

INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION

News Release

January 26, 2001

HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2001 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its 77th Annual Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, with Richard Beamish of Nanaimo, British Columbia presiding as Chairman. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2001 totaling 73,180,000 pounds, compared to 67,500,000 pounds in 2000.

The Commission staff reported on the assessment of the Pacific halibut stock in 2000. There were two major changes in the data used for the 2000 stock assessment. The first was the removal of a precautionary adjustment for a bait change in the IPHC setline surveys, that was made in the 1999 assessment. That adjustment had reduced the population estimates by 20-30% in the eastern and central Gulf of Alaska (Areas 2 and 3A). Experiments conducted during 2000 concluded that the change in baits did not require the adjustment to the time series of survey catch rates. The major increase in biomass estimated for 2001 over that for 2000 resulted from removal of this adjustment. The second major change in assessment data for this year was the general increase in survey catch rates for the central and eastern parts of the stock range, particularly in Area 3A. This increase was associated primarily with higher catches of fish up to about age 13. Weight at age also increased somewhat in Area 3A, after declining for most of the late 1980s and 1990s. However, survey catch rates were down in Area 3B and portions of Area 4. The staff has considerable uncertainty about stock productivity in Area 4 and recommended maintaining existing catch limits for the area while an improved framework for setting catch limits, that is less dependent on changes in Area 3A, is developed. Staff will report on this project at the 2002 Annual Meeting. A proposed tagging program for the stock will also provide information on exploitation rates, when tag recovery results are obtained.

Recruitment to the stock has declined in recent years from the record high levels seen during 1985-1995. Year classes originating during the 1989-1993 period appear below average in strength and while the 1993-1995 year classes have appeared generally stronger in trawl surveys, they have not yet recruited to the exploitable stock. Commission scientists also note that oceanographic indices normally associated with halibut recruitment indicate poor conditions for generation of halibut year classes in the 1998-2000 period. Stock biomass is therefore expected to decline from current levels although the magnitude and rate of this decline cannot be assessed yet.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2001 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States fishermen and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission will recommend to the governments the following catch limits for 2001 in Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington), Area 2B (British Columbia), Area 2C (southeastern Alaska), Area 3A (central Gulf), Area 3B (western Gulf), Area 4A (eastern Aleutians), Area 4B (western Aleutians), Area 4C (Pribilof Islands), Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea), and Area 4E (Bering Sea flats):

2001 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Point Chehalis)	192,926
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	34,046
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in the sablefish longline fishery (north of Point Chehalis)	47,946
2A Treaty Indian commercial	406,500
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	17,500
2A Sport - North of Columbia River	214,110
<u>2A Sport - South of Columbia River</u>	<u>226,972</u>
Area 2A total	1,140,000
2B	10,510,000
2C	8,780,000
3A	21,890,000
3B	16,530,000
4A	4,970,000
4B	4,910,000

4C	2,030,000
4D	2,030,000
4E	<u>390,000</u>
<u>Area 4 total</u>	14,330,000
Total	73,180,000

The catch limits for Regulatory Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the catch sharing plan implemented by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC). The NPFMC catch sharing plan in Area 4 allows the Commission to set biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4C-D-E.

The catch sharing plan implemented by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) was adopted by the Commission. The catch limits for the Area 2A fisheries reflect the PFMC catch sharing plan. The 2001 plan allows for a new incidental halibut fishery occurring north of Point Chehalis with the sablefish longline fishery. Fishing dates for an incidental halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons in Area 2A and the incidental halibut fishery concurrent with the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis, will be established under United States domestic regulations established by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The remainder of the Area 2A catch sharing plan, including sport-fishing seasons, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS.

In Area 2A, six 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended for June 27, July 11, July 25, August 8, August 22, and September 5. All fishing periods will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits.

The Commission considered industry proposals for increases to the length of the commercial halibut fishing season but noted that the Commission staff was continuing its investigation of the season length, and was due to report on it at the 2002 Annual Meeting. The Commission also requested that the Director's Research Advisory Board, composed of industry representatives, be consulted during the development of this report. Pending this report, the Commission made no changes to the season length for individual quota fishing. Therefore, the treaty Indian commercial fishery in Area 2A, the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States Individual Fishing Quota (IVQ) fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E will all commence at 12 noon local time on March 15 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Area 2A licensing regulations remained the same as in 2000, with the exception that vessels fishing in the incidental halibut fishery concurrent with the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis are also required to get a commercial license from the Commission. Again, fishers must choose between a commercial or sport charter license. Commercial fishers must choose between a license for (1) retaining halibut caught incidentally during the salmon troll fishery, or (2) fishing in the directed commercial halibut fishery (south of Point Chehalis) and/or retaining halibut caught incidentally in the primary sablefish fishery (north of Point Chehalis). The deadline dates for receiving license applications remain the same: April 30 for the directed commercial fishery/incidental sablefish fishery and April 2 (as March 31 is on Saturday) for the incidental halibut fishery concurrent with the salmon troll fishery. A vessel that has a commercial halibut license cannot be used for sport fishing for halibut.

The Commission adopted regulations to allow the possession of halibut fillets on board a vessel up to 6 p.m. on the calendar day following the offload, if the fillets are from legally-retained commercially-caught halibut and the vessel is in the same port where the landing occurred.

In the United States, vessels with an overall length over 25 feet fishing for halibut are required to keep halibut fishing information in one of the following four logbooks: 1) the NMFS catcher vessel daily fishing logbook, 2) Alaska hook-and-line sablefish logbook, 3) Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Longline-Port fishery Logbook, or 4) the logbook issued by IPHC. The regulation change for 2001 provides for the ADF&G logbook as an additional option.

Other logbook regulation changes were that IPHC will require that the logbook be kept on the vessel until the offload is completed, instead of for five days after the offload. The regulations will also state specifically that the location be either latitude/longitude, loran, or a direction and distance from a point of land, instead of requiring a "fishing locality". The required location must be by day or set and the following additional information will be required: gear hauled or set, and lost, total weight or numbers of halibut retained. The logbooks must include vessel name and vessel number.

The Commission approved the requirement that operators of Canadian vessels must mail the log sheets to IPHC within seven days of their final halibut offload. The change was made from seven days after each offload so that the vessel operator could keep the IPHC copy of the log sheet in their book, and allow the IPHC sampler to interview and collect the log sheet from the vessel operator at anytime through their halibut season.

In the United States, vessel operators are still required to offload all halibut once the offload commences. The Commission approved that the weight be recorded on state fish tickets and, in Alaska, the total scale weight be recorded on the federal IFQ catch records. The regulations will change to clarify that total halibut weight be recorded on both state and federal catch records, not one or the other.

The Commission approved Nazan Bay on Atka Island as an additional port where the Area 4A clearance prior to fishing can be obtained. If no observers are on board, the

vessels would have to offload any Area 4B fish first, as clearances can only be obtained when no halibut is on board. A new requirement in 2001 will be that the clearance forms must be signed. In most cases the required signature will be vessel operator, with the exception that it could be the person completing the form in St. Paul and St. George, or the person completing the clearance form at Nazan Bay or Atka Island for vessels leaving Area 4B.

The industry asked NMFS Enforcement to continue to review the use of transponders in place of the clearance procedures in Area 4. Any fisher interested in this test program should contact NMFS Enforcement in Juneau, (907) 586-7200.

An industry proposal to require clearance procedures for Area 3B, similar to the Area 4 program, was discussed by the Commission. This proposal was not approved however the staff was directed to review with relevant agencies if a clearance program for Area 3B is feasible.

The Commission held extensive discussions on the present and future status of landing live fish for sale, as well as holding live halibut for subsequent sale after the halibut fishing season closes. A Commission regulation requiring that fish be offloaded with gills and entrails removed effectively prohibits live fish landing, but Canada has not adopted this regulation for the past two years in support of added-value initiatives by the Canadian industry. The existing Commission regulation was implemented to improve fish quality and address sampling concerns, rather than to prohibit live fish landing. The Commission does not specifically oppose live fish landing or penning of fish, provided that a satisfactory framework for sampling, data collection, and validation exists. The Commission noted that Canadian officials were developing a reporting and regulatory framework to satisfy Commission conservation and data validation concerns. The Commission will continue to examine the issue of live fish landing but made no changes to its existing regulation requiring the dressing of fish prior to offloading. The Commission staff will work with Canadian government authorities to ensure that the live fish holding operations in Canada meet Commission requirements concerning conservation and data capture.

The Commission received several proposals from its industry Conference Board concerning restrictions on or banning of halibut aquaculture, such proposed activities and regulation are not part of the Commission's mandate or jurisdiction. In addition, support for aquaculture in general, is a policy of both the U.S. and Canadian governments. The Commission therefore took no action on these proposals with the exception of requesting comprehensive annual reports on both private and public sector halibut aquaculture activity from the two governments.

Other Actions

The Commission received several industry proposals that are not part of the Commission's mandate and these proposals will be forwarded to the NPFMC. These proposals include one for a pre-trip check out prior to halibut IFQ fishing in Alaska and one requesting restricted fishing within 2.5 nm of land in Area 2C.

The Commission has conducted research on the occurrence of chalky halibut, a rare condition that affects the color and texture of halibut flesh. To assist the industry, a section of the Commission's webpage will be dedicated to voluntary recording and tracking of chalky fish occurrence. Harvesters and processors are requested to provide as many details as possible, time and fishing location, and when posting the information.

The Commission also received proposals that the staff undertake extensive tagging programs in support of understanding halibut exploitation rates and movements. The Commission noted that it had approved such projects as part of the Commission's research budget.

The recommended regulations for the 2001 halibut fishery will become official as soon as they are approved by the Canadian and United States Governments. The Commission will publish and distribute regulation pamphlets.

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission will be held in the Seattle, Washington area from January 28-31, 2002. The United States Government commissioner, James Balsiger, was elected Chairman for the coming year. The Canadian Government commissioner, Richard Beamish, was elected as Vice Chairman. Other Canadian commissioners are Kathleen Pearson and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Andrew Scalzi. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Director of the Commission.

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