

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2024 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 2, 2023. This report presents a summary of the 2023 halibut fishery season to date and proposed CSP 2024 season options for the Council to consider and approve for public review.

2023 Halibut Season Overview – Preliminary

Structuring the recreational halibut season in 2023 again focused on expanding opportunity (i.e., days open) as managers and stakeholders strive to adjust to fishery dynamics significantly altered compared to pre-2020. The primary change to the 2023 CSP added days in April and May to utilize the Washington sport allocation during spring months, which are preferred for halibut fishing across all five marine subareas.¹ Most stakeholders express less interest in late summer/fall halibut fishing. While there is support by some for fishing in August and September as these months provide access when weather is more favorable, it varies by area. Anglers in Puget Sound cite the increased and undesirable presence of dogfish in Puget Sound as one reason for preferring early season opportunity.

The 2023 season opened April 6 in Puget Sound, Marine Areas (MAs) 5–10, 5-days per week through May, increasing to seven days per week in June. All coastal areas, MAs 1-4, opened on May 4: the south coast following a 3-day per week schedule for most of May with four single day openers for June, and the north coast and Columbia River following a more traditional 2-day per week schedule for May and June. Overall, this represents several adjustments to the CSP from prior years.

- 1) In Puget Sound, the number of days increased from three to five per week in April and May and from five to seven in June.
- 2) In past practice, MA 5 opened at the same time as the north coast. By aligning it with Puget Sound, MA 5 opened a full month earlier (April instead of May) and the number of days open weekly increased in June from three to seven.
- 3) On the south coast, the number days increased from two to three days per week in May.

In mid-May based on projections of remaining quota and stakeholder input, WDFW sought, and National Marine Fishery Service (NMFS) approved, for June, two additional days for the Columbia River and seven days for the north coast. As of June 30, this year, statewide quota attainment was about 67 percent, compared to about 56 percent at the same time in 2022.

Having anticipated remaining quota on June 30 and with stakeholder input from a public webinar on June 7, WDFW forwarded a late season fishery proposal to NMFS for consideration. Consistent

¹ Washington subareas for Pacific Halibut fishery management and Marine Areas (MA): Columbia River (MA 1), south coast (MA 2), north coast (MAs 3,4), Puget Sound (MAs 5-10).

with flexibility described by the CSP, the proposal relaxed adherence to subarea quotas which meant scheduling could aim for full utilization of Washington's quota while also providing opportunity across all subareas. With these dual objectives and contingent on sufficient remaining statewide quota, five days for the Columbia River and south coast (August 26 and 27, and September 8, 9 and 22) were added and the north coast and Puget Sound were scheduled to re-open August 17 through September 30, seven days per week. The flexibility to share subarea quotas, undertaken initially 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 2024

Stakeholder input during an August 2 public meeting was broadly supportive of continuing to expand the season structure for the north coast, south coast, and Columbia River subareas. Stakeholders voiced a common theme, preferring opportunity to catch more of the sport allocation earlier in the year (spring versus summer/fall) by increasing the number of days per week that the fishery can be open.

Status quo CSP provisions stipulate season dates will be developed for all areas by the end of November each year for the following year. Per the CSP, Puget Sound seasons will open in early May with flexibility to open in April, and during April, May, and June season structure may include periodic closures to assess the remaining quota for the subarea. Coastal area all-depth fisheries, per the CSP, will open in early May with the flexibility to open on April 30 in years when April 30 falls on a Thursday. Columbia River dates will be determined after consultation between Oregon and Washington Departments of Fish and Wildlife. Area specific status quo and 2024 options are presented below.

Puget Sound Subarea (MAs 5-10)

Status Quo: Open April 4 through May 20 **five days per week**, Thursday through Monday. Memorial Day open Friday, May 24 through Sunday May 26. Open, May 30 through June 30, **seven days per week**. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Option 1: Open April 4 **seven days per week** through June 30. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Option 2: Open MAs 6-10 (eastern Puget Sound) in **February or March, seven days per week** through June 30 and open MA 5 (western Puget Sound), **April 1 seven days per week** through June 30. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Option 3: If 2024 2A FCEY is below 1.3 million pounds, open April 4 **five days per week** through June 30. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Rationale: Stakeholders from the Puget Sound 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 closes 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 beginning February in eastern Puget Sound (MAs 6-10) while April remains preferred for western Puget Sound (MA 5). These options would allow discussions on trade-offs between opening earlier in the year, more days per week, potential weather conditions, 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: Open May 2 through May 18, **two days per week**, Thursday and Saturday. Memorial Day weekend, open Friday and Sunday, May 24 and 26. May 30 through June 29, open **two days per week**, Thursday, and Saturday. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Option 1: Open May 2 through May 20, **five days per week**, Thursday through Monday. Memorial Day weekend, open Friday and Sunday, May 24 and 26. May 30 through June 29, open **five days per week**, Thursday through Monday. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Option 2: If 2024 2A FCEY is below 1.3 million pounds, open May 2 through May 20, **four days per week**, Thursday through Sunday. Memorial Day weekend, open Friday and Sunday, May 24 and 26. May 30 through June 29, open **four days per week**, Thursday through Sunday. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Rationale: Stakeholders in the north coast subarea support expanding opportunity in May and June, establishing dates in regulation rather than through inseason action, yet want to consider a less aggressive schedule should the 2A FCEY for 2024 be less than 1.3 million.

South Coast

Status Quo: Open May 2 through May 21, **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday. Memorial Day weekend, open Thursday, May 23. If sufficient quota remains, open June 13, 16, 20, 23. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September. 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.

Option 1: Open May 2 through May 21, **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday. Memorial Day weekend, open Thursday, May 23. If sufficient quota remains, open **June 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25, 27, 30**. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Rationale: Stakeholders in the south coast subarea support maintaining the three day per week schedule for May which is provided for in the CSP without change, while adding more days to the June schedule in regulation.

Columbia River

Status Quo: Open May 2 through May 19, **two days per week**, Thursday and Sunday. Memorial Day weekend, open Thursday, May 23. Open May 30 through June 30, **two days per week**, Thursday and Sunday. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September. 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.

Option 1: Open May 2 through May 21, **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday. Memorial Day weekend, open **Thursday, May 23** and **Sunday, May 26**. May 30 through June 30, open **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday. If quota remains, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Rationale: Like stakeholders in other coastal subareas, stakeholders in the Columbia River subarea expressed support for adding opportunity in May and June. Input spoke in favor of continued alignment of the season structure in this subarea with the south coast subarea through Memorial Day.

All Washington Subareas

Inseason management flexibility

WDFW has worked with the NMFS in recent years to implement the flexible management provisions in the CSP. Anticipating a season structure that will fully harvest WA sport subarea allocations has been particularly challenging since 2020. The fishery characteristics now are markedly different compared to the pre-pandemic period. Stakeholders recall vividly the three- and four-day coastal seasons of prior years and have requested conservative and incremental changes, cautious of a return to rapid attainment of quotas. Stakeholders, in framing requests, lean on inseason flexibility – asking for dates to be pre-determined but only implemented if needed, i.e., not in regulation initially.

The flexibility afforded in the CSP has yielded substantial benefits by supporting the addition of opportunity through inseason action. WDFW greatly appreciates NMFS’s recognition of the challenges faced in setting season dates and thanks them for their efforts to revise federal regulations inseason to allow for additional fishing days. WDFW will continue to work with NMFS to explore potential approaches in the CSP to further enhance inseason management flexibility consistent with NMFS’s regulatory process and in a manner 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, this has been a discussion point. In particular, there is interest in increasing the annual limit to six fish. Stakeholders have been 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 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 this allows for a flexible approach to increasing the limit. This last idea was implemented for August and September 2023 through WDFW rule to explore and evaluate its utility as a management tool.

Next Steps

WDFW will hold a stakeholder meeting in October, to discuss the alternatives for the 2024 season structure and to confirm recommended season dates for 2024, which we will share with the Council in November including specific changes to the CSP language needed to accommodate the final recommendation.