



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

File Number: HAL 18-006

Agenda Date 4/2/2018

Agenda Number: C8

Dan Hull, Chairman
David Witherell, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

Halibut retention in BSAI sablefish pots - Initial Review

STAFF CONTACT: Sarah Marrinan and Sara Cleaver (NPFMC)

ACTION REQUIRED:

- Review Draft EA/RIR and decide whether to release for public review.
- Consider whether to select preliminary preferred alternative and elements at this time.

BACKGROUND:

The Council is considering a regulatory amendment to allow retention of legal-size halibut in pot gear used to fish sablefish IFQ or CDQ in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands, provided the operator also holds sufficient sablefish and halibut IFQ or CDQ for the appropriate regulatory area. Since there is no regulatory definition of a "sablefish pot", any action taken would presumably affect fishery participants using pot gear that had both sufficient sablefish and halibut IFQ/CDQ.

Recently, the Council took action to allow harvest of sablefish and halibut in pot longline gear in the GOA. Additionally, in January 2018, the IPHC changed its regulations to make pot gear legal for halibut in all areas off Alaska; however, complementary NMFS/Council action would be needed for this action to take effect in the BSAI. Currently in the BSAI, halibut may only be retained using hook-and-line gear.

The incentive for this proposal is primarily driven by the desire to improve the economic and resource efficiency associated with harvesting halibut IFQ/ CDQ. Killer whale depredation of both hook-and-line gear as well as of regulatory discards of halibut in the sablefish IFQ/CDQ pot fishery has negative consequences for both the IFQ/CDQ fleet as well as the halibut resource. The requirement to discard halibut caught incidentally in sablefish pots reduces the efficiency of the fishery and leads to halibut wastage. IFQ and CDQ participants using pots in the BSAI who also hold both sablefish and halibut IFQ/CDQ are essentially "fishing twice" to harvest their halibut quota. This action is proposed to allow for more efficient harvest of the halibut resource by decreasing the wastage of legal-size halibut discarded in the BSAI sablefish pot fishery. It also intends to reduce whale depredation of halibut caught on hook-and-line gear by allowing operators that hold both halibut and sablefish IFQ the opportunity to retain halibut in pot gear.

This analysis highlights the possible environmental and socio-economic impacts of allowing for this harvest flexibility. In particular, NMFS describes potential concerns with the pot gear interactions in the Pribilof Island Habitat Conservation Zone due to sensitive nature of the overfished Pribilof Island blue king crab stock.

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In addition, the analysis examines the Council's proposed action alternative, which includes 4 elements under which the Council will consider:

- (1) permitting the use of both single and longline pots;
- (2) adding gear retrieval requirements;
- (3) adding an exemption to the 9-inch maximum tunnel opening in pot gear;
- (4) adding logbook and VMS requirements.