

North Pacific Fishery Management Council
C-4 Halibut Retention in BSAI IFQ Pots Motion
October 5, 2018

The Council recommends the following purpose and need statement and alternatives, elements, and options to allow halibut retention in pot gear in the BSAI. Preferred alternatives are in **bold**.

Purpose and Need Statement:

Interactions with whales throughout the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) affect the ability of sablefish and halibut QS holders to harvest their IFQ by reducing catch per unit of effort and increasing fishing costs. Whale depredation is increasing for vessels fishing halibut IFQ with longline gear, and for halibut discarded when using pot gear to fish sablefish IFQ in the BSAI. The purpose of this action is to address whale depredation on discarded halibut and to allow for more efficient harvest of halibut in areas with whale depredation. Research into developing technological solutions to deter whales and changes in fishing strategies have not resolved this problem. The problem may be addressed by revisions to current regulations that authorize pot gear as legal gear to retain halibut in the BSAI. Allowing retention of halibut caught in pot gear in the BSAI could address the negative impacts of whale depredation on QS holders. This action seeks to reduce the problems associated with whale depredation, including unobserved halibut mortality, while minimizing gear conflicts. In the event that there is conservation concern for a shellfish or groundfish species, NMFS would have the authority to close the directed longline and pot halibut fisheries in both the BSAI and the Gulf of Alaska.

Alternative 1: No action (status quo).

Alternative 2: Allow retention of legal-sized halibut in single or longline pot gear used to fish for halibut or sablefish IFQ/CDQ in the BSAI provided the IFQ/CDQ holder holds sufficient halibut IFQ/CDQ for that IFQ regulatory area. The Pribilof Islands Habitat Conservation Zone will be closed to all fishing with pot gear.

Element 1: Gear retrieval

Option 1: No gear tending requirements (status quo)

Option 2: A vessel cannot leave gear on the grounds untended for more than (sub-options 5-10 days)

Element 2: Limit of a 9-inch maximum width of tunnel opening does not apply when vessel has unfished halibut IFQ/CDQ onboard.

Element 3: All vessels using pot gear to fish IFQ/CDQ are required to use logbooks and VMS.

Element 4: Require escape mechanisms in the mesh panels of pots.

Option 1: No escape mechanism requirement for crab (status quo)

Option 2: Require escape mechanism for crab

Element 5: Establish regulations that would allow NMFS to close IFQ fishing for halibut if an OFL is approached for a groundfish or shellfish species consistent with regulations in place for groundfish.

The Council requests that NMFS include BSAI IFQ pot gear effort in its annual inseason management report to the Council. The Council intends to review the effects of allowing retention of halibut in pot gear three years after implementation.

To the extent practicable, the Council recommends that halibut fishermen in the BSAI interested in using pot gear under this action consult with crab industry participants on appropriate crab escape mechanisms to minimize crab bycatch.