



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Charter Halibut Management Committee REPORT

October 20, 2023

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Charter Halibut Management Committee held an online public meeting October 20, 2023. At this meeting the Committee developed a list of management measures (e.g., bag limits, size restrictions) to be analyzed for 2024 as well as discussing a number of other agenda items. All meeting materials are posted to the eAgenda.¹

Committee Members in attendance:

Andy Mezirow (Area 3A; <i>chair</i>)	Seth Bone (Area 2C)	Forrest Braden (Area 2C)
Daniel Donich (Area 3A)	Mike Flores (Area 3A)	Kent Huff (Area 2C)
Matt Kopec (Area 3A)	Stan Malcolm (Area 2C)	Scott McKelvey (Area 2C)
Brian Ritchie (Area 3A)	Steve Zernia (Area 3A)	Sarah Marrinan (<i>staff coordinator</i>)

Members absent:

Richard Yamada (Area 2C)

Others in attendance:

Brianna Bowman	Sarah Webster	Ben Jevons
Rachel Baker	Steve Ramp	Tom Gemmell
Kristen Labrecque	Tom Taube	Tom Meyer
Nick Smith	Diana Evans	Kim Landeen
Karla Bush	Derek Anderson	Clay McKean
Mel Erikson	Patricia Phillips	Heather Bauscher
Felecia Baker	Leland Baker	Jim Kearns
Ida Myer	Bethany Robichaud	Sarah LaBelle

Committee chair Andy Mezirow called the meeting to order with introductions. Staff coordinator Sarah Marrinan provided an overview of the agenda for the Committee.

Draft Terms of Reference

A draft Terms of Reference was reviewed and adopted by the Committee. The final Terms of Reference will be available on the Committee webpage.²

Final 2022 and Preliminary 2023 Charter Halibut Harvest Estimates

Brianna Bowman (ADF&G) presented the final estimates of charter harvest for 2022 and preliminary harvest estimates for 2023. For Area 2C, the final 2022 estimate for total charter halibut removals in 2022 was 0.848 Milb, just 5,000 lb greater than the preliminary estimate of 0.843 Milb. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of fish harvested in Area 2C increased while the overall yield (which accounts for average

¹ Link to eAgenda with all meeting materials and written public comment:
<https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/3009>

² Link to Terms of Reference: <https://www.npfmc.org/about-the-council/advisory-groups/other-committees/>

weight) decreased. This seems to be explained by the fact that the average weight in Area 2C was down. In Area 3A, the final 2022 estimate for total charter halibut removals was 1.741 Mlb. This was 32,000 less than the preliminary estimate of 1.773 Mlb. Both yield and harvest declined from 2021 to the final 2022 estimates, though harvest still remained high compared to the previous ten years.

In 2023, preliminary estimates for Area 2C showed a 1.6% overage of total removals relative to the Area 2C allocation of 800,000 lb. For Area 2C mean weight was 9.41lb with 83,605 fish harvested resulting in an estimated yield of 786,438 lb. Including release mortality, the initial estimate for Area 2C in 2023 was 812,776 lb of total removals. Brianna noted that because Area 2C is using electronic logbooks these preliminary estimates should not change much when finalized. For Area 3A in 2023, preliminary estimates showed a 17.7% underage. This is likely explained by a lower average weight (10.09 lb) relative to the predicted weight of 11.88 lb. Some Area 3A Committee members confirmed they saw smaller fish on the grounds this year. The preliminary estimate of total removals for Area 3A was 1.56 Mlb relative to an allocation of 1.89 Mlb for 2023.

There was some discussion about the release mortality estimates that are used in the assessment. The IPHC recently conducted additional research on release mortality off Alaska but it was noted that these results have not yet been incorporated into the current process. Staff were asked what the process would be to update the release mortality estimates. Staff indicated that they would provide more information on this process in December.

Public Comment

Public comment was received at this time by Steve Ramp and Patricia Phillips on concerns around the lack of accountability with unguided rental boats, by Jim Kearns on the concept of having a halibut stamp and matching regulations for all recreational anglers, and by Mel Erikson on 2024 regulations for Area 3A.

Management Measures for Analysis for 2024

Area 2C

The Committee requested the following harvest measures for analysis for Area 2C for 2024. All analyzed measures would include a one fish daily limit with no annual limit. Therefore, the analysis would include tables of reserve slot limits with possible additional measures if needed. The Committee is also asking that all tables to accommodate down to at least 0.540 Mlb. The following describes additional requests and specifics for tables:

- Reverse Slot ranging from 35 – 50 inches on the low end and 50 – 80 inches on the upper end.
 - Additional column at the end of each row showing the amount of removals absorbed by release mortality when upper slot is 80 inches.
- Reverse Slot with day closures with savings in removals displayed for each day of closure.
 - Analyzed for each day of the week from May 15 – September 15 or for the entire season
 - Analyzed for lower slot limits ranging from 32 inches to 50 inches, and an upper slot limit of 80 inches.
- Differential Reverse Slot displayed in removals.
 - Analyzed for lower slot limits ranging from 40-45 inches, changing to a range of 35-40 inches, and an upper slot limit of 80 inches for each iteration.
 - Breaking July 1, July 15, and August 1.

Committee members spoke to these requests for Area 2C. They noted that a lot of input went into these requests. They understand concerns that have been expressed, including those submitted in written public testimony. The hope is to direct a robust enough analysis across different types of management measures

that affected stakeholders could still make choices in several different directions and get surgical in looking at options for management measures in a way that is intended to do the least harm.

The first type of table is a standard reverse slot limit that is analyzed, although the Committee is asking for additional columns that would include associated release mortality. The hope is that this table would include values low enough to achieve any likely allocation without additional measures (i.e., down to .540 MIb).

For the second type of table, it was noted that this would be a new way to view the impact of the day-of-the-week closure on projected yield. It may help the Committee members and affected stakeholders consider how they might apply this measure if they had to go there. For instance, by looking at Mondays throughout the season and seeing the resulting savings, perhaps they could close less days if they choose the right days. The upper slot limit for these tables would allow halibut retention for a fish over 80 inches (O80).

The third type of table would be a differential reverse slot limit. These tables would analyze a reserve slot limit in which the lower limit changes mid-season. For example, on July 1, the lower slot limit may drop from a halibut less than 42 inches (U42) to a halibut less than 38 inches (U38). Throughout these tables the upper limit would be O80.

It was noted that with the state of halibut abundance and the coastwide assessment this is a difficult place for Area 2C charter operators to be in with difficult choices that will likely have to be made. However, Area 2C members expressed an intention of reaching out as well as being available for feedback from operators in their region early on this year given the compressed timeframe in December.

Area 3A

The Committee requested the following harvest measures for analysis for Area 3A for 2024. Unless otherwise noted, all scenarios include one trip per vessel per day, one trip per charter halibut permit per day, and Wednesdays closed for the entire season. In addition, the Committee requests analysis of:

- Day of the week closures on Tuesdays from June 1 – August 31 or for the entire season;
- Maximum size limit of 26 – 32 inches on one fish,
- Annual limits of 2 – 4 fish, and
- Any combination of the above management measures.

Committee members expected these requests to be a shortened version of what has been asked for in recent years. For instance, annual limits analyzed would be in the range of 2-4 fish and combinations of measures would be similar to what has been previously considered.

It was noted that members have heard general acceptance from Area 3A operators for maintaining a 2-fish bag limit and adjusting closed days as a tool if needed, but also allowing for the consideration of adjusting the size of the second fish. In addition, members discussed the underrage that occurred in 2023, which to some members, felt like fishing opportunity left in the water.

Charter Halibut Management Timeline Considerations

Sarah Marrinan provided a brief overview of some considerations with the timeline for Charter Halibut Management, both regarding specific issues for this upcoming December meeting and timeline issues that have been persistent within the Catch Sharing Plan structure. The timeline in place generates a bottleneck for affected stakeholders and decision-makers in December each year, providing ADF&G staff only a brief window to finalize the analysis, and subsequently a short opportunity for Charter Halibut Management Committee members to discuss management measures with other stakeholders prior to providing recommendations to the AP and Council. Last year was an example of this and this year will be

an even greater challenge in scheduling the Committee meeting. Staff were asked to consider the challenges with the timeline and discuss possible solutions. This is addressed in a short memo that was prepared and attached to the eAgenda.

Options highlighted in the memo include:

1. Established (but malleable) hierarchy of management measures for each area and/ or less management measure options for analysis.
2. Limit the annual process for the Advisory Panel.
3. Two-part Committee meeting.
4. Release the analysis prior to the Interim IPHC meeting, but with only last year as a reference point.
5. One-year lag in management measures or setting measures for two years at a time.

Option 5 would require regulatory action and coordination/ approval from the IPHC. The other options are non-regulatory efforts that could occur as soon as December. Because scheduling is expected to be an issue for December 2023, Sarah emphasized that members should attempt to take on option 1 and do as much outreach as they can prior to the release of the IPHC reference points and analysis. If members have other ideas in the interim, they could contact her or Andy.

ADF&G staff indicated that they will attempt to release analysis results (tables) as early as possible this year and will provide the full documentation of methods, results, and consideration thereafter, and before the Council meeting.

Andy suggested that members consider these options, in particular the longer-term regulatory actions and that they will be discussed again at the upcoming December meeting. In addition to the management measure recommendations and the long-term timeline changes, there are a number of other topics he would like to bring to the Committee including rental boats, CHP latency, and possibly others. In order to address them in this tight timeline he emphasized they all needed to come prepared. *Since the Committee meeting occurred, further evaluation of the schedule in December has shown that there would be insufficient opportunity for robust discussion of these tasking issues. An additional meeting following the December meeting has been proposed to focus specifically around these topics.

Halibut Unguided Rental Boat Discussion

Andy began the Committee's discussion of the rental boats with a reminder of previous steps the Council has taken to consider action to identify and/ or regulate rental boats being used to harvest halibut recreationally off Alaska. In the recent past, this includes discussion papers in 2017, 2018 and an initial review analysis in 2019. This initial review explored alternatives for requiring registration of unguided rental vessels as well as an alternative to align the bag and size limits between charter anglers and anglers on unguided rental vessels. The Council took no action after this initial review in December 2019. Andy described some of the roadblocks that arose in identifying what constitutes a rental boat that may fish for halibut in order to accurately account for them. Concerns have primarily been expressed around new and existing operations in Southeast that outfit anglers with vessels, gear, and coaching on how to fish halibut, generally resulting in successful anglers. However, halibut could be harvested off a rented kayak or sailboat as well, hence the challenge of what constitutes the definition of a rental boat. Additionally, data is not available to estimate this sub-sector's harvest of halibut. Harvest of halibut from the unguided recreational sector is estimated through the ADF&G Alaska Statewide Harvest Survey which generally

does not show trends of increasing removals from the unguided sector as a whole.³ In particular, Andy felt that attempting to both identify a registration system at the same time as considering how to align management measures was too complex of a task taken together. This is a topic the Committee and the Council has received enduring public testimony on, and Andy suggested that if the Committee wishes to consider action again, it should be in stages, with a first step focused on defining and identifying.

Other members commented on the rationale for considering action on rental boats. Several members felt that given the previous challenges in defining and identifying this type of unguided recreational angler, this ultimately leads to a discussion of how unguided halibut anglers may fit into the Catch Sharing Plan. There were concerns about a rationale that have overtones of resident over non-resident access which is contrary to management under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. However, members also expressed their understanding for the frustration that has been and continues to be voiced on this topic and it was noted that there is support in Area 2C in being able to understand and tease out what the trends are with these unguided rental boats.

Andy suggested Committee members and the interested members of the public should carefully review the previous efforts that have been put into this topic and work together between now and the December meeting to try to come up with the first steps of the action, which he sees as a clear definition and way of accounting for these vessels through a registration system. This topic may be on the agenda along with several other topics that could be recommended by the Committee in an omnibus package to the Council. *Since the Committee meeting occurred, further evaluation of the schedule in December has shown that there would be insufficient opportunity for robust discussion of these tasking issues. An additional meeting following the December meeting has been proposed to focus specifically around these topics.

Public Comment

Additional public comment was received at this time from Steve Ramp and Heather Bauscher on the concerns of unguided rental boats and by Jim Kearns concerning issues with the Catch Sharing Plan dividing up the recreational halibut sector.

Future Meetings

The Charter Halibut Management Committee is tentatively scheduled to meet next in person in Anchorage, AK (also broadcast virtually) on **December 6, 2023**. *It was stated that this meeting may occur in the evening of December 6th; however, since this Committee meeting has occurred the timing for **the next Charter Halibut Management Committee meeting has been identified as Dec 6, 8am – 12pm** at the Council office (1007 West Third Ave., Suite 400 L92 Building, 4th floor).

As highlighted under the topic of the management timeline there will be an extremely tight turnaround this year between the Interim IPHC meeting, the release of the ADF&G analysis on projected removals, and the Charter Halibut Management Committee meeting in which recommendations for 2024 measures must be developed. Therefore, **it is critical that Committee members engage ahead of the meeting with stakeholders on a range of possible measures for 2024 recommendations.**

³ The SWHS is not designed to capture information at the trip level and can only be attributed at the area level. To ascertain whether an unguided angler used a rental boat to harvest halibut, this would require a significant modification to the way in which the SWHS is currently designed.