

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PACIFIC HALIBUT CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2024 ANNUAL REGULATIONS

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) held a public meeting with recreational anglers on October 11, 2023. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss proposed changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for 2024, and refine the proposals developed at the public meeting held by WDFW in August and adopted for public review at the September PFMC meeting.

In September, the 2024 Washington recreational season proposal adopted for public review included options that increase access across all subareas, with some intermediate increases linked to the Fishery Constant Exploitable Yield (FCEY) set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC). For Puget Sound, options include opening seven days per week in April and May or, opening the eastern portion (marine areas 6-10) as early as February or March. Coastal options include more days per week (three versus status quo of two) for the Columbia River in May and June, adding four more scheduled days to status quo in June for the South Coast and opening the North Coast five days instead of two per week in May and June. Both Puget Sound and the North Coast include an option that scales the number of days depending on the FCEY: if the 2024 FCEY is below 1.3 million pounds, Puget Sound would open in April five days per week and the North Coast would open May (most days) and June four days per week. All subarea options include opening up to 7 days per week in August and September should quota remain after June 30. From discussions at the October 11th meeting, proposed changes to the CSP are recommended and details presented below that support achieving Washington subarea and overall sport allocations.

Although bag limits are not provisions of the CSP, requests to increase the annual bag limit from four to six fish for 2023 were received and discussed at the October meeting with strong support from stakeholders to move to a six fish annual bag limit. Input also clarified that support for increasing the annual bag limit was contingent on the adopted 2024 allocation for Area 2A. WDFW staff agreed to follow up with stakeholders after the IPHC's annual meeting before adopting a change to the annual bag limit which would be made through the state regulatory process only.

Washington Subareas

Changes to the CSP supporting flexible inseason management have proven particularly valuable to respond to vastly altered fishery dynamics following the pandemic in 2020. In the years since, stakeholders have supported an inseason management approach that utilizes remaining allocation to provide the south coast and Columbia River subareas, where the subarea allocation has been typically taken mainly in the spring, some additional fishing opportunity in June, and that also allows for late season opportunity in August and September in all areas and in particular for the north coast and Puget Sound subareas.

While this flexibility to consider inseason additions to the schedule at the end of May and/or end of June has been successful, the constrained timing poses challenges to meet federal public rule notice obligations and strains planned sampling resources. The proposals for 2024 reflect increasing confidence that building more opportunity into the schedule early in the season is not likely to jeopardize achieving a season that lasts at least through May. However, some uncertainty remains and flexibility in the number of days per week and the ability to share allocation between subareas will remain important to meet allocation objectives for the Washington sport fishery.

Because the Area 2A allocation is somewhat uncertain and there are concerns that it may be lower than the 1.5 million pounds we've been managing around since 2019, stakeholders recommended an alternative season structure option that would be implemented if the Area 2A allocation is less than 1.3 million pounds. The recommendations below include alternative season structures for the north coast and Puget Sound subareas in 2024 but this approach may be considered for all subareas in the future.

WDFW Recommendation: Revise the CSP language to allow individual subarea season structures to be contingent on the 2024 FCEY.

Puget Sound Subarea

Discussions regarding the Puget Sound subarea were focused on a season structure that would allow more open days per week in April and May, and that aligns the season start dates in Marine Area 5 with Marine Areas 6-10. This is a departure from past practice in which Marine Area 5 seasons were aligned with the north coast subareas, 3 and 4. This change for Marine Area 5 and the recommendation to open more days per week in April and May, when halibut fishing is generally more productive in Puget Sound, are responding to a recent pattern where the Puget Sound subarea allocation has not been attained. Some stakeholders from the eastern region of Puget Sound (marine areas 6-10) proposed opening as early as February or March. This proposal was discussed at the October 11 stakeholder meeting including that it's unlikely that federal regulations can be in place quick enough following the adoption of allocations at the IPHC annual meeting to allow an opening this early in 2024. Stakeholders expressed interest in exploring a regulatory pathway that would allow for an earlier opening in the future.

WDFW Recommendation: If the 2024 FCEY exceeds 1.3 million pounds revise the CSP to open in April seven days per week through June; or if the 2024 FCEY is below 1.3 million pounds, revise the CSP to open in April five days per week through June.

North Coast, South Coast Subareas (Coastal Subareas) and Columbia River

Discussions relative to coastal subareas (Marine Areas 1 – 4) centered on cautiously expanding opportunity compared to a status quo season structure. Stakeholders still support a flexible inseason management approach. While the options adopted for public review included opening the North Coast subarea up to five days per week, stakeholders from this subarea supported a season structure that is more precautionary in the month of May with days open per week contingent on the FCEY similar to the approach taken in the Puget Sound with support for opening up to four days open per week during June regardless of the 2A allocation.

South Coast stakeholders requested additional dates for June, preferring to cancel if insufficient quota is available rather than rely solely on adding dates inseason. Columbia River stakeholders requested opening three days per week instead of two, a change that is currently allowed under existing CSP language. The request for three days per week anticipates the likelihood that weather conditions may preclude fishing at least one day per week and thus intends to improve the opportunity to achieve two days of fishing per week. This also aligns the Columbia River with the South Coast for most May dates.

WDFW Recommendation:

North Coast - Revise the CSP to open in May three days per week, Thursday through Saturday and open in June four days per week, Thursday through Sunday if the 2024 FCEY is above 1.3 million pounds, or if the 2024 FCEY is below 1.3 million pounds, open in May two days per week, Thursday, and Saturday and in June up to four days per week, Thursday through Sunday.

South Coast – Revise the CSP to open in May up to three days per week, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday, and if sufficient quota remains, open eight days in June.

Columbia River – Revise the CSP to open in May and June up to three days per week, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday.

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.

Based on the input we received, WDFW recommends the Council adopt the following season dates for the Washington subareas:

Proposed Season Dates

Puget Sound Subarea: Marine Areas 5, 6 - 10:

FCEY > 1.3 million pounds:

April 4 through June 30, seven days per week

If quota remains after June 30, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

FCEY < 1.3 million pounds:

April 4, five days per week, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, through June 30

If quota remains after June 30, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

North Coast: Marine Areas 3 and 4:

FCEY > 1.3 million pounds:

May 2 through May 18, three days per week, Thursday through Saturday.

Memorial Day weekend: open Friday and Sunday, May 24 and 26.

May 30 through June 30, open four days per week, Thursday through Sunday.

If quota remains after June 30, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

FCEY < 1.3 million pounds:

Open May 2 through May 20, two days per week, Thursday, and Saturday.

Memorial Day weekend, open Friday and Sunday, May 24 and 26.

May 30 through June 30, open four days per week, Thursday through Sunday.

If quota remains after June 30, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

South Coast: Marine Area 2:

Open May 2 through May 30, 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 after June 30, open up to seven days per week in August and September.

Columbia River: Marine Area 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 after June 30, 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.

Marine Areas 11-13 are closed

Marine Areas 5: It is permissible for halibut anglers to retain lingcod and Pacific cod caught while fishing for halibut in waters deeper than 120 feet on days that halibut and lingcod is open.

Marine Areas 6 – 10: It is unlawful for halibut anglers to retain lingcod and Pacific cod caught while fishing for halibut in waters deeper than 120 feet on days that halibut fishing is open.

Marine Areas 1-10: Daily bag limit of one halibut per angler, with no minimum size limit. Annual limit (TBD). All catch must be recorded on WDFW catch record card. Possession limits remain the same.