

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members
FROM: Chris Oliver *CO*
Executive Director
DATE: March 21, 2011
SUBJECT: Miscellaneous Issues

ESTIMATED TIME
12 HOURS
(ALL D-2 ITEMS)

ACTION REQUIRED

Steve Hawk ; gregg Williams

Review discussion paper on GOA Halibut PSC Limits

BACKGROUND

In February 2010, the Council reviewed a NMFS discussion paper that described the process for changing the halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) and the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI). The Council set a priority for action to revise GOA halibut PSC limits.

In June, the Council briefly reviewed a preliminary discussion paper that provided 1) information identified in the GOA Groundfish FMP as necessary to change the halibut PSC limits and 2) preliminary data summaries. In December the Council reviewed additional information and tables. The Council identified its intent to prioritize action to reduce halibut bycatch in the near term (e.g., 2012). The Council reviewed additional requested information and NMFS comments on the different analytical requirements for management approaches the Council may take (i.e., plan amendment/regulatory amendment combination or annual specifications process). The Council requested additional information from the staff of the International Pacific Halibut Commission (Agenda D-2(b)(1)).

The Council could initiate an environmental assessment to support potential changes to GOA halibut PSC limits through the annual specifications process for 2012/2013. To do so the Council should identify at this meeting 1) a problem in the fishery; 2) goals and objectives for addressing the problem, and 3) a reasonable range of management alternatives for analysis. In October 2011, the Council could identify its preliminary preferred alternative for notification to the public in the proposed rule for the 2012/2013 annual specifications and identify its final preferred alternative in December for the final rule. Agency staff previously has identified that this approach may delay implementation of final specifications in early 2012 and affect pending halibut PSC apportionments in rationalized groundfish fisheries in the GOA.

In December 2010, the Council also requested a summary of previous actions for 2012 implementation that may be affected by potential future action to reduce GOA halibut PSC limits (Agenda D-2(b)(2)). Specifying changes in the GOA halibut PSC limit in the annual specification process poses several challenges for implementation and management of GOA groundfish fisheries. The potential scope of the analysis required to assess the implications of changing the overall GOA halibut PSC could be substantial and could complicate the ability of the agency to complete the analytical and rulemaking processes required to implement the annual harvest specifications in a timely manner. At a minimum, NMFS has identified the need to analyze the potential impact of any proposed revisions on the Central GOA Rockfish Program, AFA and Amendment 80 sideboards, and other fisheries that use halibut PSC.