

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON SABLEFISH GEAR SWITCHING MAXIMUM ATTAINMENT LEVEL

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) provides recent California sablefish catch history from all commercial sectors of the fishery that are or have been active in California, in hopes that the information illuminates how a cap on gear switching could affect future fishery performance in California. The time period from 2015 through 2020 was selected due to 2015 being the approximately the time when gear switching concerns were first identified (Table 1).

Regional Sablefish Catch Trends by Fleets

From the Oregon/California border to 40°10' N. Lat.

The vast majority of sablefish landings over the 2015-2020 time period have come from the IFQ sector, using trawl gear. While it is unknown if these IFQ trawl landings are 'directed' or part of a mixed target fishing strategy, they are relatively stable in volume year over year. The number of participating vessels is stable over the time period, ranging from 7 to 11 vessels.

The Sablefish Primary Tier fishery is a fairly significant contributor in this region as well, but notably, there have been zero gear-switch landings the last three years, and only de minimis amounts in the years prior.

Gear switching does not appear to be playing an influential role in any way for this area, given there have been no gear-switch sablefish landings of significance over the time period.

From 40° 10' N. Lat to 36° N. Lat.

The IFQ Trawl fishery is overall still the most significant contributor of landings in this region over the time period, however, these landings comprise only about 30-40 percent of the total. Like the region to the north, there are consistently 7-11 vessels participating, though the total catch is somewhat less consistent. Meanwhile, IFQ gear switch landings, made almost exclusively with pot gear, also contribute significant catch in this region. Notably, in 2018 and 2020, these gear switch landings account for nearly 50 percent of the IFQ catch.

The Sablefish Primary Tier, LEFG and OA sectors all also contribute significant sablefish catch in this region, and both hook and line and pot gear is utilized by these sectors – unlike the pot-dominant IFQ gear switch landings. An interesting observation regarding the OA landings in this region is that pot gear catches each year are generally three or four times greater than those made with hook and line gear, with between 34 and 85 vessels participating.

South of 36° N. Lat.

The LEFG sector, using hook and line gear, dominates the sablefish catch performance in this region, with 30 or more vessels actively participating each year. As anticipated, given broad prohibitions on use of trawl gear in this region, virtually all of the IFQ landings are made by non-trawl gear. Interestingly however, given the clear and dominant presence of the LEFG hook-and-line fleet in this region, the gear of choice for IFQ gear switch instead appears to be pot gear, similar to the region directly to the north.

Conclusions

As described above, almost all IFQ gear switch sablefish landings are made using pot gear. CDFW was somewhat surprised by this finding, given the significant number of vessels in the Sablefish Primary Tier, LEFG and OA fleets throughout California who utilize hook and line gear in their fishing activities. CDFW is interested in hearing industry perspectives as to why this is, and if pot gear brings certain efficiencies that can be maximized in IFQ gear-switch fishing activities, compared to hook and line gear.

Given the diversity of fleets and sectors successfully prosecuting sablefish in the region from 40°10' - 36° N. Lat., CDFW is concerned about what might have happened to the IFQ gear switch landings that were made in this region in recent years, had a cap on gear switch landings been imposed. Although the participating vessels are few by number as suggested by the asterisk needed to protect confidentiality, they have contributed quite successfully to the catch portfolio while also demonstrating no apparent impediment to trawl activity.

As noted in various documents in the West Coast Groundfish Trawl Catch Share Program 5-year review process, since 2011 there has been consolidation in IFQ fishery activities that resulted in a sharp decline in the number of participating IFQ vessels in California, regardless of gear type. While several factors could have influenced this outcome, CDFW is concerned that selecting a cap on gear switching may bring a similar result, as the IFQ pot gear vessels operating in California today are not likely to use that same sablefish quota with trawl gear in the same California ports.

Table 1. Number of Vessels and amount of sablefish landed in CA by each sector and gear type (2015-2020). Confidential data has an asterisk (*). Data source: PacFIN.

Sector and Gear	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)
N & S of 4010 (S of 42°)												
IFQ Unidentified area												
Trawl									*	25.1	*	27.2
42° - 40°10' N lat												
IFQ North of 36° N lat.												
H&L			*	0.1								
Pot					*	7.4						
Trawl	10	258.0	9	283.2	9	227.7	11	171.4	9	191.2	7	163.5
LE North of 36° N lat.												
H&L	6	25.2	7	28.0	6	33.8	7	44.6	5	8.3	*	0.8
Pot	5	5.2	*	8.1	4	7.1	*	6.3	*	8.2	*	12.5
Primary Tier Fishery												
H&L	7	74.7	8	128.9	8	115.0	7	122.6	8	106.4	5	71.2
Pot	*	26.7	4	37.5	4	70.3	*	23.5	*	29.9	*	21.5
OA North of 36° N lat.												
H&L	15	31.2	13	16.9	10	19.3	8	14.0	15	18.0	7	7.2
Pot	6	11.9	6	7.2	11	14.2	7	7.7	7	10.0	6	3.6
40°10' - 36° N lat												
IFQ North of 36° N lat.												
H&L	*	0.3										
Pot	*	97.3	*	32.1	4	125.4	*	91.9	*	65.8	*	136.8
Trawl	9	225.6	7	131.1	11	179.0	8	95.2	7	96.7	9	144.8
LE North of 36° N lat.												
H&L	23	72.4	28	101.3	22	114.3	22	97.7	17	97.8	21	120.7
Pot	4	5.5	5	8.4	4	5.4	*	3.6	*	1.1		

Sector and Gear	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)	# of Vessels	Rd Wt (mt)
Primary Tier Fishery												
H&L	21	148.0	19	129.4	21	157.2	17	107.6	16	117.1	13	88.9
Pot	*	44.4	4	39.6	4	48.1	5	54.3	5	50.0	*	46.3
OA North of 36° N lat.												
H&L	45	61.8	56	39.7	49	43.1	39	45.2	27	45.5	20	36.4
Pot	70	172.8	85	162.1	70	160.2	71	136.8	54	129.5	34	52.4
N & S of 36 (S of 40°10' N lat)												
IFQ Unidentified area												
Trawl											1	1.4
S of 36° N lat												
IFQ South of 36° N lat.												
H&L	*	8.0	*	35.4			*	1.8				
Pot	4	132.3	4	142.2	6	103.7	*	41.9	*	83.6	*	76.2
Trawl	*	5.1	*	4.5	*	0.8	*	0.3			*	0.0
LE South of 36° N lat.												
H&L	40	407.5	41	387.8	38	324.4	41	392.7	41	346.2	30	255.7
Pot	*	0.2					*	0.5	*	0.1	*	2.8
OA South of 36° N lat.												
Gill Net	*	0.0					*	0.2				
H&L	16	24.6	13	16.9	9	18.6	19	16.9	3	8.2	5	2.2
Pot	7	8.6	6	7.6	6	7.8	7	6.2	*	5.0	*	1.7