

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CATCH SHARING PLAN AND 2025 ANNUAL REGULATIONS

On August 13, 2024, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) held a recreational halibut meeting via webinar to identify and discuss proposed changes to the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP). We also reached out to Washington participants in the commercial directed halibut fishery individually to solicit feedback on this season's openers. This report summarizes the input we received and the 2024 halibut fishery season to date and identifies the proposed CSP 2025 recreational season options for the Council to consider approving for public review.

2024 Halibut Season Overview – Preliminary

Structuring of the recreational halibut season in 2024 continued to focus on fully utilizing opportunity (i.e., quota) as managers and stakeholders strive to adjust to fishery dynamics that were significantly altered by the pandemic. The 2024 CSP expanded the number of days in April, May, and June compared to 2023 to use 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 because of the more favorable weather, it varies by area. Anglers in Puget Sound cite the increased and undesirable presence of dogfish in Puget Sound later in the season as one reason for preferring fishing in the spring.

The 2024 season opened April 4 in Puget Sound and the Straits (Marine Areas (MAs) 5–10) 7 days per week through June. All coastal areas, MAs 1-4, opened on May 2 following different weekly schedules through June (see Appendix 1 for area specific details). Highlighted here are the primary modifications to the CSP in 2024 compared to prior year(s).

- 1) In Puget Sound, the number of days increased from five to seven per week in April and May.
- 2) The South Coast scheduled more days in June (eight compared to four) during the preseason process rather than relying on inseason action to add days.
- 3) Both the Puget Sound and North Coast subarea options included reduced schedules contingent on the 2A Fishery Constant Exploitable Yield (FCEY) being less than 1.3 million pounds.

As of June 30, this year, the Washington statewide quota attainment was about 74 percent compared to 67 percent and 56 percent at the same time in 2023 and 2022, respectively.

WDFW held a public webinar June 5 to seek input on the late season fishery structure and based on the input submitted a proposal to NMFS for inseason action. Consistent with flexibility described by the CSP, the proposal relaxed adherence to subarea quotas which meant scheduling

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).

could aim for full utilization of Washington’s quota while also providing opportunity across all subareas. The proposed schedule for achieving these two objectives, although contingent on available quota, included thirteen consecutive days (August 22 – September 3) plus three days per week for the remainder of September for the Columbia River and South Coast and opening the North Coast and Puget Sound August 16 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 continues to be an extremely valuable management tool.

WDFW interviewed six industry members involved in the commercial directed halibut fishery, a combination of fishers and buyers, about the 2024 openers. Many of the participants we spoke with had difficulty catching their full vessel limits. There was broad support for management measures that facilitate efficiency in attaining the quota as early in the season as possible and avoiding a fourth opener. Further, there was consistent support for limiting the time between openers to no more than two weeks, as any more than two weeks between openers further delays the season. Participants expressed concern about the number of boats that obtain a permit prior to the first opener but do not participate in the first or second opener. The participants we spoke with felt that it prevented the fleet’s ability to attain the quota as early as possible in the season, because the vessel limits were set according to the number of permits obtained instead of the number of vessels that participated. Directed halibut participants were also in favor of reducing the amount of time in which both the recreational and commercial directed fisheries operate in the same area. If both fisheries’ seasons are delayed or expanded, the amount of time in which they overlap is greater. There continues to be positive feedback for three-day openers, compared to the 10-hour openers in prior years.

Proposed Changes to the CSP for 2025

Stakeholder input during an August 13 public meeting was generally supportive of continuing season structures similar to 2024, with some modest adjustments as captured below for each subarea. The sentiment was that the incremental steps taken in recent years to expand opportunity as reflected in the 2024 season structure has reached a satisfactory balance between early season and late season opportunity while also meeting other fishery objectives.

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 2025 options are presented below.

Puget Sound Subarea (MAs 5-10)

Status Quo:

If the 2025 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds, the season may be open up to seven days per week in April, May, and June.

- Open April 3 through June 30, **seven days per week**.

If the 2025 2A FCEY is less than 1.3 million pounds the season may be open up to five days per week in April, May, and June.

- April 3 **five days per week** through June 30, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday.

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

Rationale: Stakeholders from Puget Sound support Status Quo which continues the general season structure from the 2024 CSP, including a reduced schedule should the 2A FCEY for 2025 less than 1.3 million pounds. A request to allow the dates for late season to be set in late July rather than early June was discussed. Currently, halibut dates are set assuming salmon fisheries will remain open through mid-August in this region. By delaying a decision, the status or attainment of salmon fishery quotas and when those fisheries might close would be better known. The interest is in opening halibut immediately upon closure of the salmon fishery if this occurs earlier than mid-August. However, federal rule-making processes simply cannot accommodate this degree of flexibility.

North Coast

Status Quo:

If the 2025 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds, the season may be open up to three days per week (Thursday through Saturday), except Memorial Day weekend which may be open Friday and Sunday.

- Open May 1 through May 17, **three days per week**, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and
- Friday, May 23 and Sunday, May 25 (Memorial Day weekend).

If the 2025 2A FCEY less than 1.3 million pounds, the season may be open two days per week in May (Thursday and Saturday) except Memorial Day weekend which may be open Friday and Sunday

- Open May 1 through May 17 **two days per week**, Thursday and Saturday, and
- Friday, May 23 and Sunday May 25 (Memorial Day weekend).

The season in June may be open up to four days per week (regardless of the 2A FCEY).

- May 29 through June 29, **four days per week**, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

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

Option 1:

Status Quo, except add Saturday May 24 if the 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds and if the 2A FCEY is less than 1.3 million pounds open **three days per week** (Thursday, Friday, Saturday) in June.

Rationale: Stakeholders in the North Coast subarea support Option 1 which largely incorporates Status Quo opportunity in May while also adding the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend if the 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds. This option reduces the schedule compared to Status Quo should the 2A FCEY for 2025 less than 1.3 million pounds.

South Coast

Status Quo:

During May the fishery may be open up to three days per week (Thursday, Sunday and Tuesday) and if sufficient quota remains, then open up to eight days in June.

- Open May 1 through May 22, **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday, and
- Tuesday, May 27 and Thursday, May 29, and
- June 12 through 29 **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday and Tuesday (equals eight days).

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

Rationale: Stakeholders in the South Coast subarea support maintaining the Status Quo season approach which balances opportunity across halibut and groundfish fisheries in the spring and between early and late season fishing for halibut.

Columbia River

Status Quo:

During May and June, the fishery may be open up to three days per week (Thursday, Sunday and Tuesday).

- Open May 1 through June 29, **three days per week**, Thursday, Sunday and Tuesday.

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:

If the 2025 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds, open:

- May 1 through May 29, **three days per week**, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday and
- June 1 – 29, **three days per week**, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday as Fixed dates, with **two days per week**, Monday and Tuesday, as Back-up dates to be opened if a pre-determined amount of the sub-area quota remains after a date that is also pre-determined.

If the 2025 2A FCEY is less than 1.3 million pounds, open

- May 1 through May 29, **three days per week**, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday and
- June 1 – 29, **three days per week**, Thursday, Friday, 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 2: Same as Option 1, except the recreational fishery would not open on Monday, June 23 or Tuesday, June 24 (Back-up dates) to reduce interaction with the commercial directed halibut fishery which typically opens the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday the last week of June. Under this option, both fisheries would be open on Thursday.

Rationale: Stakeholders in the Columbia River subarea support Option 1 which maintains a three-day per week schedule similar to 2024 but swaps Tuesday with Friday. Instead of opening Thursday, Sunday, and Tuesday, the Columbia River subarea would open Thursday, Friday, and Sunday. With this change, the Columbia River and South Coast subareas would no longer align as closely which has been a management consideration to avoid effort shifts across ports. Columbia River stakeholders recognized the uncertainty associated with consecutive-day openers and for potential effort shift but felt this structure meets subarea fishing needs.

Option 1 where the 2A FCEY is at least 1.3 million pounds would maintain the Thursday, Friday, and Sunday schedule through June as “Fixed” days and add Monday(s) and Tuesday(s) as “Back-up” days. Fixed dates and Back-up dates would be set preseason, however, opening any Back-up date(s) is dependent on an estimated pre-determined amount of Columbia River sub-area quota remaining as of late May (e.g., May 25) and projected daily catch rates. Back-up dates would only be opened if Fixed-date projected catches through June do not achieve the subarea quota. Currently, Option 1 does not describe a preference for allocating projected available quota to June (through scheduling Back-up days) or leaving some projected amount for the late season (i.e., August-September). Consideration for Columbia River late season opportunity could also be contingent solely on the availability of statewide quota.

All Washington Subareas

Inseason management flexibility

WDFW has worked with the NFMS 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 been cautious of a return to rapid attainment of quotas. The Washington halibut season structure has expanded incrementally since 2020 as stakeholders and managers explore and evaluate different fishery schedules in an effort to become less reliant on inseason action. In 2024, the only inseason action taken was to schedule the late season fishery dates for August and September. However, stakeholders in framing requests continue to seek flexibility when considering upcoming season structure – asking for dates to be pre-determined but only implemented if needed.

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 management flexibility consistent with NMFS's regulatory process and in a manner that provides sufficient notice and transparency to the public. In particular, WDFW seeks NMFS's input regarding the proposed changes to the CSP proposed under Option 1 for the Columbia River sub-area.

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 has been interest in increasing the annual limit to six fish. Stakeholder opinions 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. 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.

In 2023, WDFW announced an increase to the annual limit to six fish when opening the late season (August and September). This provided anglers that had filled their four-fish limit during the spring season additional opportunity and according to angler input would serve as an incentive for them to take other anglers halibut fishing. In 2024, WDFW implemented a six fish annual bag limit at the outset of the spring season and retained it for the late season. Either approach may be an option for 2025 depending on the 2A quota (FECY).

Next Steps

WDFW will hold a stakeholder meeting October 3, 2024, to discuss the alternatives for the 2025 season structure and to confirm recommended season dates for 2025, which we will share with the Council in November including specific changes to the CSP language needed to accommodate the final recommendation.

Appendix 1. Washington Pacific Halibut Season 2024

All dates subject to available quota.

Early Season

Marine Area 1 (Ilwaco/Chinook):

The all-depth fishery opens May 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 26, and 30; June 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25, 27, and 30. The nearshore area opens to fishing May 6, on a Monday-through-Wednesday schedule, as long as there is sufficient quota.

Marine Area 2 (Westport):

The all-depth fishery opens May 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 23, 28, and 30. If sufficient quota remains the all-depth fishery will open June 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25, 27, and 30.

Marine Areas 3 and 4 (Neah Bay and La Push):

Open May 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 24, 26, 30, and 31; June 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, 29, and 30.

Marine Area 5 (Sekiu) and Marine Areas 6 – 10 (Puget Sound):

Open April 4 through June 30 (seven days per week).

Late Season (Proposed)

Marine Area 1 (Ilwaco/Chinook):

The all-depth fishery opens Aug. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31; Sept. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, 24, 26, and 29, 2024. The nearshore area is open immediately, through Sept. 30, on a Monday-through-Wednesday schedule, as long as there is sufficient quota.

Marine Area 2 (Westport):

The all-depth fishery opens Aug. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31; Sept. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 22, 24, 26, and 29, 2024.

Marine Areas 3 and 4 (Neah Bay and La Push):

Open Aug. 16 through Sept. 30, 2024.

Marine Area 5 (Sekiu) and Marine Areas 6 – 10 (Puget Sound):

Open Aug. 16 through Sept. 30, 2024.

Halibut Rules: Daily limit of 1 halibut per angler, with no minimum size limit. Annual limit of 6 halibut. All catch must be immediately recorded on a WDFW catch record card. Possession limit is two daily limits in any form, except only one daily limit while aboard the fishing vessel. WAC 220-300-160

Anglers cannot fish for, retain, possess, or land halibut into a port located within an area that is closed to halibut fishing, except anglers can land halibut that were lawfully retained in Marine Area 5 into a port within Marine Area 4 when Marine Area 4 is closed.