



NMFS/ NPFMC Recreational Fisheries Roundtable

SUMMARY REPORT

December 2, 2024; 1-3pm

In conjunction with the December North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) meeting, NPFMC and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) sponsored a recreational fishing roundtable event at the Egan Center in Anchorage, AK. The meeting was structured as an informal conversation where stakeholders were encouraged to ask questions, to voice their concerns, their priorities, and their strategies for improving the conservation, management, and business practices of the Alaska halibut sport fishery. The roundtable was hosted in person and broadcasted online. In person recreational fishing stakeholders were primarily from Homer, Whittier and Juneau, Alaska.

In Person Attendees:

Kurt Iverson (NMFS)	Russ Dunn (NOAA)
Sarah Marrinan (NPFMC)	Katherine Papacostas (NMFS OST)
Chance Miller (Miller's Landing; Seward)	Brian Ritchie (North Country Charters; Homer)
Matt Kopec (Whittier Marine Charters)	Chelsea Schmitt (Deepstrike Sportfishing; Homer)
Clay Duda (Homer Ocean Charters)	Adrienne Swan (Rum Runner Charters; Juneau)
Chris Conder (Rum Runners Charters; Juneau)	Daniel Donich (Daniel's Personalized Guide Service; Homer)
Alaina Plauche (NPFMC)	Melissa Norris (Hunt and Fish Alaska Magazine)
Tiffanie Cross (NMFS, MRIP)	Cheyenne Lambert (Maverick Charters; Homer)
Shannon Cochran (NPFMC)	Israel Payton (Director of Div of Sport Fish, ADF&G)
Adam St. Saviour (ADF&G)	Doug Vincent-Lang (ADF&G Commissioner)
	Ben Jevons (Logbook Program Coordinator, ADF&G)

Online Attendees:

Forrest Braden	Tom Gemmell	Anneloes Tyers	Russel Dame
Dan Lew	Phil Joy	Jeffery Groenke	Shelby Restepo
Kayla Buster	Joel Kraski	Rudy Tsukada	Scott Vulstek
Kim Landeen	Shannon Martin	Paul Olson	

NOAA National Policy Advisor for Recreational Fisheries, Russ Dunn welcomed attendees with introductions and a summary of the purpose for the roundtable. The roundtable event is part of a series of conversations held across the country to hear from fishermen on topics of importance to recreational fisheries. Based on previous feedback from recreational fishery stakeholders, NMFS committed to improving face-to-face engagement with the recreational fishing community, improving recreational data

collections, and issues of concern around habitat. These and other roundtable events are intended to address the first component of this commitment by providing an opportunity for persons, businesses, and organizations of all types who have vested interests in recreational fishing to ask questions and to present their priorities, concerns, suggestions for topics that intersect with sport fishing in Alaska. This roundtable builds on similar events in the past and provided a venue for fresh conversation, to talk to new stakeholders and to reconnect. Russ highlighted this roundtable as particularly important in briefing the new administration on topics of importance to recreational fisheries. The goal is to increase awareness for all participants and to encourage stakeholders to participate in the management of their fisheries. These roundtable sessions have previously been hosted in the North Pacific region in Sitka, AK (2019) and Homer, AK (2019).

Next, Kurt Iverson (Fishery Management Specialist with NMFS Alaska Region) provided an update on the Recreational Quota Entity (RQE) funding mechanism. The RQE is a non-profit entity that is authorized to purchase commercial halibut quota share on behalf of the charter (guided) halibut sector in IPHCs Area 2C and 3A. NMFS is currently in the process of rulemaking for establishing a charter halibut stamp program as an industry-driven funding mechanism for the RQE. This action will directly affect more than 500 charter businesses in Alaska by providing greater angling opportunities for charter vessel anglers. Kurt noted that the comment period on the proposed rule will close that night at midnight, after which, NMFS will consider and respond to comments. The final rule may be published, and the halibut stamp program may be implemented, as soon as February 2025.

Regarding NMFS' commitment to habitat conservation, Russ highlighted the Recreational Fisheries Initiative which has put out grant opportunities collaboratively through the National Fish Habitat Partnerships. Through this program, seven projects have been funded in Alaska. Individual anglers and organized groups in the angling community are directly involved in all of these projects.

Relative to recreational fishing data, Katherine Papacostas (Supervisory Fish Biologist with NMFS Office of Science and Technology) provided information on the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). This is a collaborative state-federal partnership that is working to improve recreational data through a national network of recreational fishery surveys. The amount and quality of recreational data varies quite a bit regionally. Katherine highlighted that in some regions NOAA is directly involved in the data collection and in some regions, such as Alaska, most of the data is collected by the state.

Regional implementation teams, made up of NOAA regional office, science centers, states, commissions, and councils work together to develop this prioritized list of recreational data needs. In Alaska, ADF&G has led the development of the Regional Implementation Plan, with the first plan published in 2023.¹ The priorities identified in that plan includes support for the current data collection programs, modernizing the Statewide Harvest Survey program, developing data storage and assimilation structure, outreach for the saltwater guide electronic logbook program, expanding dockside sampling, and improving recreational release mortality data for halibut and rockfish. Katherine spoke to some of the specific improvements planned for modernizing the Statewide Harvest Survey, which is the source for all of the unguided recreational halibut harvest and also collects data from guided anglers. Efforts to improve this data collection (e.g., leveraging electronic reporting, decrease recall bias, timeliness of data, etc.), include certification through a scientific peer review process.

Additionally, NOAA has been working more generally to renew state-federal partnerships toward a goal of having regionally specific, but nationally coherent data collections. There has been broad feedback from stakeholders for the agency to improve trust, credibility, and engagement with partners in the fishing community, including providing feedback loops. Consistent, accessible, transparent data has been something that has come up a lot across regions.

¹ Link to the Alaska region MRIP Plan: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/mrip-alaska-regional-implementation-plan>

Following these updates, there was wide-ranging discussion among roundtable participants. The discussion, questions, and comments are summarized around the following themes:

Importance of Quality Data

- There was some discussion among participants about the importance of funding for ADF&G creel samplers. It was noted that fishermen are seeing samplers less often on the docks. But they are also catching smaller halibut in Southeast Alaska (Juneau) and there were concerns that the full effect of that is not represented in the average size of fish that is being used in analysis for estimating and forecasting removals because of less comprehensive data.
- There were concerns expressed about the current voluntary ADF&G Statewide Harvest Survey and suggestions for efforts to improve the survey. For instance, the survey is sent out following the fishing season and recall bias is expected to be large. Some concerns were highlighted with the self-reported nature of survey. It was suggested that fishermen typically don't have a lot of confidence in these data. Participants asked about plans to consider alternate methods to decrease recall bias; for example, post-trip surveys or tying the survey to an angler's email.
- ADF&G representatives highlighted that through the MRIP program and the plans to modernize that survey, all ideas are on the table. Staff are investigating electronic applications for reporting, enhancing the appeal and interface of the survey, and possibly building the survey in a manner that would allow it to be completed in a timelier fashion. Staff also indicated some of the survey challenges, particularly for unguided anglers. For example, when anglers buy a fishing license online, they are asked to provide an email address or telephone number; however, neither of these fields are required under current law or regulations. Currently about 60% of licenses are purchased through the online ADF&G store and 40% are purchased in-person as paper or through an eVendor.
- A roundtable participant asked if the Statewide Harvest Survey would ever be mandatory, noting that it is difficult to manage the species (i.e., halibut) with only half of the data. ADF&G representation highlighted some considerations relative to that question, one being 'is the juice worth the squeeze?' to make every angler report everything they catch (i.e., there may be diminishing marginal cost to tracking down and requiring every angler to participate). They also noted that ADF&G personal use and subsistence permits require reporting. They have been thinking about requiring increased reporting AND recording across the board for more prized species (e.g., king salmon) and looking into how to implement that. Another consideration is the desire to keep people connected to fishing, making recreational fishing accessible and not putting a lot of bureaucratic red tape around this opportunity. So they are thinking about it in baby steps. ADF&G has a mobile application for reporting and recording, but it still hasn't been widely used.
- However, it was also noted that the Statewide Harvest Survey data is routinely compared to other data sources (logbooks and creel sampling) and has been found to be accurate when it has a good response rate.
- The lower Cook Inlet Tanner Crab permit was highlighted as an example of reporting and recording requirement that could also be used for other key species. If we have more mandatory reporting for these key species that was simple and limited, a participant noted it would increase fishermen buy-in and trust in the data.

Topics for the New Administration to Understand?

- Participants highlighted the importance of the new administration understanding the value of the fishery and the significance of the recreational sector to Alaska communities. This is not only per pound value of the halibut or the expenditures in the community, but also the broader social and

community value. Having clearer and more citable social and economic data is important in getting attention for these fisheries.

- It was noted that this one the first comment cited in New England as well. National statistics on the economic impacts and contribution to GDP were cited. In 2022, the saltwater recreational fishing community industry brought in \$138 billion in sales impacts and contributed \$74.8 billion to the US GDP (about 2% of the GDP). Thus, recreational fisheries are a tremendous driver to local, regional and the national economies. It was also noted that in recent years recreational fisheries businesses have been increasing their work with the outdoor recreation community to elevate common interests and concerns. Sales impact for Alaska recreational fisheries were cited as \$486 million a year, with contribution of value added approximately \$280 million contributing to GDP, income impacts of \$160 million.
- Given the importance of these fisheries, participants also highlighted informing the administration on the significance of funding for these data collections mentioned and for surveys (e.g., the Fishery Independent Setline Survey (IPHC)).
- Participants highlighted how consistency and reliability in regulations and other external factors are incredibly important for this industry. They expressed that this is of course tough to achieve, but important for the elements that we can control.

Changes in Recreational Fisheries?

- It was highlighted by participants from both Area 2C and 3A that they are seeing a smaller halibut, and smaller other fish as well (e.g., king salmon).
- Hatchery releases of salmon are very different from 20 years ago. These have become an important component for some recreational fishing opportunities.
- There have been important cumulative impacts felt with declines other species (e.g. king salmon, silver salmon), a drop in fishing opportunities, and other challenging environmental/ ocean conditions.
- There was some discussion about external economic impacts on the industry. For instance, charter operators have generally been able to find interested crewmembers, but they struggle to find available and affordable lodging for these seasonal workers in many communities (e.g., Juneau, Sitka, Seward, etc.). With a longer cruise ship season, it can also be difficult to find crewmembers that can commit to the full season. One participant also noted that one of the largest external constraints on fish retention has likely been the adoption of the 50lb bag limit on commercial airlines in 2007, which suddenly changed the poundage of fish that out-of-state anglers were interested in retaining.
- Charter operators noted a perceived increase in the success and access of unguided private anglers. They see larger, more efficient private vessels out on the water. They travel further and appear to be more successful than 20 years ago.
- Several participants noted a change in client and charter angler expectations. There is likely more charter effort from cruise ship passengers and out-of-state anglers and less from Alaskans. One participant noted that in the 1990s it wasn't considered to be a good day unless you didn't fill the big cooler. Now, people come out more for the fun of it. They still catch fish, but there has been a transition. People who want to fill their freezer often opt for fishing on unguided boats – on charter vessels, the prices have gone up, the size of fish allowed to be retained has gone down, so now the resident anglers have transitioned to frequently fishing from private boats.
- Several ports are expecting large changes with changes in cruise ship operations and that may further change the customer base (e.g., Whittier, Seward, Juneau, Sitka).

- Cruise ship traffic in some Southeast communities has greatly increased and has made a big impact on the customer base for many Southeast charters. There has also been an increase in independent travelers. Therefore, the management measures that have been adopted in recent years for Area 2C halibut – for example, day of the week closures and the trip limits that are being considered this year - are/will be very impactful to businesses and angler opportunities. A cruise ship passenger may have only one day to fulfill a dream of catching a halibut in Alaska and it could be that charter halibut fishing is closed on that particular day of the week. It was also noted as problematic that these measures are not known until early Jan/Feb because people book early and charter operators are forced to call clients and cancel trips. Anglers are frustrated and operators are losing money. This is a very challenging timeline, and a participants noted that the situation would be much better if upcoming management measures would be known in November or earlier.
- More people care about where their food comes from. Seeing the boat-to-table process is important to anglers and the high-quality protein the catch.
- Participants agreed that they have seen vast improvements in technology, fishing efficiency and overall capital invested into recreational fisheries in a way that likely makes operators more effective, regardless of the status of the stock.

What is Working?

- Some participants noted that they have been able to adapt to some of the tighter measures by changing the focus of their business and how they market their trips. However, the emphasis on trips has to be less able about filling the freezer and more about the complete experience. This can mean a shift in the type of clientele. It may mean adding value to the trips by incorporating some wildlife viewing or sight-seeing. Operators can still market their experience and provide assistance in proper handling of the fish to provide excellent quality. The scenery, experience, stories, adventure is still marketable. The people here are friendly. These things also keep people coming back.
- It was noted that anglers have generally understood the sustainability of these fisheries. Historically, operators have a lot of confidence in explaining this to clients. But maybe in part due to cuts to the setline survey and lower sampling due limited funding, attitudes have changed and there are now more concerns about the sustainability of the fishery.
- A participant noted the success of relying on the Charter Halibut Management Committee for setting annual management measures. That Committee is made up of operators that will be directly impacted by the measures put into place, so they have insight into balancing the economic tradeoffs with the need to harvest under their allocation. There could also be improvements to the timeline, predictability, or more engagement, but the process as a whole allows the charter representation to have more of a say rather than just the Council or IPHC.
- A participant noted a lot of engagement and accessibility from ADF&G and NMFS staff and expressed an appreciation for this.
- There was broad discussion about the improvements in and increased use of descending devices that have reduced discard mortality. There has been a lot of federal and state effort into education and access to these devices, as well as circle hooks. These are widely used (required) among the charter fleet. Charter operators stated that their anglers have been interested in the deepwater release device seaqualizer. Anglers don't like to see discard mortality, and they understand why it's good for the resource. It was unclear to some participants how much the local private anglers used these devices, although it was noted that they are required to have these devices on their boats.

Ways to Improve Communication or Opportunity?

- Participants highlight that the best way to talk to fishermen is face-to-face (i.e., ‘walk the docks’). Informal outreach like this one, is in contrast to other times when they are working on contentious issues. There are many remote communities in Alaska dependent on recreational fishing so the effort to go to them is often appreciated.
- It was noted that it is more difficult to get private angler engagement than those who depend on the fisheries for their livelihood.
- The Bristol Bay Guide Academy was highlighted as an example of a program intended to connect people who live in the communities with science and management, as well as a means to prepare young persons with experience that could help prepare them with jobs.
- One participant mentioned the idea of a voluntary Saltwater Guide school, similar to the Kenai River School, which would teach skills essential for guiding in the ocean. There is a lot at stake as a guide, and businesses need to invest in this training inhouse. This would allow potential captains/crew to demonstrate a person investment and commitment to their saltwater guide skills.

Long and Short Terms Concerns?

- Many of the concerns were highlighted under earlier discussion.
- Concerns were expressed that with more cruise ship ports of call and more cruise ship passengers wanting to go fishing, charter fishing operations will need to adjust more around the ship schedules. This may mean that more operators will be constrained to fishing closer to port, which could lead to localized impacts, particularly if survey data is not enhanced to capture this.
- Since the Charter Halibut Limited Access Program (2011) and the Catch Sharing Plan (2014) went into place, the allocation has seen a steady decline and measures have mostly been tightened each year. A participant from Area 3A noted that now it feels like they have a size 12 foot in a size 10 shoe that keeps shrinking. Another participant from Area 2C concurred and stated that they feel that they have less and less of a fishing trip to offer to anglers with the additional management measures that have been put into place. This has greatly impacted their operational strategies.
- When there are times of low production, anglers and businesses are subject to more restrictions. However, when you disconnect people from the resource for extended periods they often stop caring; they stop going to meetings, and their buy-in is lost. Therefore, it’s very important to keep people connected to the resource.