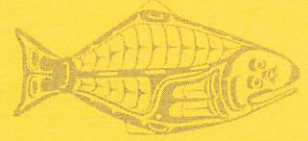


News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2003 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its seventy-ninth Annual Meeting in Victoria, British Columbia, with Dr. Richard Beamish of Nanaimo, British Columbia presiding as Chairman. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2003 totaling 74,920,000 pounds, identical to the regulatory area catch limits in 2002.

The Commission staff reported on the assessment of the Pacific halibut stock in 2002. There were some significant changes in the assessment as a result of changes in the underlying data being analyzed and the persistence of smaller sizes at age in the central part of the halibut range. These changes created some uncertainty about differences in the biomass of the stock estimated from the current and the previous assessment. Analyses were conducted for the 2002 assessment to ensure that the stock is not in any danger of being overharvested. However, the staff needs to resolve these technical issues of the assessment over the next year. In addition, Commission staff is investigating a new harvest policy that may result in greater stability in the yield from the fishery and insulate the process of setting catch limits from technological changes in the assessment. This harvest policy will also need to be reviewed by the Commission. The resolution of the technical issues of the assessment may indicate a larger estimate of biomass in the central region of the stock distribution but application of the proposed harvest policy might dictate slightly lower yields. Since these two processes may be somewhat counterbalancing, the staff wishes to complete its investigations before recommending any changes to present catch limits or the harvest policy. While the trajectory of the halibut stock biomass is downward, the biomass is still above the long-term average level and is expected to remain above this level for the next several years.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2003 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies. The Commission will recommend to the governments the following catch limits for 2003 in Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington), Area 2B (British Columbia), Area 2C (southeastern Alaska), Area 3A (central Gulf), Area 3B (western Gulf), Area 4A (eastern Aleutians), Area 4B (western Aleutians), Area 4C (Pribilof Islands), Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea), and Area 4E (Bering Sea flats):

2003 Catch Limits

Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
2A Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Point Chehalis)	222,700
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll	39,300
2A Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Point Chehalis)	70,000
2A Treaty Indian commercial	456,500
2A Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	27,000
2A Sport - North of Columbia River	232,499
<u>2A Sport - South of Columbia River</u>	<u>262,001</u>
Area 2A total	1,310,000
2B	11,750,000
2C	8,500,000
3A	22,630,000
3B	17,130,000
4A	4,970,000
4B	4,180,000
4C	2,030,000
4D	2,030,000
<u>4E</u>	<u>390,000</u>
<u>Area 4 total</u>	<u>13,600,000</u>
Total	74,920,000

The catch limits for Regulatory Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the catch-sharing plan implemented by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC). The NPFMC catch-sharing plan in Area 4 allows the Commission to set biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4C-D-E. The catch-sharing plan allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E. The requirements for fishing Area 4D CDQ in Area 4E will be part of regulations promulgated by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and will be reflected in the IPHC regulations.

The catch-sharing plan implemented by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) for Area 2A was adopted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. Fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons in Area 2A and the incidental commercial halibut fishery during the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis will be established under United States domestic regulations established by NMFS. The remainder of the Area 2A catch-sharing plan, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. For further information of the depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut

fishery, incidental halibut during the sablefish fishery, and the sport fisheries, call the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825).

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 25, July 9, July 23, August 6, August 20, September 3, and September 17. All fishing periods will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. local time, and will be further restricted by fishing period limits announced at a later date.

The staff reported to the Commission on its further investigation of the issues associated with an extended halibut fishing season. The Commission conducted extensive discussions on the season extension issue and received several industry proposals and public testimony. After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting sector, the Commission voted to extend the season by two weeks at the beginning of the season. Therefore, the treaty Indian commercial fishery in Area 2A, the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E will all commence at 12 noon local time on March 1 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2003.

In addition, the Commission directed the staff to form an industry-agency task force and provide a report and recommendations on how a season of up to 12 months could be accommodated. The task force report will be presented to the Commission at its 2003 Interim Meeting in November.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission approved several minor clarifications to the regulations. The regulation allowing fillets from legally landed and retained fish to be possessed only aboard a vessel, in port, up to 1800 hours local time on the calendar day following the offload was revised to state "harvesting" vessel. The requirement of vessel operators for retaining records was revised to reflect the defined term of landed rather than delivered halibut.

The Commission agreed to amend its regulations concerning clearances into and out of Area 4 to accommodate a NOAA Fisheries Office for Enforcement request that vessels equipped with Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) be exempted from clearance requirements. The exemption would only apply if VMS systems are installed and operated according to Enforcement's standards and conditions. Full details on the requirements will be published in IPHC regulations and will be available on the NOAA Enforcement website (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>) or by phone at (907) 586-7200.

The coordinates for the Cape Spencer light used for the Area 2C-3A boundary were updated (58°11'54" N, 136°38'24" W) to agree with the U.S. Coast Guard light list.

Other Actions

The regulations were not changed to require IPHC permits for tagging halibut and retaining halibut for research, or defining access for IPHC sampling, as requested by staff. The

Commission agreed with the intent of recommended changes but wished to consider the impacts of these regulations on other agency activities. The Commission asked staff to monitor issues of access to fish for sampling and advise of any difficulties, while the potential regulation was being evaluated.

The Commission reviewed the request for changing the regulation from having all buoys onboard the vessel marked with vessel identifiers, to having only the setline buoys or the buoys in the water marked. The regulation was not changed but different enforcement agencies will review various buoy marking requirements and report to the Commission on potential standardization of marking, at the next Annual Meeting.

The Commission noted the concerns of local depletion by several groups. The staff will cooperate through DFO with the West Coast Vancouver Island Aquatic Management Board to investigate whether depletion of halibut off Vancouver Island has occurred and, if so, what mitigative measures might be possible. IPHC research projects in Area 4C, in conjunction with Central Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, will be continued in 2003. This research is examining oceanographic influences on halibut distribution.

The Commission honoured Ms. Elise Pletnikoff of Kodiak, Alaska as the first recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Ms. Pletnikoff attended the meeting and was presented with a certificate and plaque, as well as the scholarship of \$2,000 (U.S.). The Commissioners expressed their continued support for the scholarship program and commended the Scholarship Committee for their efforts in assessing the candidates.

The Commission notes that halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries was reduced slightly in 2002, continuing the trend initiated by the 1991 Commission agreement to achieve lower bycatch mortality levels. However, the Commission believes that progress on further reductions on bycatch mortality is desirable and that current levels of mortality reduce yield to the directed halibut fisheries. The Commission will continue to work with agencies of the two governments to achieve reductions in halibut bycatch mortality.

The Commission received statements of concern from industry about the level of NOAA Enforcement oversight of IFQ deliveries in Alaska. Commissioners discussed this issue with Enforcement staff and expressed their concern that Enforcement positions be fully staffed and that IFQ oversight be adequate.

The Commission acknowledged comments concerning aquaculture received in its public sessions. Recognizing that aquaculture development occurs in both countries, the Commission is concerned that all such developments incorporate monitoring and evaluation programs, such that wild Pacific halibut stocks will not be harmed. Staff was instructed to obtain present guidelines and standards for aquaculture licensing and operation in each country, for presentation to the Commission.

The recommended regulations for the 2003 halibut fishery will become official as soon as they are approved by the Canadian and United States Governments. The Commission will publish and distribute regulation pamphlets.

The next Annual Meeting of the Commission is planned for Juneau, Alaska from January 20 to 23, 2004. The United States Government commissioner, Dr. James Balsiger, was elected Chairman for the coming year. The Canadian Government commissioner, Dr. Richard Beamish, was elected as Vice Chairman. Other Canadian commissioners are Clifford Atleo and John Secord. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Andrew Scalzi. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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