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JAN 30 2006

January 23, 2006

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P.O. BOX 90009, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98145-2009

HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2006 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission completed its Eighty-second Annual Meeting in Bellevue, Washington, with Dr. James Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska presiding as Chair. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States, catch limits for 2006 totaling 69,860,000 pounds, a 5.37% decrease from the 2005 catch limit of 73,819,000 pounds.

The Commission staff reported on the 2005 assessment of the Pacific halibut stock which implemented only minor technical changes from the previous year. The halibut stock is healthy in the central and southern portions of the range (Areas 3A through 2A) but is believed to have declined in Areas 3B through Area 4, and lower catch limits are required in those areas. The recruitment of the 1994 and 1995 year classes appears to be relatively strong in most areas, although Area 4B is showing a notably lower level of recruitment of these same year classes compared with other regulatory areas. Recoveries of PIT-tagged halibut from the Bering Sea and western Gulf of Alaska have been very low and do not provide information sufficient to estimate exploitable biomass reliably in these areas. Such low recovery rates suggest very high biomass levels in the Bering Sea but steadily declining commercial and survey catch rates in most areas suggest that fishing mortality rates of halibut are similar to those in the central and eastern Gulf of Alaska. The Commission does not yet know why the recaptures of tagged halibut from these areas are low and is continuing to examine the problem. However, the Commission's analytic assessment and survey data for these areas continue to indicate stock declines and the requirement for reductions in harvest.

In 2005, Commission staff implemented a 22.5% harvest rate for use in Areas 2A through 3A and a rate of 20% for Areas 3B through 4E. Low levels of recruitment and a new examination of productivity in Areas 4B and 4CDE indicated that harvest rates lower than 20% were more appropriate for these areas. Accordingly, the Commission adopted catch limits based on a harvest rate of 15% for Areas 4B and 4CDE. This is the second year in a row that harvest rates for these areas have been lowered as a precautionary measure, and while additional research projects are conducted in 2006.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2006 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 2006 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):

## 2006 Catch Limits

Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A	
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	234,960
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	41,464
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	70,000
Treaty Indian commercial	472,000
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	36,000
Sport – North of Columbia River	249,152
<u>Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>276,424</u>
Area 2A total	1,380,000
Area 2B (includes sport catch allocation)	13,220,000
Area 2C	10,630,000
Area 3A	25,200,000
Area 3B	10,860,000
Area 4A	3,350,000
Area 4B	1,670,000
Area 4C	1,610,000
Area 4D	1,610,000
<u>Area 4E</u>	<u>330,000</u>
Area 4 total	8,570,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>69,860,000</b>

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada will allocate the adopted Area 2B catch limit between sport and commercial fisheries.

The IPHC sets biologically-based catch limits for Areas 4A, 4B, and a combined Area 4CDE. 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 catch-sharing plan allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E.

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. In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 28, July 12, July 26, August 9, August 23, September 6, and September 20, 2006. 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.

Area 2A fishing dates for an incidental commercial halibut fishery concurrent with salmon troll fishing seasons and the incidental commercial halibut fishery during the sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis will be established under United States domestic regulations by the National Marine Fisheries Service (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).

After reviewing staff information and proposals from the harvesting and processing sector, the Commission voted on a season opening date of March 5. The Sunday opening date is to facilitate marketing. Therefore, seasons will commence at 12 noon local time on March 5 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2006 for the following fisheries and areas: 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.

#### Regulatory Changes and Issues

The Commission approved regulations to change the sport fishery possession limits in Area 2A. The sport fishery possession limit on land will be two halibut (U.S. origin) in Washington, three daily bag limits in Oregon, and two daily bag limits in California. The sport possession limit on the water in Area 2A will be the same as the daily bag limits.

For the Area 2A fishery, the Commission passed a regulation requiring that the person completing the State fish ticket (first recipient, commercial fish processor, or buyer) record on the fish ticket whether the halibut weight is head-on or head-off fish, or record the corresponding product code.

The Commission approved recognizing in IPHC regulations the First Nation's Food Fishery in Area 2B. Also, the IPHC regulations will be changed to require the new British Columbia Integrated Fisheries logbook, replacing the requirement to complete the Halibut Fishery Logbook. Additionally, the Commission approved removing the requirement that the logbooks in Area 2B be completed not later than 24 hours after midnight local time for each day fished and prior to offload, as it will be obsolete with the new fisheries plan.

For landings in Alaska, the IPHC regulations will be revised to allow the Interagency Electronic Recording System, eLandings, as an option along with State fish tickets.

The Commission removed an obsolete regulation that requires vessel operators to record personal use halibut in the vessel's logbook within 24-hours of offload. This is not required as all halibut caught is recorded in the logbook and all halibut retained is weighed and recorded on the landing documentation whether it is sold or retained for personal use.

The Commission agreed to add the definition of net weight of halibut to the IPHC regulations. Net weight is defined as gutted, head-off, and without ice and slime. The catch limits are always in terms of net weight and this will also be stated in the regulations.

#### Other Actions

The industry proposal to allow live halibut landings to processors was discussed. There was concern by the IPHC staff, NOAA Enforcement and industry on the ability of enforcement to track the movement of live halibut. Therefore, the option of butchering the halibut at the dock prior to weighing was reviewed and practical questions were raised. The Commission asked the staff to work with other agency staff to review this option and provide a recommendation at the next IPHC Annual Meeting.

The Commission supports the use of electronic logbooks and asked the staff to work with the person who proposed allowing IPHC approved electronic logbooks for U.S. and Canada. When a logbook design is completed, the Commission will review each specific logbook.

The Commission did not take action on proposals to implement a legal size limit for all fisheries, including the sport and sport charter fisheries, or to require IFQ holders in Alaska to record dogfish bycatch in logbooks, or to allow offloads to floating processors in Area 4.

The Commission did not approve the allowance for proxy fishing in Alaska.

The Commission will request that NMFS finish amending their Quota Share regulations for the Individual Fishery Quota fishery in Alaska to reference the dates of the halibut season, rather than specific dates of the year.

The Commission spent considerable time discussing the state of understanding about halibut stocks in the Bering Sea, particularly on the eastern Bering Sea shelf. The advisory bodies to the Commission recommended additional research to obtain data necessary for a better understanding of the status and productivity of halibut stocks in the area. Accordingly, the Commission approved a four-part research program to address this issue, to be initiated in 2006. The program will incorporate both a new survey of the eastern Bering Sea shelf, expansion of some segments of the existing survey program in the area, analysis of historical trawl surveys conducted by NMFS, and an estimation of the catching efficiency of the NMFS trawl gear, for halibut.

In addition, the Commission will generate a research project to address the lack of detailed knowledge of the timing of spawning migrations of halibut between Areas 2B and 2C. This project will involve tagging and deployment of halibut with pop-up satellite tags that will release during February-March of 2007. Together with information on exploitation rates from the two areas, this project should allow the staff to estimate the approximate proportions and timing of potential interceptions of halibut originating in Area 2B, that might be caught by the fishery in Area 2C in March.

The Commission honoured Mr. Tyler Jones of Bellingham, Washington as the fourth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Jones was unable to attend the meeting because of academic commitments but has been 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 noted that halibut bycatch mortality in non-target fisheries was reduced slightly in 2005, and was at the lowest level since 1987, continuing the trend initiated by the 1991 Commission agreement to achieve lower bycatch mortality levels. However, the Commission agrees that further reductions are 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 was also asked to send a letter to the NPFMC on the management of the sport charter fishery. The Commission deferred on this request until NOAA General Counsel completes a legal examination of the management authority.

The recommended regulations for the 2006 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 Victoria, British Columbia from January 16 to 19, 2007. The Canadian Government commissioner, Dr. Laura Richards, was elected as Chair for the coming year. The United States Government commissioner, Dr. James Balsiger, was elected Vice-Chair. Other Canadian commissioners are Clifford Atleo and Gary Robinson. The other United States commissioners are Ralph Hoard and Phillip Lestenkof. Dr. Bruce Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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