

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2022 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 23, 2021.

2021 Halibut Season Overview

The recreational halibut season in 2021 mirrored the structure set for 2020 and included the flexibility to open:

- a. the Puget Sound subarea in April,
- b. the north coast, south coast, and Columbia River subareas on April 30th in years when April 30th falls on a Thursday; and,
- c. all subareas up to three days per week.

While most fisheries returned to pre-pandemic operations in 2021, the ports of Neah Bay and La Push were affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. La Push was closed to the public through mid-July and Neah Bay remains closed. These closures significantly reduce recreational access to the north coast subareas and result in much lower catch and shifted fishing effort to other subareas including the south coast and Columbia River. Catch was also lower than expected in Puget Sound even though fishing opportunity was increased compared to prior years.

Much of the Puget Sound subarea opened in mid-April—approximately one month earlier than recent seasons and on a three day per week season structure which was expanded from two days per week. With lower than anticipated catch, fishing days were added to provide access to remaining quota prior to the close of the season on September 30th. After the originally scheduled fishing days concluded at the end of June, the recreational halibut fishery in the north coast and Puget Sound subareas re-opened on August 19th, three days per week (Thursday through Saturday) and remains open through September 25th or until the subarea allocations are taken. With a significant amount of quota remaining, some of north coast and Puget Sound allocation was shared to provide additional all depth fishing days in the south coast and Columbia River subareas. This sharing will provide Washington anglers with access to as much of the Washington sport halibut allocation as possible. In recent years, the regulatory flexibility, while allowed primarily because of the pandemic has been critically important for achieving this goal and will likely be an important tool in the future.

Proposed Changes to the CSP for 2022

Stakeholder input during the August 23 public meeting was broadly supportive of continuing the general season structure adopted in 2020 for the north coast, south coast, and Columbia River subareas (coastal subareas) recognizing that this structure has not been fully implemented as intended because of the La Push and Neah Bay port closures. The discussion also included ideas that would provide anglers more access to of the Puget Sound subarea allocation by opening even earlier in April in the eastern portion and having more days open per week in all Puget Sound subareas.

In addition, a proposal was submitted by the Westport Charter Boat Association (WCBA) to consider opening the coastal subareas during the May and June period in a way that shares allocation in these areas for the first six weeks of the season to provide for some stability by identifying fishing dates that will be open for all subareas at least during the first part of the halibut season. While there was support for tabling consideration of significant changes to the season structure for the coastal subareas until all ports reopen to the public, there was also interest in providing an opportunity to review and discuss an analysis of an alternative season structure during the public review process. The proposed alternative below broadens the WCBA proposal to provide a range of options for analysis.

All Washington Subarea

WDFW has worked with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in recent years to implement the flexible management provisions in the CSP. As noted above, this flexibility has yielded substantial benefits. WDFW appreciates NMFS' efforts to revise federal regulations inseason and allow for additional fishing days. WDFW is interested in working with NMFS to identify potential changes to the CSP that would streamline NMFS regulatory process to allow for continued flexibility in inseason management.

Puget Sound Subarea

Status Quo: Season dates will be developed by the end of November each year for the following year. Seasons will open in early May. Flexibility to open in April is allowed and seasons may be open up to three days per week which may include at least one weekday and one weekend day. Season structure may include periodic closures to assess the remaining quota for the subarea. If sufficient quota remains, additional openings may be implemented. The fishery will continue until the quota is projected to be taken, or September 30, whichever is earlier.

Proposed Change: Revise the CSP language to allow season openings up to four or five days per week.

Rationale: Stakeholders from the Puget Sound subarea support changes to the catch sharing plan that allows for more access to recreational halibut fishing earlier in the year and on more days per week. While providing additional fishing days at the end of the season in August and September provides a good opportunity to harvest any quota remaining after the early season closed in June, fishing success is higher in the Puget Sound region earlier in the year and stakeholders would like to see opportunity expanded for season dates in April, May, and June. Stakeholder input also included potentially opening recreational halibut in the eastern portion of the Puget Sound subarea (Marine Areas 6 -10) as early as March to further improve fishing success in an area where it has been challenging to take the full subarea allocation in recent years. However, adequate sampling resources are not available to support opening recreational halibut in March but there was support for opening the eastern Puget Sound region as early in April as sampling resources will allow. It would not be necessary to change the CSP to open earlier in April.

Columbia River, North Coast, South Coast Subareas (Coastal Subarea)

The Washington sport allocation is divided between subareas. Seasons are structured to provide as much fishing opportunity in each subarea as possible without exceeding subarea allocations. The

season structure includes the flexibility to shift allocation between subareas to achieve the overall Washington sport allocation.

Status Quo: The status quo season structures for coastal subareas are slightly different between each subarea (i.e., to accommodate a nearshore fishery in the Columbia River and south coast management subareas), but the approach for all coastal subareas includes the following provisions for the primary season: season dates will be developed by the end of November each year for the following year, and seasons will open in early May, with the flexibility to open on April 30 in years when April 30 falls on a Thursday. Seasons may be open, up to three days per week, which may include at least one weekday and one weekend day. Season structure may include periodic closures to assess the remaining quota for the subarea. If sufficient quota remains, additional openings may be implemented. The fishery will continue until the quota is projected to be taken, or September 30, whichever is earlier.

Proposed Change: In addition to status quo, analyze the following season structure for the Columbia River, north coast, and south coast subareas in the range of alternatives:

Under the following options, open the coastal subarea on the first Thursday in May, two days per week for the specified period or until the combined coastal subarea allocation is taken. Each subarea would be open one weekday and one weekend day. The weekday would be the same in all areas (e.g., Thursday) the weekend day could be different based on area preference (e.g., Sunday in the south coast and Saturday in the north coast).

- Option 1a: Open four weeks
- Option 1b: Open five weeks
- Option 1c: Open six weeks

If coastal subarea allocation remains after the initial weeks as described in Options 1a, b, and c, the balance will be distributed to the three coastal subareas consistent with status quo allocations. Additional fishing days will follow the Thursday plus one weekend day model.

Fishing days will be identified as much as possible by the end of November each year for the following year.

Rationale: Continued flexibility to adjust season dates and transfer allocation between areas through inseason management is critical to ensuring meaningful recreational halibut seasons in all subareas, particularly if there are continued closures to in the north coast subarea. And while inseason management is valuable, stability is created for stakeholders and managers when season dates are established and available to the public in advance. Allocation percentages that divide Washington's recreational quota between the three subareas were last addressed in the late 90's and were primarily based on historic landings. The coastal recreational halibut fishery has evolved dramatically since then with changes in where vessels participate. While port closures resulting from the COVID 19 pandemic have impacted the distribution of effort in recent years, changing trends in the halibut fishery have been observed prior to that.

Stakeholders recognize that the timing for analyzing alternatives is challenged by ongoing port closures but an analysis of alternatives during the public review process would provide an opportunity for a complete and robust discussion.

Next Steps

WDFW will have another stakeholder meeting on October 18, 2021, to discuss the alternatives for the 2022 season structure further and identify specific recommended season dates for 2022, which we will share with the Council in November including specific changes to the CSP language needed to accommodate the final recommendation.