

REPORT ON THE 2024 INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION ANNUAL MEETING

Overview

The 100th meeting of the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC or Commission) was held in Anchorage, Alaska the week of January 22, 2024. Area 2A was represented by a broad contingent from the Coastal and Puget Sound Treaty Indian Tribes and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC); along with representatives from Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and 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, Paul Mirante from Westport, Washington, and Larry Phillips representing American Sportfishing Association attended the Conference Board in person and several others attended virtually. However, there were no Area 2A representatives on the Processor Advisory Board. The U.S. delegation met twice with all three U.S. Commissioners during the meeting in addition to an Area 2A meeting. During the first meeting commissioners provided an update on the ongoing negotiations relative to a long-term allocation agreement between the U.S. and Canada. Commissioners were up front that it appeared unlikely they would reach a multi-year agreement during the annual meeting. During their closing remarks, Commissioners from the U.S. and Canada shared that they did not reach a long-term agreement but expressed their commitment to continue to strive for that during ongoing discussions in 2024.

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 commissioners¹.

The IPHC staff presented the results of the stock assessment to the full group of attendees that attended in person and online. The halibut resource is assessed using an ensemble of four models. The 2023 assessment represents an update of the full assessment completed in 2022. The 2012, and potentially 2014, year-classes are estimated to be smaller than the 2005 year-class and are 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 and low weight at age.
- Downward trend persists even though fishing intensity has been lower than planned.
- 2023 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 2023 – projections rely heavily on this year class growing and maturing on schedule (69% expected to be mature in 2025)

¹ https://www.iphc.int/uploads/2024/01/IPHC-2024-AM100-NR02-Rev_3-USA.pdf

- 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 and potentially the 2014 year-classes are now the most prominent year class contributing to the fishery with possible but currently uncertain 2016 and 2018 year classes detected in the data. While the stock assessment authors are not suggesting the resource is at imminent risk of being overfished, they continued to express the strong note of caution shared last year. Changing environmental conditions add to the uncertainty in the health of the halibut resource. The results of the 2023 stock assessment and the poor budget outlook impacting the fishery independent set-line survey (FISS) dominated discussions during the meeting.

In contrast to the coastwide condition of the stock, with the Gulf of Alaska area continuing to show 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 2024.

The IPHC Secretariate provided the Commission with an update on the progress on the Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) Program with an interest in looking into the definitions of exceptional circumstances using information such as FISS observations, biological observations, and new research and recommend actions to take when they occur. These types of circumstances could be considered for inclusion in the Harvest Strategy Policy that incorporates the interim management procedure (MP) (i.e. annual assessment and a reference SPR-43%) following discussions with the Management Strategy Advisory Board (MSAB and the Scientific Review Board (SRB). The Commission agreed to hold meetings in the upcoming year to consider the recommendations outlined in the report from the Secretariate ([IPHC-2024-AM100-11](#)). Area 2A participants on the MSAB include Heather Hall, Tom Marking (sport fishing), and Scott Mazzone (Quinault Indian Nation).

The IPHC also provided the recommended FISS plans for 2024-2028 which provides basic trend information and biological data for use in the 2024 stock assessment. The proposed 2024 FISS includes two charter regions in Area 2B, three in 2C, two in Area 3A and one in Area 3B. The Commission agreed that supplemental funding is needed to sustain the FISS moving forward.

2A Allowable Catch

The Makah Tribe submitted a formal regulatory proposal to set the 2A TCEY at 1.65 million pounds. The IPHC secretariat recommended this approach for bringing the 2A allocation recommendation forward but Commissioners chose to approve the Area 2A TCEY through the adoption of area allocations rather than as a permanent regulation.

The value of 1.65 million pounds is a continuation of the value that was used in the four-year agreement (2019-2022) and the 2023 agreement 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 Area 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 2024 accompanied by a Fishery Constant Exploitation Yield (FCEY) of 1.47 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). The Conference Board (harvesters) and Processor Advisory Board (processors) both had lengthy discussions about the need to decrease the coastwide overall harvest level, ranging from 5 to 15 percent. However, both advisory bodies ended up recommending coastwide TCEYs of only a 4.5-5.5% decrease.

In the end, the Commission was in favor of the values listed in the table below for a total of 35.28 million pounds net weight, a 4.57 percent decrease from 2023. Due to increases in non-directed discard mortality, the 2A FCEY is 1.47 million pounds for 2024, which is slightly lower than the 2023 FCEY of 1.52 million pounds. While many of the sector allocations remain similar under the FCEY, per the terms of the Council’s Catch Sharing Plan, an FCEY below 1.50 million pounds will not allow the allocation to the primary sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis to be 70,000 pounds for 2024, it will be 50,000 pounds compared to the 70,000 pounds that was allocated in 2023.

2024 Halibut Allocations	
Management Area	TCEY (million lbs.)
2A	1.65
2B	6.47
2C	5.79
3A	11.36
3B	3.45
4A	1.61
4B	1.25
4CDE	3.70

Commercial Season Dates for Area 2A

The Commission acknowledged the fishing periods for 2024 as approved by the Council and NMFS. For 2024, 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 2024.

02/01/24