooses to develop recommendations to the IPHC for 2021, they will be finalized at the Council's November, 2020 meeting and transmitted by letter to the IPHC.

A. Comments on the 2020 fishery

- 3 day (58 hour) fishing periods: "Not 100% sold on them, but not too bad"; "They did give some of the smaller boats a chance".
- Trip limits were too low, especially for the first period. "Craziest fishery I've ever seen this year." "How does a guy find crew when trip limits are so low?"
- Beginning trip limits deterred a lot of H class vessels in particular

- Low halibut price in 2020 added to the problem
- Too many licenses issued – resulted in low trip limits
- Lots of speculative license applications, including by vessels unsuitable for halibut fishing (“ski boats”, do not have longline gear)
- An expectation of trip limits similar to 2019, with longer fishing periods, probably drew a lot of license applications from new vessels
- The fact that a relatively small proportion of licenses issued actually fished is a problem

B. General comments on future management of the fishery

- People who have fished historically and “earned their way” should benefit in this fishery
- Keep the door open for new entrants (but they don’t need equal opportunity right away). “You’ve got to let little guys in, that’s our future.”
- People who are really involved in the fishery should have the most say in its future.

C. Input on fishing periods, season start, and trip limit structure in 2021:

At the public meeting, ODFW asked whether participants were satisfied with status quo or would like to see any changes next year in three key aspects of the current fishery: duration of fishing periods, season start, and whether to base trip limits on vessel size classes, as the IPHC has traditionally done. While there was some discussion on these, a primary concern for almost all commenters was that *2020 trip limits—especially for the initial period—were so low that they deterred participation and reduced efficiency and profitability.* Public input included multiple ideas to address this problem in the immediate and longer-term future; they are listed in sections D and E. This section focuses on the three original questions.

1. **Fishing period duration:** The majority of input was neutral to slightly in favor of keeping the 58 hour fishing periods as in 2020, although noting very strong concerns about the low trip limits that resulted from the longer fishing periods and the number of new licenses. Several fishermen said that the 10-hour periods were fine and worked for many years.
2. **Season start date:** Input was mixed on the timing of the first opening. As in recent discussions, some commenters requested an earlier start. Rationale included:
 - Accessing more halibut before they move inshore and inside the fixed gear Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) over the summer;
 - Reducing shark depredation/gear cutting which may be worse later in the summer;
 - Avoiding conflict with the tuna fishery beginning in midsummer – later halibut fishing means lost opportunity in the tuna fishery (or forgoing halibut opportunity to stay tuna fishing).

Specific suggestions were to start “as early as possible”, “one month earlier”, and “a couple weeks earlier”.

Others favored retaining the 2020 status quo opening on the fourth Monday in June.

- Some commenters recalled significant conflict between the sport and commercial sectors in the past when the seasons overlapped more than they do currently. Participants noted that although in some areas, the sport and commercial fleets fish

in different areas because of the commercial RCA restrictions, in other parts of 2A they both fish the same spots.

- If the start date was earlier, there might be more participants, because vessels that normally leave for Bristol Bay, or other fisheries, would still be here. An earlier season start could mean more licenses issued/vessels fishing and lower trip limits.
- A lot of Alaska halibut on the market in April and May means the price is generally lowest then. In addition, tourism on the Oregon coast—a significant driver of demand for fresh fish in restaurants and markets, and therefore halibut price—is higher in summer months than in April and May.

3. **Vessel size class approach for trip limits:** Input was mixed on whether to continue with different trip limits by vessel size class, or to use one trip limit for all participating vessels.

D. Additional input for the 2021 fishery:

Commenters also provided the following suggestions for the 2021 fishery; however, some may be more appropriate for consideration following the management transition.

4. **Split loads:** Allow loads to be split and delivered to multiple buyers, including offloading at different locations [within a port]. Current regulations developed by IPHC and approved by NMFS ([85 FR 14586, March 13, 2020](#)) require in section 14(2) that “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” and in section 21(4) that “It shall be the responsibility of a vessel operator who lands Pacific halibut to continuously and completely offload at a single offload site all Pacific halibut on board the vessel”. The intent of the public request to allow split loads is to give vessels a chance to obtain the best total value for their fish, which may be by delivering a load to more than one buyer, and to remove an obstacle to small buyers getting access to halibut. *This was identified by fishermen and buyers as a high-priority item.*
 - The requirement to take the full load disadvantages small buyers in particular, who do not have the capacity to process a large load. “Little buyers and fresh fish are where the value is in halibut on the Oregon coast.”
 - Some vessels that want to split loads are able to work with a processor to offload all fish onboard and then take part of the load to a different buyer, but some vessels say their processor is not willing to do that.
 - Regarding a concern that if the requirement to offload all halibut at once were removed, there could be a higher risk of some halibut not being accounted for on fish tickets because of its relatively high value, commenters observed that salmon has a higher value than halibut and salmon loads can be split within a port.
5. **Requirement to confirm intent to fish:** Require fishermen to call in two (or three) weeks before the first fishing period and confirm that they are going to fish. IPHC would then use the number of confirmed licenses to determine trip limits, rather than total licenses

issued. The intent is that by identifying vessels that actually plan to fish, closer to the season opening date, initial trip limits might be higher.

6. **Lower trip limits for new entrants:** Issue two different license types: vessels with a history of making any landings (regardless of poundage) in the last two or three years would receive a license with higher trip limits, and new entrants (no recent landings history) would receive a license with lower trip limits.
 - An additional suggestion was that holders of the lower-limit licenses would be eligible for the higher-limit license after a certain number of years of participation.
7. **License fee or deposit:** Charge a deposit or a fee for a license. A deposit would be refunded if a landing is made. The intent is to deter speculative license applications that have no solid intent to fish. (Meeting participants favored a deposit; ODFW indicated that we expect that this may not be possible.)
 - A variation on this suggestion was to charge a deposit only to vessels that haven't made halibut deliveries in the past three years.
8. **License lottery for new entrants:** Issue licenses to applicants with landings history in the last two or three years, and issue a limited number of additional licenses by lottery.
9. **Sunset date for new licenses:** Do not issue licenses to new participants in 2021.
10. **Owner-on-board requirement:** Consider an owner-on-board requirement (with a medical exemption); this could help reduce the number of license applications.

E. Suggestions for future consideration (under PFMC/NMFS management)

11. **Nearshore allocation:** Allocate some quota to a “nearshore” subsector of the fishery – inshore of the RCA. Perhaps a different license type.
12. **Directed and incidental licenses:** Issue two (or three) different license types: a directed license and an incidental license; possibly also a nearshore license (perhaps a subset of directed licenses, although this was not discussed in detail). As in past discussions with industry, there was a general desire for an incidental retention opportunity with sablefish, which would mean less discard and wastage, and potentially higher value for the halibut due to an extended period of smaller landings.
 - Meeting participants advised caution in developing an incidental fishery structure to not let the big sablefish tier vessels take over and get all the halibut.
13. **Allow halibut fishing inside the RCA:** there was strong interest in fishing inside the non-trawl RCA to access halibut. ODFW reminded participants that consideration of changes to the non-trawl RCA is under discussion at the Council and has been identified as a high priority, although it is expected to take some time to work through that process.