

GROUND FISH ADVISORY PANEL REPORT ON SCOPING TOPICS FOR CATCH SHARING PLAN AND REGULATIONS CHANGES

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) received a briefing from Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) Staff Officer Robin Ehlke and offers the following comments and suggestions for Council consideration.

Overarching comments

Relative to [Attachment 1](#) under this agenda item, potential scoping topics, the GAP generally agrees with the outlined approach(es). However, as we noted in our [November 2022 report](#) relating to halibut scoping, the GAP could benefit from more detailed Council guidance. As outlined in Scoping Document Sections 4 and 5, the Council must first determine the best pathway forward depending on time and future workload considerations. The GAP appreciates the scoping document that identifies opportunities and ways for the Council to proceed.

The GAP found consensus that management flexibility is a key to enhancing halibut fishing opportunities for both sport and commercial fishing businesses throughout Area 2A. This is not necessarily in contrast to strict, more definite allocations, but could afford better management for sport and commercial fisheries into the future. Fishing effort has increased in recent years in California, particularly in northern California; therefore, this is an opportune time for the Council to move forward with Halibut Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) changes.

Members of the GAP exchanged ideas and lessons learned from sport halibut seasons in all areas of the West Coast. Each state manages its allocation differently, according to weather, depth restrictions, availability of halibut and other species, etc. Those season-setting lessons must be considered when making long-term allocation changes to a) not restrict current sport fishing interests in existing areas; and b) create substantial, reliable opportunity for those who may see allocation increases.

Additionally, the GAP appreciates the scoping document's inclusion of a process to extend the directed commercial fishery beyond the current 64 hours. GAP members who participate in that fishery or represent those who participate in that fishery have noted the extension from one day to 64 hours has increased safety during the fishery, provided more opportunities for marketing, and has facilitated better business planning.

Regulatory considerations

Mr. Greg Busch, National Marine Fisheries Service Office of Law Enforcement, provided GAP members with an overview of what the Enforcement Consultants (EC) would include in its report at this meeting. The GAP appreciates the changes proposed by the EC and supports the recommendation to make vessel monitoring systems mandatory for halibut-only commercial fishing vessels, similar to those fishing for groundfish. Fishermen participating in the halibut

fishery use the same longline gear for fishing for halibut as they use when fishing for groundfish (sablefish, specifically).

The GAP also agrees with the proposed seabird avoidance measures.

Short-term considerations

In November, the GAP supported scoping potential changes to the 2024 Halibut CSP beginning in June 2023. It is evident there is interest in affording California increased sport fishing opportunity, especially since other fisheries such as salmon and rockfish have been severely restricted or closed completely. The GAP understands comprehensive allocation changes to the CSP will take longer.

California fishermen on the GAP request a 3 percent increase in halibut allocation, for a total of 7 percent allocation. The interest in this is evident from the volume of written public comments submitted to the briefing book. This change could be completed as part of the annual CSP process. Washington and Oregon fishermen on the GAP noted that sport fisheries in those states frequently use their entire allocation and do not support allocation that takes away from Oregon and Washington. However, if the Council opts not to take this up for the 2024 fishing season, it should be included in the long-term discussion.

Long-term considerations

As noted above, making bigger changes to the halibut CSP will likely require more time and consideration, as detailed in Section 3.2 of the scoping document.

The GAP reiterates there is an obvious desire and need to build in management flexibility to any reapportionment scheme so halibut aren't stranded in one state or one fishery. Management decisions such as those must be based on solid science and halibut abundance.

Additionally, the "trigger" mechanism for inseason management and potential release of more halibut from one area to another demands more consideration.

It is also unclear at this point whether inseason management could be done as quickly as would be necessary to provide halibut fishermen more time to fish. In June, the halibut season has barely started, but by September, the season is almost over. Inseason management that is more reflective of inseason salmon management, rather than inseason groundfish management, would likely be best for the fishery. At this time, the GAP had no specific recommendation but only flags this for consideration as the process moves forward.

PFMC
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