



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, AK 99802-1668

September 28, 2023

David Wilson, Executive Director
International Pacific Halibut Commission
2320 West Commodore Way, Suite 300
Seattle, Washington 98199

Dear Mr. Wilson:

On November 09, 2022 and December 9, 2022, NMFS published a Notice of Availability ([87 FR 67665](#)) and proposed rule ([87 FR 75570](#)) to implement Amendment 123 to the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Management Area (BSAI FMP). This amendment would establish abundance-based management of the Amendment 80 trawl sector's prohibited species catch (PSC) for Pacific halibut (halibut) in the Bering Sea. NMFS approved Amendment 123 to the BSAI FMP on March 7, 2023. NMFS expects to publish a final rule 2023 in time to implement the new halibut PSC for the 2024 fishing season.

The final rule implementing Amendment 123 will establish a new annual process that links the Amendment 80 sector's PSC limit to indices of halibut abundance. NMFS proposed Table 58 to Part 679 specifies a halibut PSC limit for each of several specified halibut abundance ranges, or index states, derived from two sources: the annual International Pacific Halibut Commission's (IPHC's) estimate of relative index of halibut biomass for all sizes of fish expressed as WPUE for IPHC's combined management areas 4ABCDE, referred to as the IPHC index; and the Alaska Fisheries Science Center's Eastern Bering Sea (NMFS EBS) shelf trawl survey, referred to as the NMFS EBS index. The IPHC index is a relative index of halibut biomass for all sizes of fish expressed as WPUE in areas 4A, 4B and 4CDE. The NMFS EBS index is a relative index of halibut biomass for all sizes of fish expressed as weight in metric tonnes (mt) in the Eastern Bering Sea.

Each year, Table 58 to part 679 would be referenced for the intersection of the most recent abundance indices provided by the IPHC and NMFS to establish the annual halibut PSC limit for the Amendment 80 sector. The resulting halibut PSC limits range from 1,745 mt, when abundance is characterized as "high" for the IPHC index, down to 1,134 mt (35 percent reduction), when abundance is characterized as "very low" for the IPHC index.

NMFS requests that the IPHC provide the halibut biomass estimate for all sizes of fish expressed as WPUE in areas 4A, 4B and 4CDE for use as the IPHC index in Table 58 by December 1 of each year. This will provide the opportunity for review by the Council, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee, and the public prior to the finalization of annual harvest specifications process. To support this process, NMFS also requests that the IPHC include the supporting methods, data, and analysis used to generate the IPHC's annual biomass estimate.



We are committed to working with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the IPHC to develop a transparent process that will ensure the data and methods used for halibut abundance indices used in Table 58 continue to incorporate the best available scientific information and provide a reliable abundance index for the halibut biomass.

If you have any additional questions, please contact Gretchen Harrington, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, at gretchen.harrington@noaa.gov, or (907) 586-7228.

Sincerely,



Jonathan M. Kurland
Regional Administrator

cc: David Witherell, Council Chair
Bob Foy, AFSC Director