

SUMMARY OF INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) held their annual meeting the week of January 24, 2011, in Victoria, British Columbia. The meeting was attended by Area 2A managers, including representatives from the Council, Tribes, National Marine Fisheries Service, and Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife and 2A commercial harvesters, processors, and recreational interests.

Prior to the annual meeting, IPHC staff developed recommended quotas for all regulatory areas using the coastwide assessment and apportionment methodology, which produced a preliminary quota for Area 2A of 860,000 lbs and a coastwide quota of 41.02 million lbs. However, at the annual meeting, this recommendation was revised to 910,000 lbs for 2A as a result of a bycatch calculation error, and a total coastwide quota of 41.07 million lbs as the quotas for other areas were adjusted due to a combination of other factors.

In addition, there were a couple of key policy level changes that were adopted by IPHC this year that affected the quotas, which are described below.

Adjustment Factors

IPHC once again applied adjustment factors in the 2010 stock assessment in the apportionment calculations to account for the timing of the fishery relative to the timing of the survey and the competition of other species for survey baits. The application of both of these factors influenced the 2A constant exploitation yield (CEY) in a positive direction.

Slow Up, Fast Down vs. Slow Up, Full Down

For the past several years, IPHC has applied a harvest policy whereby management areas with a CEY reflecting an increase from the previous year are able to realize one-third of that increase (i.e., slow up), and areas with a decline in yield take one-half of the reduction in the first year (i.e., fast down). However, IPHC staff determined that the “fast down” portion of the policy was not sufficient to recover portions of the stock, particularly when the decline was considerable, and recommended a “full down” during the first year (i.e., 100% of the decrease, rather than only 50%). This policy change was adopted by the Commissioners. As 2A experienced an increase in the CEY from 2010, the “slow up” portion of the policy was applied for 2011.

Other Removals (Bycatch) and Harvest Rate

“Other removals” is the term IPHC uses to refer to the bycatch of halibut; in Area 2A, this includes bycatch in groundfish trawl and fixed gear fisheries. Another policy change was the accounting of bycatch relative to the size of the fish; previously, only legal-sized fish, that is halibut with a length of 32 inches or higher, were used in the bycatch calculation. However, given the reduction in the size-at-age across the halibut population in recent years, smaller halibut (i.e., around 26 inches) are older than presumed. As such, IPHC staff recommended and Commission adopted, accounting for fish between 26 and 32 inches in the “other removals” category. With the inclusion of these additional fish, the target harvest rate in Area 2A increased from 20% to 21.5%.

Bycatch Amount for 2A

Through 2010, IPHC staff calculated the “other removals” by summing the estimated trawl and fixed gear bycatch from the Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) report for the previous fishing year (2009). This amount was used both in the stock assessment in calculating total removals for Area 2A for the assessment year, and as the amount subtracted off the top of the total CEY to produce the fishery CEY, or quota, for the following year.

Through the Council’s actions for Amendments 20 and 21, we recommended that IPHC continue to use the value in the NWFSC report for the assessment, but then to use the amount of the trawl bycatch set aside (i.e., 130,000 lbs of legal-sized, net weight) to produce the fishery CEY for 2011. This was communicated to IPHC in November, and the Commissioners agreed to this approach at their Interim Meeting on November 30, 2010. However, in calculating the preliminary staff recommendation of 860,000 lbs for 2A, IPHC staff had continued to use the old method for the bycatch of fish between 26 and 32 inches. This error was discovered at the IPHC meeting and a correction was made, which increased the 2A quota to 910,000 lbs.

Area 2A Survey Expansion – Pilot Program

Finally, Area 2A halibut managers (13 Treaty Tribes that harvest halibut and the Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife) submitted a letter to IPHC regarding the proposed expansion of the halibut longline survey in 2A. There were two options for a pilot project for the 2A survey for 2011—essentially the halibut managers favored one option, which we think will reduce the uncertainty in the survey estimates of abundance and better addresses the patchy distribution of the halibut off the West Coast, and IPHC staff favor the other option, which could reduce the uncertainty, but does not address the distribution. Despite our comments, it is my understanding that IPHC supported the staff’s recommendation. Both approaches include adding survey stations within Puget Sound, which had previously been excluded. The intent is to improve the survey beginning with this pilot in 2A, and then expand the pilot approach to other management areas potentially in 2013, pending available funding.

Bycatch

The Commissioners received a preliminary report from the Halibut Bycatch Work Group (HBWG) on the status of bycatch in all coastwide management areas, and recent and proposed actions taken by the North Pacific and Pacific Councils and Canada to reduce bycatch. It was decided that the HBWG had likely gone as far as it could in providing the background information on bycatch, and that broader bycatch issues remain which need policy direction to address.

In response, the Commission established a Halibut Bycatch Project Team, led by a Commissioner from each country, to gain a better understanding of the amounts and potential impacts of halibut bycatch mortality in other fisheries. This Team will also explore whether options for reducing this bycatch mortality can be implemented and whether mitigating the impacts of bycatch mortality in one area on the available harvest in other areas is possible.

The Pacific Council, in particular, received kudos for its adoption of the trawl rationalization program and the inclusion of the halibut individual bycatch quotas. I would recommend that the Pacific Council continue to stay engaged in these IPHC halibut bycatch discussions.