

## REPORT ON THE 2023 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

### Overview

The 2023 annual meeting of the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC or Commission) was held in Victoria, British Columbia the week of January 24, 2023. Area 2A was represented by a broad contingent from the Coastal and Puget Sound Treaty Indian Tribes and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC); and by Caroline McKnight and Melanie Parker, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), Jessica Watson and Lynn Mattes, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), Heather Hall and Lorna Wargo, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Josh Lindsey, Frank Lockhart, Rose Stanley, and Katie Davis, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and Phil Anderson, Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC or Council).

We were fortunate to have several Area 2A stakeholders as part of our delegation. Tim Klassen from Eureka, California attended the Conference Board in person and we had several others attend virtually. However, there were no Area 2A representatives on the Processor Advisory Board. We had the added benefit of having a phone call with all three U.S. Commissioners the week before the annual meeting. During that conversation the commissioners provided us with an update on the ongoing negotiations relative to a long-term allocation agreement between the U.S. and Canada. At that point it appeared unlikely a multi-year agreement would be completed during the annual meeting and instead the focus would transfer to a one-year agreement. As the meeting played out that was indeed where the focus was concentrated.

A summary of the reports from the West Coast tribes, states and NMFS were combined into a complete national report (including Alaska) for the United States which NMFS provided to the IPHC commissioners.

The IPHC staff presented the results of the stock assessment to the full group of attendees that numbered close to 170 people in person, along with an uncounted number of others online. The halibut resource is assessed using an ensemble of four models. Unlike 2021, the 2022 assessment was a “full” assessment rather than an update of the 2020 stock assessment. The 2012 year-class is estimated to be stronger than any since 2005 and is critically important to short term-projections of stock and fishery dynamics.

The halibut resource is experiencing unprecedented low productivity. Key messages from the stock assessment author:

- Stock is at unprecedented low population level due to poor recruitment.
- Downward trend persists even though fishing intensity has been lower than planned.
- 2022 Fishery Independent Stock Survey (FISS) and directed commercial fishing catch rates are at the lowest values observed in the last 30 years.
- 29% of the 2012-year class is mature in 2022 – projections rely heavily on this year class growing and maturing on schedule (69% expected to be mature in 2025)
- Historically low recruitment in the years between 2006-2011 adds to the poor status of the stock.

The fishery had been highly dependent on the 2005 year class with some moderate year classes before that year. The 2012 year class is now the most prominent year class contributing to the fishery but IPHC scientists have detected poor recruitment both before and in the subsequent six years since 2012. While the stock assessment authors are not suggesting the resource is at imminent risk of being overfished, there was a strong note of caution expressed.

In contrast to the coastwide condition of the stock, with the Gulf of Alaska area showing the most prominent decline, Area 2A showed signs of stability. In Area 2A, the FISS O32 weight per unit effort (WPUE) was up 10% and the fishery O32 WPUE in both the tribal and non-tribal fishery was also up. These data led, among other considerations, the 2A managers to recommend a continuation of the 1.65 million pound total constant exploitable yield (TCEY) for 2023.

The IPHC Secretariate provided the Commission with an update on the progress on the Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) Program with a focus on requested decisions on Objectives, Performance Metrics and Management Procedures (MP) including the simulation results of size limit and multi-year stock assessment MPs. The Commission recommended maintaining the 32-in size limit and continuing MSE evaluation of multi-year stock assessments. Area 2A participants in the MSE process include Heather Hall, Tom Marking (sport fishing), Scott Mazzone (Quinault Indian Nation), and Joe Petersen (NWIFC).

The IPHC also provided the recommended FISS plans for 2023-2025 which included consensus from the Science Review Board and the Commissioners to conduct survey stations in Area 2A. Despite the consensus, budgetary constraints and logistical challenges resulted in a final recommendation that included FISS activity for Area 2A for 2023 to occur only off the northern portion of Washington coast.

### 2A Allowable Catch

At the Commission's Interim meeting in early December, Patrick Depoe from the Makah Tribe proposed that the commission promulgate a regulation that would set a 2A TCEY of 1.65 million pounds. During the weeks leading up to the annual meeting considerable concern was expressed by the U.S. Commissioners that setting 2A's 2023 TCEY through the use of a regulation was problematic for both the U.S. and Canadian Commissioners. Setting a catch area's TCEY by way of a permanent regulation suggested that the number was fixed over time absent consideration of the status of the stock. The 2A management group acknowledged the concern and expressed an openness to work with the Commissioners and IPHC staff to identify another pathway to set the 2A TCEY at 1.65 million pounds for 2023.

The value of 1.65 million pounds is a continuation of the value that was used in the four-year agreement (2019-2022) by the Commission that includes an allocation framework with a 2A TCEY of 1.65 million pounds, provided there was not a substantive conservation concern identified by the staff during the four-year period. The agreement also had a formulaic approach to setting the 2B (Canada) allocation based on several factors including the exploitable biomass and the discard mortality of fish in Alaska's trawl fishery. The 2A TCEY agreed to value of 1.65 million pounds was again approved for use in 2023 accompanied by a Fishery Constant Exploitation Yield (FCEY) of 1.52 million pounds.

Considerable discussion and debate occurred over the course of the meeting regarding the allotments to the catch areas in Alaska with a particular focus on Area 2C (Southeast Alaska) 3A (Gulf of Alaska) and 2B (Canada). In the end, the Commission was in favor of the values listed in the table below for a total of 36.97 million pounds net weight, a 10.3 percent decrease from 2022. Due to decreases in non-directed discard mortality, the 2A FCEY is 1.52 million pounds for 2023, which is slightly higher than the 2022 FCEY of 1.49 million pounds. While many of the sector allocations remain the same under the FCEY, per the terms of the Council’s Catch Sharing Plan, an FCEY at or above 1.50 million pounds will allow the allocation to the primary sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis to return to 70,000 pounds for 2023 compared to the 50,000 pounds that was allocated in 2022.

Management Area	TCEY (million lbs.)
2A	1.65
2B	6.78
2C	5.85
3A	12.08
3B	3.67
4A	1.73
4B	1.36
4CDE	3.85

Commercial Season Dates for Area 2A

- a) The Commission acknowledged the fishing periods for 2023 as approved by the Council and NMFS. For 2023, the IPHC Regulatory Area 2A non-tribal directed commercial fishery may take place during specific fishing periods of 3 days’ duration, beginning on the fourth Tuesday in June, with fishing period limits (vessel quota) to be determined and communicated by NMFS. These fishing periods would open at 0800 on the first day (Tuesday) and close at 1800 on the third day (Thursday).

Finally, the Commission approved the Council’s Catch Share Plan for 2023.

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