

## WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2021 ANNUAL REGULATIONS

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) held a recreational halibut meeting to identify and discuss proposed changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) via webinar, on August 19, 2020. The 2020 halibut season in Washington was significantly impacted by restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic ([Agenda Item B.1.a, Supp. WDFW Report 1, April 2020](#)).

### 2020 Halibut Season Overview

The eastern portion of the Puget Sound subarea (Marine Areas 6 – 10) was scheduled to open on April 16, 2020, three days per week (Thursday through Saturday) and the western portion of the Puget Sound subarea (Marine Area 5) and coastal subareas (Marine Areas 1 – 4) were scheduled to open April 30, 2020 under a two or three day per week structure. In addition to allowing for earlier opening dates and consecutive fishing days, the 2020 season structure adopted a strong overlap in fishing days between subareas while accommodating traditional fishing days preferred by different subareas.

However, on March 25, 2020, WDFW closed all recreational fishing and around the same time, the Makah and Quileute Tribes closed their reservations to protect the health and safety of the public and local communities. This included the closure of the ports of Neah Bay and La Push to the public, which are important access points for coastal fisheries.

With input from stakeholders, public health experts, port commissioners, and tribal co-managers, WDFW began re-opening fisheries gradually, on a case by case basis. Recreational halibut fishing re-opened in all Puget Sound subareas (Marine Areas 5 – 10) on May 20<sup>th</sup> under an every-other-day approach that departed from the original two or three day per week structure to discourage overnight travel while the Governor's Stay Home, Stay Healthy directive was still in place. The Puget Sound subarea was scheduled to close at the end of June to avoid overlap with salmon seasons which opened in July.

Based on several factors, including input from local health officials and the continued closure of important access points, the decision was made to postpone the halibut fishery in coastal subareas (Marine Areas 1 – 4) until August, when, at the time, the expectation was that many of the restrictions related to COVID-19 would be lifted or at least reduced. The coastal halibut subareas opened on Thursday, August 6<sup>th</sup> under a season structure very similar to what was initially proposed. There was enough quota remaining to also re-open the Puget Sound subareas on August 6<sup>th</sup> in a way that aligned the season dates in adjacent coastal and Puget Sound subareas. The ports of Neah Bay and La Push remain closed to the public so anglers fishing in the north coast subarea must access coastal areas from, and land their fish into, an adjacent open port.

WDFW appreciates the close coordination and flexibility of stakeholders, managers at Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and International Pacific Halibut Commission to get the Washington 2020 recreational halibut season underway.

## Proposed Changes to the CSP for 2021

Based on stakeholder input during the August 19 public meeting and general comments we have received regarding the 2020 halibut season, the preferred season structure for 2021 would follow the same general approach approved for 2020.

In addition, two changes to the Columbia River subarea are also proposed for public review. One change would adopt groundfish retention rules approved for 2021 into halibut regulations. Another change considers extending the area where lingcod retention with halibut on board is allowed into Oregon.

WDFW has received positive feedback on the late summer halibut fishing opportunity. While there wasn't strong support for making changes to the CSP to reserve quota for fishing days in August and September, many support the option to use that time to continue the recreational halibut season if quota is not taken during the traditional fishery in April, May and June.

Some Washington stakeholders expressed support for increasing the annual bag limit from four to six fish. However, this provision is not included in the CSP or federal regulations and the issue can continue to be discussed and revisions considered through the state regulatory process.

### All Washington Subareas

In general, there was widespread support for implementing the season structure that was approved for 2020 in all Washington subareas.

Changes made to the CSP to accommodate the 2020 season structure included:

- Providing flexibility for the Puget Sound subarea to open in April.
- Providing flexibility for the north coast, south coast, and Columbia River subareas to open on April 30<sup>th</sup> in years when April 30<sup>th</sup> falls on a Thursday.
- Providing flexibility to have up to three days open per week in all subareas.

In addition, some anglers commented proposed that the annual bag limit should be increased from four to six halibut per year.

### Columbia River Subareas

*Proposed Change:* Revise the CSP to allow the retention of yellowtail rockfish, widow rockfish, canary rockfish, redstriped rockfish, greenstriped rockfish, slivergray rockfish, chilipepper, bocaccio, and blue/deacon rockfish, Pacific cod, flatfish species, and lingcod north of the Washington – Oregon border on all depth halibut days.

*Rationale:* Stakeholders from the Washington portion of the Columbia River subarea requested consideration for allowing the retention of more groundfish species with halibut on board during the all depth halibut fishery. Currently, groundfish retention on halibut days is limited to flatfish, sablefish, and Pacific cod; lingcod retention is also allowed with halibut on board north of the Washington–Oregon border.

This proposed change was analyzed during the 2021-2022 harvest specifications and management measure process and aligns groundfish retention regulations in Washington and Oregon. This change was included in the groundfish regulations adopted by the Council and anticipated to be

implemented by the National Marine Fisheries Service beginning in 2021. However, it also needs to be implemented into the halibut regulations in order to be available for 2021.

*Proposed Change:* Revise the CSP to allow lingcod retention on days open to the all depth halibut fishery in the Columbia River subarea north of 46°10' N. Lat.

*Rationale:*

Stakeholders from the Ilwaco Charter Association, which represents charter vessels based in Washington and Oregon, have requested consideration for allowing lingcod retention on all depth halibut days in the past ([Agenda Item E.1.a, WDFW Report 1, November 2016](#)). There is an understanding that lingcod retention during all depth halibut trips has been a concern for ODFW due to potential increased yelloweye rockfish encounters. In response to those concerns, lingcod retention is currently only allowed on all depth halibut days north of the Washington – Oregon border.

The proposal to expand the area where lingcod retention is allowed was raised again for 2021 given the higher yelloweye harvest guidelines that will be in place for 2021 and 2022. To minimize the potential for increased yelloweye mortality, this proposal limits the area where lingcod retention would be allowed to the area north of 46°10' N. Lat. as a first step. This would provide some lingcod retention in a limited portion of the area where the Washington and Oregon fishery overlaps and would simplify regulations, at least in that portion of the co-managed area, prior to considering it in the larger Columbia River subarea.

Impacts to yelloweye rockfish are not only a concern for ODFW. Recreational groundfish landed into Washington ports is accounted for under Washington specific harvest guidelines (HG), regardless of where the groundfish were harvested. In recent years, with increased yelloweye rockfish HGs, WDFW has taken incremental steps to expand fishing into deeper depths and allow retention of more groundfish species, particularly in the halibut fishery where fishing effort is targeted in deeper water where yelloweye encounters are generally higher. For example, new management measures will be in place in 2021 that reduce deepwater lingcod closed areas in the Washington portion of the Columbia River subarea and, as described above, allow more groundfish species to be retained on halibut trips. These measures were analyzed and adopted during the 2021-2022 harvest specification and management measure process and, while WDFW is supportive of the proposal to consider expanding lingcod retention during the halibut fishery in the Columbia River subarea, there may be benefit in evaluating how projected impacts for all groundfish species compare to actual impacts in 2021 before implementing a new management measure.

WDFW will have another stakeholder meeting on October 28, 2020 to discuss the 2021 season structure further and identify specific recommended season dates for 2021, which we will share with the Council in November including specific changes to the CSP language needed to accommodate the final recommendation.