

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN FOR THE 2022 FISHERY

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) solicited public input via e-mail, phone, and a webinar on August 9 to discuss proposed changes to the Pacific halibut (halibut in remainder of report) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for fisheries off of Oregon in 2022. Normally ODFW holds a series of in-person public meetings in several coastal ports and Salem. However, due to continued restrictions on gatherings and staff travel due to COVID, it was necessary to conduct the meeting online only. Twenty-five members of the public participated in the webinar, additionally four e-mails, and one phone call were received. ODFW considered the public input and provides the following information for consideration by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) in determining which alternatives to adopt for further public review for the 2022 fishery.

Proposed Changes for the 2022 Catch Sharing Plan

Allow Groundfish Retention on All All-Depth Dates in the Central Oregon Coast and Columbia River Subareas

Anglers have requested allowing groundfish retention (rockfish, lingcod, greenlings, etc.) on all all-depth halibut trips, regardless of whether a depth restriction is in place for bottomfish. The Southern Oregon Subarea halibut fishery is currently open to all-depths seven days per week, and groundfish may be retained on the same trip in areas (depths) open to groundfish fishing.

Alternatives

Status quo: during periods when the groundfish fishery is depth restricted, only sablefish, Pacific cod, and other flatfish species or longleader gear species are allowed with all-depth halibut.

Alternative 1: all groundfish (within bottomfish bag limits) would be allowed with halibut; this would include lingcod, greenlings, rockfish species, etc.

Allowing bottomfish with all-depth halibut regardless of the bottomfish depth restriction is intended to provide additional opportunities for halibut anglers when fishing offshore, and possibly reduce regulatory discards. ODFW is unsure at this time what potential impacts will be on yelloweye rockfish bycatch and mortality, and would monitor carefully inseason. If this proposal moves forward, ODFW will analyze what data is available on potential yelloweye rockfish impacts and provide to the Council in November. This action has the potential to take some pressure off of more nearshore groundfish species such as quillback, copper, and China rockfish. ODFW has been prohibiting retention of these three species inseason in recent years in order to keep Oregon recreational impacts under our allocation of the nearshore rockfish complex and constraints are expected to continue/increase in coming years; any increase in offshore groundfish opportunity may spread the impacts to different species and help manage to multiple constraining stocks.

This proposal does have the potential to increase complexity of regulations with the overlapping halibut and groundfish fisheries and regulations. If it moves forward, ODFW staff will solicit input from anglers and enforcement to help makes the regulations easier to follow as well as enforceable.

Central Oregon Coast All-Depth Open Days

Anglers have expressed a desire to have the all-depth fishery open seven days per week. The longer opening is desired to spread effort and allow opportunity that better accommodates a variety of work schedules and the ability to take advantage of the weather. Two ideas that have been expressed by anglers are to open the spring all-depth fishery seven days per week in May and/or the summer all-depth fishery after Labor Day (September and October) depending on how much quota remains. The recreational bottomfish fishery has been open to all-depths in May and September and October in recent years. Since bottomfish and halibut are allowed on the same trip when both are open to all-depth (CSP section 6.11.1.g), this would not impact anglers' opportunities to retain both incidentally caught halibut when bottomfish fishing, as it would in June, July, or August. Additionally, opening seven days per week during the early and late season will provide fisheries managers with information on how much effort might occur on Sundays through Wednesday, compared to Thursdays through Saturdays. This could be useful for future discussions around modifying the days per week open in the remainder of the summer all-depth season or the spring all-depth season.

Alternatives (alternatives may be combined)

Status quo: the Central Oregon Coast Subarea Summer All-Depth season is open Thursdays through Saturdays

Alternative 1: if the Central Oregon Coast Subarea Spring All-Depth allocation is greater than 100,000 pounds, the season may open seven days per week starting the 2nd Thursday in May through May 31; then open every Thursday through Saturday, except weeks can be skipped to avoid adverse tides

Alternative 2: If after the first summer all-depth opening (first Thurs-Sat in August), it is estimated that there will be 60,000 pounds or more remaining on the Central Oregon Coast combined nearshore and all-depth quotas remaining, the fishery may open seven days per week beginning the Tuesday after Labor Day

The spring all-depth season would still open the second Thursday in May, the traditional start date. ODFW would still meet with anglers after the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) annual meeting which announces the quota to determine which weeks would be open, and if any should be skipped due to large morning low tides, as has been done in the past. Additional fixed openings (Thursday through Saturday) would be identified for June and July, as well as potential back-up dates. Due to a lack of data on potential effort on Sundays through Wednesdays for all-depth fishing, precaution will be needed when setting the total number of fixed dates, so as to not exceed the spring quota and eat into the summer and nearshore quotas. With the 1.5-million-pound Area 2A allocation the last three years, and the resulting fishery allocations, the spring all-depth season has left 60,000-100,000 pounds unharvested. At the recent allocation and effort levels combined with harvest rates, being open seven days per week for one or more weeks in May would have been accommodated without exceeding the spring allocation. There would have been quota for three-day openings in June and likely July as well. ODFW is recommending a trigger at 100,000 pounds for the spring all-depth season, so that at lower allocation levels, the season would retain the current three-day openings, spreading opportunity out through May, June, and potentially July.

For the summer all-depth season, after the initial summer all-depth opening, ODFW would consult with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and IPHC to determine how much quota remains in the Central Oregon Coast Subarea (all-depth and nearshore combined) and other Oregon subareas, how fisheries have progressed to date, and bycatch impacts on key species such as yelloweye rockfish. Based on that consultation, it could then be announced in mid-August that the fishery will be open seven days per week beginning the Tuesday after Labor Day. This schedule should allow for anglers, charter operators, and fishing related businesses to prepare for the additional opportunity.

Central Oregon Coast Subarea Daily Bag Limit

The Catch Sharing Plan currently states that “After the Labor Day weekend, the IPHC, NMFS, PFMC, and ODFW will consult to determine whether increasing the Oregon Central Coast bag limit to two fish is warranted with the intent that the quota for the subarea is taken by September 30.” Based on the progress of the fishery in recent years, anglers have been requesting the two fish bag limit earlier in the season.

Alternatives

Status quo: the bag limit can be increased to two fish after Labor Day

Alternative 1: At the conclusion of the spring all-depth season, IPHC, NMFS, PFMC, and ODFW will consult to determine whether increasing the bag limit to two fish is warranted with the intent of taking the subarea quota by September 30.

Modifying the bag limit earlier in the summer would provide additional opportunity for anglers to harvest the allocation. Often by early September many outdoors people are switching from angling to hunting, reducing the number of anglers who could take advantage of the additional opportunity provided by an increased bag limit after Labor Day. One area of concern, however, is the potential that raising the bag limit in August could result in additional effort, possibly exacerbating overcrowding which already occurs at some ports and times, particularly when there are good salmon, albacore, and/or halibut fishing conditions. ODFW will also need to track yelloweye rockfish bycatch and mortality carefully, to ensure that it does not become too high and potentially impact the recreational groundfish fishery (e.g., with a need for further depth restrictions or closures).

For 2023 or Beyond: Halibut Tag Concept, Similar to Big Game Tags

Note: this item is not a consideration for the 2022 CSP. ODFW is providing early notice of a potential concept for future years in order to facilitate thorough consideration and feedback to ODFW by stakeholders and management partners.

Over the last several years, ODFW has been receiving more frequent requests to change the management of the recreational Pacific halibut fishery by implementing halibut tags, similar to what is used in big game hunting. ODFW discussed the concept at our August 2021 public meeting on recreational groundfish and halibut fisheries, and received mixed feedback. The goal described by anglers supportive of the tag concept would be to allow the angler to fish for halibut at any time during the halibut season (May through October) at any depth, in order to take advantage of optimal ocean/weather conditions, reduce crowding, accommodate individual scheduling interests, etc. ODFW would still manage recreational halibut to stay within the Oregon recreational allocation as outlined in the Catch Sharing Plan.

All, or only a portion, of Oregon's recreational allocation could be used for a halibut tag system. A key consideration would be determining how many tags to issue annually, to stay within the Oregon recreational share of the overall Area 2A allocation, especially if the entire Oregon quota is used for tags. Anglers have suggested just dividing the Oregon recreational allocation by the recent average weight of fish. However, average weights fluctuate from year to year, and being off on the average weight by even two pounds could cause the total harvest to exceed the allocation, or alternately leave a large amount of quota unharvested. An additional concern is high grading and increased discard. If an angler only gets one or two tags per year, they may try for bigger fish than under the current management structure.

Some anglers have expressed concern that a tag system such as this will limit halibut fishing opportunity to a relatively small number of tag holders, and also that it could further complicate regulations. A tag system would make the recreational halibut fishery similar to a limited entry system in commercial fisheries. There would also likely be additional costs to anglers for tags and mandatory reporting requirements, and additional inseason monitoring and management required of ODFW.

A big-game type halibut tag would be a significant change in recreational fishery management in Oregon, and ODFW will seek and consider further stakeholder input prior to a decision on whether to proceed. Implementation details such as tag distribution, format, and cost, catch monitoring/reporting, enforceability, etc. of a potential tag have yet to be discussed, but would likely happen through State of Oregon process and would take one to three years to develop and implement. If this moves forward, ODFW will keep the Council informed of the progress of the state process, and propose any necessary changes to the CSP at the appropriate time.

While many details of this concept still need to be worked out in order to fully evaluate the concept, ODFW is presenting it to the Council, Advisory Bodies, and public at this time to gather input, ideas, and concerns about this potential management measures since it would be a drastic change from current management of the fishery.

Draft Catch Sharing Plan Language

ODFW does not have proposed changes to the language in the Catch Sharing Plan for the above items at this time. As the alternatives are finalized, ODFW will draft the appropriate language revisions to the Catch Sharing Plan, in consultation with staff at the NMFS West Coast Region and Council.

ODFW staff would also like to work with NMFS and Council staff to ensure the language in the Catch Sharing Plan continues to allow for flexible inseason management of the recreational halibut fisheries in a responsive and timely manner. As CSP language is developed, we support the development of provisions that can streamline the process and reduce delays or other challenges in the federal rulemaking process and timeline.