

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2023 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 9, 2022.

2022 Halibut Season Overview

The recreational halibut season in 2022 mirrored the general approach taken to set the season structure in Washington subareas in recent seasons. Changes to the CSP for 2022 focused on the need to increase flexibility to maximize fishing opportunity and achieve the Washington sport allocation across all subareas and included allowing opening coastal and Puget Sound subareas up to five days per week in August and September.

This season mostly saw a return to pre-pandemic operations coastwide with all coastal ports open. However, other factors such as severe inclement weather, particularly on the coast, significantly affected fishing effort. Bar closures coincided with days open for halibut for some ports. Notably, all coastal ports experienced multiple days, including preseason fixed dates and dates added inseason, in May and June in which no (zero) effort was observed: Columbia River (WDFW Marine Area 1) - 6 days, South Coast (Marine Area 2) – 4 days, North Coast (Marine Area 3 and 4) – 3 days. Puget Sound (Marine Areas 5 – 10) recorded effort on all days open, averaging approximately 1,100 anglers per week compared to about 1,800 per week in 2021. Reduced effort was also attributed to high fuel costs. The Washington statewide average June gasoline price was \$5.48 compared to less than \$3.80 for the same month in 2021, and prices were higher than averages in coastal counties.

Recognizing a substantial amount of quota would likely remain at the end of May, WDFW conferred with NMFS to consider adding dates to the June schedule for coastal marine areas. With input from stakeholders, WDFW announced on June 3 two additional days for the Columbia River and South Coast, and three additional days for the North Coast, basing catch projections on productive fishing days in May (when weather was favorable). However, due to continued poor weather, the extra fishing time did not result in substantial catch. Statewide quota attainment was about 22 percent at the end of May and about 56 percent at the end of June.

Continuing the expansion of opportunity in the Puget Sound subarea, Marine Areas 6-10 opened in early-April 2022 compared to mid-April in 2021 and fully a month earlier than recent seasons and maintained a three day per week season structure which had been expanded from two days per week starting in 2020. The earlier 2022 season start was scheduled with some trepidation because the consequence of opening in early April was uncertain, however, at least under this year's circumstances it served to bolster catch and did not preclude later opportunity.

Following the closure of the halibut fishery at the end of June, WDFW again conferred with NMFS and met with stakeholders to consider how to structure a late summer fishery. Per the CSP, additional opportunity could be scheduled for August and September. Also consistent with

flexibility described by the CSP, adherence to subarea quotas was relaxed which meant scheduling could aim for full utilization of Washington's quota while also providing opportunity across all subareas. With these dual objectives and consideration for regulatory and fishery monitoring constraints, in mid-July WDFW announced six additional days for the Columbia River and South Coast, a five day per week opener beginning August 11 through September 5, shifting to seven days per week from September 6 through September 30 for the North Coast, and a seven day per week opener for Puget Sound beginning August 11 through September 30. All openers are contingent on sufficient remaining statewide quota. The flexibility to share subarea quotas, undertaken in response to conditions stemming from the pandemic, supports angler access to the full Washington sport halibut allocation and will likely continue to be an extremely valuable tool into the future.

Proposed Changes to the CSP for 2022

Stakeholder input during the August 9 public meeting was broadly supportive of continuing the general season structure adopted in 2020 for the north coast, south coast, and Columbia River subareas with a common theme of increasing the opportunity to catch more of the sport allocation earlier in the season by increasing the number of days per week that the fishery can be open.

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 with flexibility to open in April. During April, May, and June, season structure may include periodic closures to assess the remaining quota for the subarea. Seasons may be open up to three days per week which may include at least one weekday and one weekend day. If sufficient quota remains after the final open day in June, additional openings may be implemented in August and September up to five days per week. The fishery will continue until the quota is projected to be taken, or September 30, whichever is earlier.

Proposed Change:

Option 1: Revise the CSP language to allow season openings up to five days per week during April, May, and June and up to seven days per week if sufficient quota remains to allow additional openings in August and September.

Option 2: Revise the CSP language to allow season openings up to seven days per week during April, May, and June and up to seven days per week if sufficient quota remains to allow additional openings in August and September.

Rationale: Stakeholders from the Puget Sound subarea continue to support changes to the CSP 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. These options would allow discussions on trade-offs with opening earlier in April with more days per week and interest in insuring that the fishery is open through Memorial Day, which has been a common discussion point in the past.

North Coast

Status Quo: Season dates will be developed by the end of November each year for the following year. Seasons will open in early May, with the flexibility to open on April 30 in years when April 30 falls on a Thursday. During April, May, and June, 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 after the final open day in June, additional openings may be implemented in August and September up to five days per week. The fishery will continue until the quota is projected to be taken, or September 30, whichever is earlier.

Proposed Change: No changes to the CSP are proposed for the north coast subarea.

Rationale: Stakeholders in the north coast subarea support status quo for 2023. With lingering impacts related to the pandemic, including port closures in Neah Bay and La Push, stakeholders recommended waiting to see if fishing patterns and historical effort resume or stabilize before considering changes to the season structure in this subarea.

South Coast

Status Quo: Season dates for the primary fishery will be developed by the end of November each year for the following year. The primary seasons will open in early May, with the flexibility to open on April 30 in years when April 30 falls on a Thursday. During April, May, and June, 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 after the final open day in June, additional openings may be implemented in August and September up to five days per week. If there is insufficient quota remaining to reopen the primary fishery for another fishing day, the remaining primary fishery quota will be used to open a nearshore fishery.

Proposed Change: No changes to the CSP are proposed for the south coast subarea.

Rationale: Similar to the input from stakeholders in the north coast, stakeholders in the south coast subarea echoed the value in waiting to observe how fishing patterns stabilize post-pandemic before making changes to the CSP. There was interest in considering a season structure in this subarea that opens the fishery up to three days per week in May but changes to the CSP are not needed to consider this option for 2023.

Columbia River

Status Quo: The all-depth fishery will begin in May, with the flexibility to open on April 30 in years when April 30 falls on a Thursday. Open dates will be determined after consultation between Oregon and Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife, and in time for Council final action at the November meeting. During April, May, and June, the fishery will be open up to three days per week, Thursday or Friday, and/or Sunday until the subarea allocation is taken, or until September 30, whichever is earlier. The nearshore fishery will be open Monday through Wednesday following the opening of the all-depth fishery, until the nearshore allocation is taken

or September 30, whichever is earlier. On days when the all-depth halibut fishery is closed, taking, retaining, possessing, or landing halibut on groundfish trips is only allowed in the nearshore area.

Proposed Change: No changes to the CSP are proposed for the Columbia River subarea.

Rationale: Like stakeholders in other coastal subareas, stakeholders in the Columbia River subarea expressed support for maintaining status quo for 2023. Input spoke in strong favor of continued alignment of the season structure in this subarea with the south coast subarea through Memorial Day then resuming the days per week pattern followed in May.

All Washington Subareas

Inseason management flexibility

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 greatly appreciates NMFS' efforts to revise federal regulations inseason this year and allow for additional fishing days. WDFW will continue to work with NMFS to identify potential changes to the CSP that would streamline NMFS' regulatory process and enhance flexibility in inseason management in a way that provides sufficient notice and transparency to the public.

Annual halibut bag limit

While the four fish annual limit in Washington is not included as a provision of the CSP, there was a discussion about increasing the annual limit to six fish. Stakeholders were divided on this topic with some in support, others preferring status quo, and some suggesting an option where additional fish could be added to the annual limit during the late season when quota attainment is low. Stakeholders in support pointed to improving the ability to attain the quota, particularly in areas like the Puget Sound where quota has been left unharvested in recent years. Those preferring status quo expressed concerns with returning to conditions where the early season quota is taken very quickly and that a four fish annual limit allows more access to more fishery participants. Those supporting increasing the annual limit later in the season commented that approach allows an option for a flexible approach to increasing the limit.

Next Steps

WDFW will hold a stakeholder meeting on October 4, 2022, to discuss the alternatives for the 2023 season structure further and to identify specific recommended season dates for 2023, which we will share with the Council in November including specific changes to the CSP language needed to accommodate the final recommendation.