

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON INCIDENTAL CATCH
RECOMMENDATIONS: OPTIONS FOR FIXED GEAR SABLEFISH FISHERIES

The incidental Pacific halibut allocation to the primary sablefish fishery will increase from 50,000 lbs. in 2024 to 70,000 lbs. in 2025 due to an increase in the Fishery Catch Exploitable Yield from 1.47 M lbs. to 1.53 M lbs. In the primary sablefish fishery north of Pt. Chehalis, WA (46°53.30' N lat.), vessels are currently allowed to land 150 lbs. of Pacific halibut dressed weight per 1,000 lbs. of sablefish dressed weight (aka the landing ratio), plus an additional two (2) Pacific halibut outside of the landing ratio ([50 CFR Part 660.231\(b\)\(3\)\(iv\)](#)). The landing ratio was a minimum of 200 lbs. in 2019, 2020, and 2021, three recent years in which the Pacific halibut landings allocation was 70,000 lbs ([Agenda Item C2, Attachment 1](#)), but two of those years were impacted by COVID resulting in very low participation. In 2023, the allocation was 70,000 lbs. and the landing ratio was 150 lbs as effort in the sablefish primary fishery recovered post-COVID, particularly since the allocation was exceeded in 2019 when the landing ratio was 200 lbs and the season ended October 31st. Starting in 2021, the primary sablefish season end date was extended to December 31st, providing additional time to attain the incidental halibut allocation. The last date to retain commercial Pacific halibut is set each year by the International Pacific Halibut Commission, and has typically been around December 7 of each year.

For 2025, concerns were raised that record high sablefish quotas and higher optimism about sablefish markets could result in a single vessel landing a substantial portion of the Pacific halibut allocation. Setting the ratio limit at a precautionary level would allow for a more equitable distribution of the quota among vessels looking to increase activity in the fishery in 2025. If left too high, Pacific halibut landings could accrue quickly, increasing a risk of exceeding the 70,000 lbs. allocation. To keep Pacific halibut catch within the allocation, and to equitably spread the opportunity for halibut retention more evenly throughout the year as some vessels may spend more time fishing in Alaska than others, the GMT considered a 75 lb. landing ratio as a precautionary start to the 2025 season. The ratio was last set at 75 lbs. of Pacific halibut per 1,000 lbs. of sablefish each year in 2013-2015. The incidental Pacific halibut allocation ranged from 10,348 lbs. to 21,410 lbs. during that time, but the sablefish ACL north of 36° N. lat. was also at its lowest since 2011, ranging from 4,012 mt to 4,793 mt in 2013-2015.

With higher sablefish catch limits for 2025 than in recent years, and extremely low vessel participation within the past few years, the GMT considered that prior methods of estimating the appropriate ratio may be less accurate predictors for 2025. Therefore, the GMT considered using a recent indicator year of fishing to estimate what Pacific halibut landings might have been that year under a 75-lb. ratio limit if sablefish landings had doubled. If vessels that made incidental Pacific halibut landings in 2023 had doubled their sablefish landings, the maximum amount of Pacific halibut that could have been incidentally landed under a 75-lb. ratio limit is 75,841 lbs. net weight. This estimate exceeds the 70,000 lb allocation by over 5 thousand pounds. However, it is not likely that all primary tier vessels will double their sablefish landings and land the full Pacific halibut allowance, but some vessels may.

Given the FMP objective to provide year-round availability of quality seafood, and to increase the likelihood of keeping Pacific halibut catch within the allocation and avoid an early season closure, the GMT recommends setting the incidental Pacific halibut landing ratio in the commercial sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis, WA at 75 lbs. dressed weight Pacific halibut per 1,000 lbs. dressed weight sablefish plus an additional two Pacific halibut. As before, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will monitor incidental Pacific halibut landings inseason and alert the Council if action may be needed to keep landings within the allocation