

SUMMARY OF INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) held their annual meeting the week of January 23, 2012, in Anchorage, Alaska. The meeting was attended by Area 2A managers, including representatives from the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), Tribes, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Area 2A commercial harvesters and processors.

Adopted harvest levels for each IPHC management area were consistent with staff recommended levels with the exception of Area 2B, which was higher than initially proposed. This resulted in an Area 2A allowable harvest of 989,000 lbs and a coastwide quota of 33.54 million lbs (Mlbs). This is an eight percent increase for Area 2A over 2011. Incidental retention of Pacific halibut in the fixed gear sablefish fishery north of Pt. Chehalis will be allowed in 2012 due to the increase in quota.

2011 Model

Five models were constructed with two models (“trendless” and “wobbleSQ”) having the best fit. The major difference between the two models was how constraints were placed on the scalar between the survey estimate in numbers of fish and the population, also known as ‘q’. In past assessments (2007-2010), the “trendless” model was selected as the base case model. This model had a constraint placed on ‘q’. For the 2011 assessment, the “wobbleSQ” model had superior fit to the data and was deemed by IPHC staff to be the most appropriate model to use to set harvest levels. This model did not have a constraint placed on ‘q’. The outputs of the two models for estimates of exploitable biomass were 288 Mlbs and 260 Mlbs with the “wobbleSQ” model having the lower output.

IPHC once again applied adjustment factors to account for the timing of the fishery relative to the timing of the survey and the competition of other species for survey baits. These have been important adjustments in the assessment and apportionment and have been beneficial to Area 2A.

During Commission action, IPHC staff were directed to construct a new research planning team that will include a Commissioner from each country. This team will develop a five-year research plan that will include a peer review process for a scientific review of the stock assessment, a management strategy evaluation, and review of the retrospective bias and reduced length at age issues. The plan will be finalized during 2012.

Retrospective Bias

For the last several years, the model has been shown to over predict the biomass of Pacific halibut for a yet to be determined reason. Work will continue to determine the cause of the bias. No action was taken at this meeting to address the concern of overharvesting Pacific halibut; however, meeting participants were put on notice that significant changes may be coming beginning in 2013. One of the remedies being considered is a reduction in harvest rate to align harvest with lower biomass estimates seen retrospectively.

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 Constant Exploitable Yield (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, in 2011 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%). As 2A experienced an increase in the CEY from 2010, the “slow up” portion of the policy was applied for 2011 and 2012. Commissioners directed staff to review the applicability of this policy prior to the 2012 interim meeting.

Area 2A Survey Expansion – Pilot Program

During the 2011 stock assessment survey, additional sampling stations were added in Puget Sound and in the coastal waters between 10-20 fathoms and 275-400 fathoms. This was an explorative project to attempt to reduce variability in the Area 2A survey and include areas with high fishery yields. Additionally, 12 stations were added in the routine sampling depth range of 20-275 fathoms that had inadvertently been dropped. The stations in the 10-20 and 275-400 fathom areas did not have an impact on survey variability. The Puget Sound portion of the survey had unique challenges, such as addressing potential impacts to endangered species, shipping and ferry lane conflicts, and adjacent homeowner distress. This pilot program was not included in the survey/research budget for 2012. Area 2A co-managers met with IPHC staff and the NMFS Commissioner to express our interest in continuing to explore additional survey stations in the Puget Sound, as it may be very worthwhile given some adjustments to station location.

Bycatch

Bycatch continued to be a primary topic of discussion at the annual meeting. Concerns were expressed over the level of bycatch occurring in fisheries in the North Pacific. The PFMC, in particular, received kudos for its implementation of the trawl rationalization program and the halibut individual bycatch quotas. It was noted that halibut bycatch in the trawl fishery had decreased substantially during this first year of implementation. The PFMC would benefit from continued engagement in current and future IPHC halibut bycatch discussions.

During Commission action, direction was given to staff to review current observer coverage, review bycatch estimates for state managed fisheries, and define minimum monitoring standards for all fisheries. The first two items as proposed by the Conference Board (advisory board consisting of public and industry representatives) were specific to Alaskan and North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) fisheries, however IPHC staff may consider expanding these reviews to all IPHC areas.

Bycatch Workshop

A workshop is being held April 24-25 in Seattle with the goal of addressing specific questions and providing guidance to the NPFMC for use in setting revised bycatch limits for fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska. Additional discussion will include the methodology and accuracy of the estimation of halibut bycatch and general halibut ecology. The workshop will be structured to have a review panel made up of government and industry sponsored scientists and a series of

presenters from scientific and management agencies and industry organizations. The NPFMC has invited a presenter from Area 2A to discuss the implementation of the trawl rationalization program and the halibut individual bycatch quota.