

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council and AP Members
FROM: Chris Oliver *DO*
Executive Director *SOR*
DATE: January 17, 2012
SUBJECT: GOA halibut PSC limits

ESTIMATED TIME
8 HOURS

ACTION REQUIRED

Initial review of analysis to set GOA halibut PSC limits.

BACKGROUND

GOA halibut PSC limits

The Council is scheduled to take an initial review of an analysis that examines proposed changes to the management of commercial groundfish fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) that would occur through an amendment to the GOA Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. Prohibited species catch (PSC) limits on removals of Pacific halibut can limit fishing activity on targeted groundfish fisheries or affect fishing practices. The fisheries that result in the highest halibut PSC in the GOA are the 1) Pacific cod trawl and longline fisheries, 2) shallow-water flatfish complex and arrowtooth flounder trawl fisheries, and 3) rockfish trawl fishery. In some target fisheries, PSC limits are not typically fully utilized, while other fisheries are 'typically' closed prior to attainment of the target TAC because they have fully utilizing its PSC allowance.

Current halibut PSC limits concern the Council because these limits have remained unchanged since their implementation in 1986 for trawl fisheries and revision in 1995 for fixed gear fisheries. Recent declines in halibut biomass, particularly in the GOA, have exacerbated concerns about levels of PSC in groundfish fisheries because of the potential effect of halibut PSC on other user groups.

In April 2011, the Council adopted a range of proposed reductions for analysis that would be implemented through the GOA groundfish harvest specifications process for 2012/2013 after scoping the issue through a number of discussion papers in 2011 and 2012. In addition to the No Action Alternative, the proposed alternative (Alternative 2) included options for reductions of a) 5 percent, b) 10 percent, and c) 15 percent of the 2,000 mt halibut PSC limit on trawlers and 300 mt halibut PSC limit on fixed gear groundfish operations. Two suboptions addressed effects on trawl PSC limit apportionments. In June 2011, the Council reviewed the suite of alternatives for analysis and reorganized the suboptions.

In October 2011, the Council initiated a new action to remove GOA halibut PSC limits from the annual harvest specifications process through an amendment to the GOA Groundfish FMP and set halibut PSC limits in federal regulation. Such an action would mirror the process for setting halibut PSC limits in BSAI groundfish fisheries. The Council also modified the options under the proposed alternative for revising GOA halibut PSC limits and scheduled initial review of the analysis for the revised management approach and alternatives for February 2012. At this meeting the Council will review the draft analysis and determine the schedule for final action (e.g., either April 2012 or June 2012).

The analysis was distributed on January 13, 2012. The executive summary is attached (Item C-2).