

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED
CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN –
BACKGROUND ON PACIFIC HALIBUT MANAGEMENT IN WASHINGTON

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has prepared this report to provide background information on the management of Pacific halibut in Washington. This information will provide context to aid discussions on potential changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for 2024 and beyond.

Background - Commercial

WDFW strives to balance fishing opportunity for both sport and commercial fishery participants in Washington (WA). The development of an allocation for the retention of incidentally caught halibut in the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis provides helpful background. The PFMC operated under its first CSP in 1988. At the time, the 2A quota was allocated to four fishery sectors – tribal, non-tribal commercial, Washington sport, and Oregon/California sport. At the recommendation of WDFW, the Council chose to allocate the WA non-tribal halibut quota for the primary benefit of the sport sector. In 1995, the non-tribal commercial allocation was divided into two components, the directed fishery south of Point Chehalis and the incidental landing allowance in the salmon troll fishery. Some thought it was unfair to not include incidental landings in the sablefish fishery but at the time the 2A TAC was around 500,000 lbs. which couldn't accommodate both sport and all commercial fisheries. When the 2A TAC reached 820,000 lbs. in 1998, WDFW recommended an approach where in years of higher halibut abundance, the WA sport allocation would be scaled to accommodate incidental halibut retention in the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis. This change was adopted into the CSP in 2001. The allocation provision for incidental halibut retention north of Point Chehalis was revised again in 2002 to cap the incidental retention at 70,000 lbs. More information is available in [Agenda Item D.3.b, WDFW Report, September 2010](#) and the [PFMC CSP](#).

The Area 2A CSP allocates 15 percent of the non-tribal commercial halibut allocation to the commercial ocean salmon troll fishery for incidental halibut catch. The primary management objective outlined in the CSP is to attain the incidental quota during the April through June salmon troll fishery, with a secondary objective to attain the balance of the incidental quota from July through the end of the salmon troll season. Halibut retention in the salmon troll fishery is managed using a ratio requirement and a cap of halibut that can be landed per trip. Attainment of the allocation to the salmon troll fishery is therefore dependent on the availability of salmon. The number of Washington salmon troll vessels retaining halibut nearly halved from 2019 to 2020 due to impacts to the salmon troll fleet from the pandemic, as well as depressed salmon quotas. Between 2019 and 2021, Washington halibut landings declined by 50 percent and retention has remained at lower levels through 2023.

Background - Sport

The sport halibut fishery in WA attracts a significant number of participants particularly in the early season, i.e., April and May. The WA sport allocation is divided into four subareas, Puget Sound, North Coast, South Coast, and the Columbia River based on historical participation. The WDFW Ocean Sampling Program (OSP) produces weekly catch estimates for each coastal subarea to track quota attainment. Catch estimates for Puget Sound have been produced by the Puget Sound Sampling Unit (PSSU) weekly since 2017. Prior to that, estimates collected from a phone survey to estimate effort in combination with dockside angler interviews to collect catch were produced every two-months.

There is a long history of high attainment of the WA sport allocation. In coastal areas, 99 percent of the subarea quota was taken every year from 2003 through 2019 (see Appendix, Figure 1). During the same period, however, the average season length for coastal areas declined from hundreds of days in the early years to less than 30 days from 2015 to 2019 (see Appendix, Figure 2). From 2010 through 2018, neither the North Coast nor the South Coast subareas were open for more than 10-days and in many of those years, the seasons lasted only four or five days (see Appendix, Table 1).

The Puget Sound region also has a history of high quota attainment, but with estimates produced every two months it was challenging to project quota attainment and anticipate a need to close the fishery in a timely manner. In the early 2000s Puget Sound catch exceeded the subarea allocation occasionally, but from 2008 through 2016 the Puget Sound subarea allocation was exceeded every year except one (Appendix, Figure 3). During this time halibut managers worked closely with PSSU to explore inseason estimation methods and met with stakeholders to develop season structures that aligned with the subarea quota. In 2017, WDFW's PSSU implemented an intensive sampling methodology that produced weekly estimates and allowed managers to close the fishery on projected quota attainment. Consequently, the Puget Sound subarea went from being open five or more days per week for months in the early 2000s to less than 30 days per year with fewer days open per week from 2010 through 2019.

Catch Sharing Plan

The CSP provides an overarching description of allocations and season structures and includes management objectives specific to WA that provide additional transparency to stakeholders relative to halibut management goals. As mentioned above, the Washington sport allocation is divided among four regions to establish specific subarea allocations. This approach distributes fishing opportunity across regions and throughout the April-September season, ensuring that one area does not take the entire WA sport allocation.

Although the CSP provides a valuable management framework it does not provide a complete explanation of how WDFW managers and stakeholders develop season structures and season dates for each subarea. WDFW has invested significant time, effort, and resources to develop seasons that provide meaningful opportunity across regions to as many anglers as possible. For example, outside of the CSP, WDFW has taken additional action through the legislature and state regulations

to require that anglers purchase a catch record card (CRC) and adhere to a four fish annual limit. Further, WDFW has relied on a set of principles to provide greater transparency and consistency during the development of proposed season structures and dates. Current season setting principles used to frame discussions on season dates are as follows:

- Avoid effort shift: continue to align fishing days as much as possible, particularly Columbia River/ South Coast and North Coast/Seki to maximize season length and fishing opportunity.
- Provide advance notice of season dates to allow anglers to plan rather than add dates inseason.
- Provide more fishing opportunity in areas where catch was below the subarea allocation.
- Recognize traditional days if possible (e.g., North Coast: Thu/Sat, South Coast: Sun/Thu, MA 5: Memorial Day derby).

These principles were developed out of necessity as WDFW, and stakeholders grappled with setting seasons in years when quotas were obtained in a matter of days in many subareas.

The pandemic changed halibut fishing dynamics in WA. Changes in fishing effort and catch rates are also likely the result of the economy and potential variability in abundance, particularly in the Puget Sound region where halibut presence is known to vary from year to year. WA is in a period of recalibration and as we seek to revise season structures, which for the first time in many years includes expanding opportunity, we are affected by our experience of taking the WA sport allocation very quickly over many years. Historical quota attainment and a precautionary approach to avoid exceeding subarea quotas has led to revising season structures in subareas in a very conservative manner. During this time, we have been appreciative of and reliant on inseason management flexibility to adapt in a way that provides opportunity by relaxing subarea quotas and considers more fishing days across all subareas to achieve the WA sport allocation.

WDFW is open to discussions on how to utilize the non-tribal portion of the Area 2A Fishery Constant Exploitable Yield and increase management flexibility, however, it's important that those discussions acknowledge the differences in management approaches in each of three states.

Appendix.

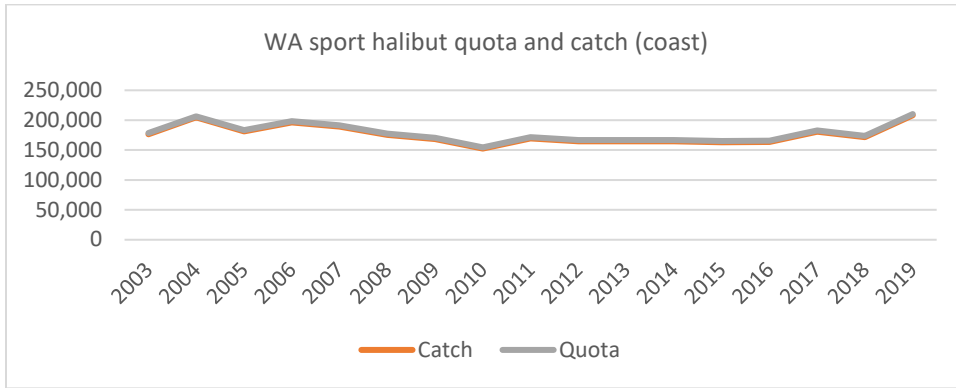


Figure 1. Washington sport quota and catch for coastal subareas from 2003 through 2019.

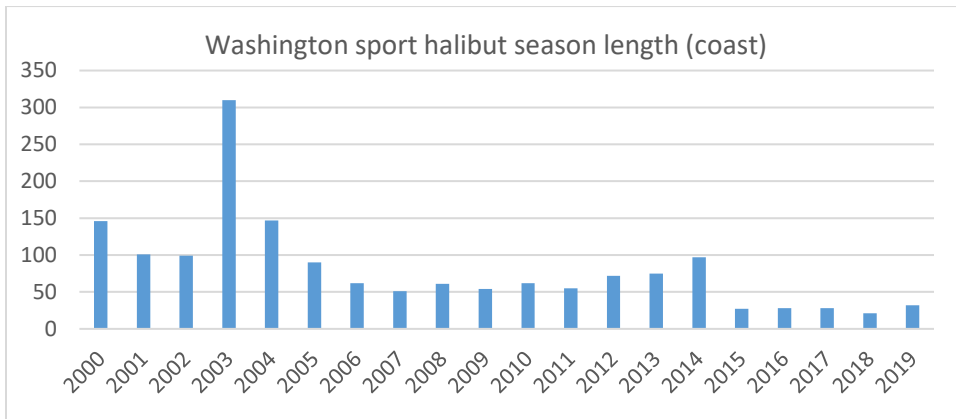


Figure 2. Washington sport halibut season length (days open) for coastal subareas, 2000 - 2019.

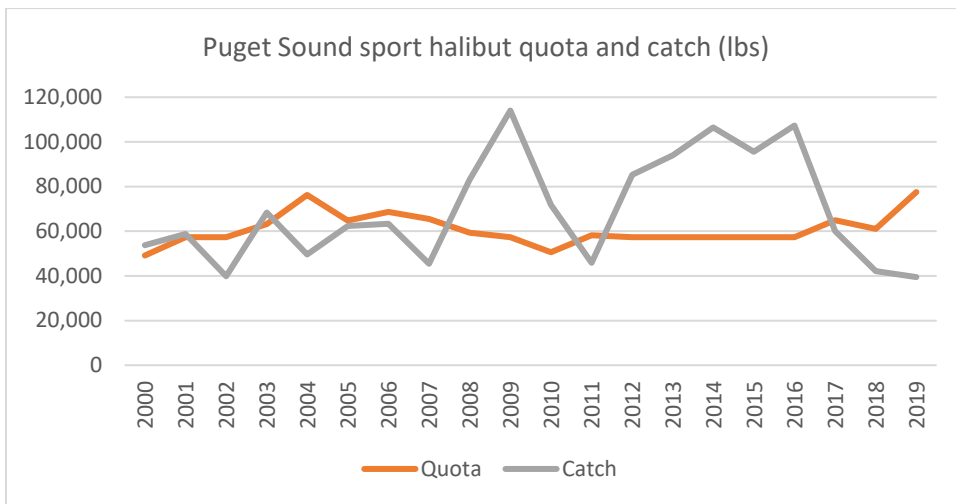


Figure 3. Washington sport halibut quota and catch (Puget Sound), 2000 – 2019.

Table 1. Washington sport halibut season length (days open) for all subareas, 2000 – 2019.

Year	North Coast	South Coast	Columbia River	Coast Total	Puget Sound	WA Total
2000	35	21	90	146	77	223
2001	29	27	45	101	81	182
2002	23	51	25	99	79	178
2003	20	137	153	310	87	397
2004	14	47	86	147	97	244
2005	9	22	59	90	82	172
2006	7	13	42	62	87	149
2007	9	6	36	51	84	135
2008	10	15	36	61	76	137
2009	6	11	37	54	52	106
2010	7	7	48	62	22	84
2011	8	7	40	55	22	77
2012	7	5	60	72	26	98
2013	4	5	66	75	14	89
2014	4	5	88	97	11	108
2015	3	4	20	27	11	38
2016	5	4	19	28	8	36
2017	9	5	14	28	9	37
2018	10	5	6	21	10	31
2019	15	9	8	32	18	50