

News Release



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HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2014 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its 90th Annual Meeting in Seattle, WA on January 17, with Dr. James Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska, presiding as Chair. More than 250 halibut industry stakeholders attended the meeting, with over 60 more participating via the web. All of the Commission's public and administrative sessions during the meeting were open to the public and broadcast on the web.

The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2014 totaling 27,515,000 pounds. The Commission is responding to stock challenges with a risk-based precautionary approach and review of the current harvest policy to ensure the best possible advice. Accordingly, it has set catch limits that should achieve a lower coastwide harvest rate than the 2013 catch limits of 31,028,000 pounds. The Commission also addressed other regulatory issues and took actions regarding assessment survey expansion, bycatch management, and follow-up from the 2012 IPHC performance review.

A news release issued January 17, 2014, announced the catch limits and fishing seasons for 2014, and that information is repeated in this news release. Documents and presentations from the Annual Meeting can be found on the Annual Meeting page of the IPHC website: <http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html>.

Stock Assessment and Harvest Rates

During 2013, a thorough exploration of all available data sources was completed. This analysis provided several new avenues for stock assessment modeling. The IPHC's scientific peer review process also continued with a Scientific Review Board (SRB, <http://www.iphc.info/srb>) evaluation of the stock assessment data and modeling conducted since the 2012 assessment. This evaluation improved the 2013 assessment, and SRB recommendations will be used to help structure the 2014 assessment.

For the 2013 stock assessment, an ensemble of three alternative models was developed to produce the stock biomass estimates and harvest decision table results. This resulted in estimates of stock size and management reference points that are substantially more robust to current or future technical changes to the underlying models. The 2013 stock assessment indicates that the Pacific halibut stock has been declining continuously over the last decade, with recruitment strengths that are much smaller than those observed through the 1980s and 1990s, and more typical of those seen during the last century, as well as decreasing size at age, being contributing factors. In recent years, the estimated female spawning biomass appears to have stabilized near 200 million pounds. An executive summary of the 2013 stock assessment is posted on the IPHC website at <http://iphc.int/meetings-and-events/interim-meeting.html>, and the complete report of the 2013 stock assessment is available at http://iphc.int/publications/rara/2013/rara2013_12_2013assessment.pdf.

As in 2013, the IPHC staff harvest advice was presented in the form of a decision table that estimates the consequences to stock and fishery status and trends from different levels of harvest. The final version of the decision table for 2014, incorporating the adopted catch limits, is posted on the IPHC website at <http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting.html>.

Catch Limits and Seasons

Catch Limits

The Commission received harvest advice for 2014 from the scientific staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fishery agencies, and recommends to the two governments the following catch limits for 2014:

Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A (California, Oregon, and Washington)	960,000
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	168,137
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	29,671
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish fishery (north of Pt. Chehalis)	14,274
Treaty Indian commercial	307,500
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	28,500
Sport – North of Columbia River	214,110
Sport – South of Columbia River	197,808
Area 2B (British Columbia) (includes sport catch allocation)	6,850,000
Area 2C (southeastern Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport) ¹	4,160,000
Commercial fishery	3,318,720
Guided sport fishery	761,280
Area 3A (central Gulf of Alaska) (combined commercial/guided sport) ¹	9,430,000
Commercial fishery	7,317,730
Guided sport fishery	1,782,270
Area 3B (western Gulf of Alaska)	2,840,000
Area 4A (eastern Aleutians)	850,000
Area 4B (central/western Aleutians)	1,140,000
Areas 4CDE	1,285,000
Area 4C (Pribilof Islands)	596,600
Area 4D (northwestern Bering Sea)	596,600
Area 4E (Bering Sea flats)	91,800
Total	27,515,000

¹The combined total includes estimated mortality from regulatory discards of sublegal halibut and lost gear in the commercial fishery, plus discard mortality in the guided sport fishery, as mandated in the U.S. Catch Sharing Plan.

Notes Regarding the Catch Limits for Specific Regulatory Areas

Area 2A

The Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) Catch Sharing Plan (CSP) for Area 2A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for the Area 2A fisheries. The overall catch limit for Area 2A in 2014 is sufficient to permit non-treaty incidental harvest of halibut during the limited-entry sablefish longline fishery, under the provisions of the CSP.

Area 2B

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

Areas 2C and 3A

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) CSP for Areas 2C and 3A was accepted by the Commission and is reflected in the catch limits adopted for Areas 2C and 3A. That CSP sets the allocation between the commercial and charter sport sectors in those two Regulatory Areas. Note that unlike previous years, the IPHC catch limits for Areas 2C and 3A now include both sectors (commercial and recreational charter), plus discard and lost gear mortality estimates, as noted above in the table footnote.

Area 4CDE

The IPHC sets a combined catch limit for Area 4CDE. The individual catch limits for Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E reflect the 4CDE CSP adopted by the NPFMC. The CSP also allows Area 4D Community Development Quota (CDQ) harvest to be taken in Area 4E, and Area 4C Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ to be fished in Areas 4D and 4C.

Fishing Season Dates

The Commission approved a season of March 8 – November 7, 2014, for the U.S. and Canadian Individual Quota fisheries. Seasons will commence at noon local time on March 8 and terminate at noon local time on November 7, 2014 for the following fisheries and areas: the Canadian Individual Vessel Quota (IVQ) fishery in Area 2B, and the United States IFQ and CDQ fisheries in Areas 2C, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E. All Area 2A commercial fishing, including the treaty Indian commercial fishery, will take place between March 8 and November 7, 2014. The Saturday opening date was chosen to facilitate marketing.

In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery, south of Point Chehalis, Washington are recommended: June 25, July 9, July 23, August 6, August 20, September 3, and September 17, 2014. All fishing periods will begin at 8 a.m. and end at 6 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 the limited-entry sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis and the salmon troll fishing seasons will be established under U.S. domestic regulations by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The remainder of the Area 2A CSP, including sport fishing seasons and depth restrictions, will be determined under regulations promulgated by NMFS. Further information regarding the

depth restrictions in the commercial directed halibut fishery, and details for the sport fisheries, is available at the NMFS hotline (1-800-662-9825).

Regulatory Changes and Issues

Charter Halibut Sector Management Measures for Areas 2C and 3A

The Commission received a request from the NPFMC to adopt charter halibut sector management measures in accordance with the CSP implemented by NMFS for 2014. This proposal is designed to keep removals by the charter fishery within the limits of the CSP. After consideration of the advice of the Council, Commission staff, Canadian and United States harvesters and processors, and other fisheries agencies, the Commission approved the following measures:

In Area 2C, 1) a one-fish daily bag limit, and 2) a reverse slot size limit restriction (≤ 44 inches or ≥ 76 inches).

In Area 3A, 1) a two-fish daily bag limit, 2) a maximum size limit for the second fish of 29 inches, and 3) a vessel limit of one trip per calendar day.

In both Areas 2C and 3A charter fisheries, if a halibut is filleted, the entire carcass, with head and tail connected as a single piece, must be retained on board the vessel until all fillets are offloaded.

Area 2A Licenses

To support the possibility of an earlier season opening for the incidental commercial fisheries the Commission approved Staff-proposed regulatory changes to the Area 2A licensing procedures. The Commission will issue individual licenses for each of the three Area 2A commercial fisheries: the directed commercial fishery; the incidental halibut fishery during the primary limited-entry sablefish fishery north of Point Chehalis, Washington; and the incidental halibut fishery during the salmon troll fishery. Previously, one vessel license was issued for the directed fishery and the incidental halibut fishery during the sablefish season. The Commission also approved an earlier deadline date of March 15, or the first weekday if it falls on a weekend, for license applications for the two incidental halibut commercial fisheries. In 2014, the deadline date will be March 17. The deadline for license applications for the directed halibut fishery remains April 30. There are no changes to the IPHC sport charter licenses.

Halibut Retention in Sablefish Pots in Area 4A

The Commission reviewed documentation from the NPFMC to allow retention of Area 4A halibut caught incidentally in the sablefish pot fishery in the areas of overlap with the NMFS Bering Sea and Aleutian Island regulatory areas. The initial proposal for a legal gear change for the area had been directed to IPHC and the Commission referred the matter to the NPFMC. The Commission supported the proposal and agreed that the NPFMC should continue to explore the issue and begin to develop the appropriate regulations. The Commission noted that this may be a good way to address bycatch, but also stressed its desire that removals be limited to incidental catch and not lead to a directed halibut pot fishery. The Commission asked the NPFMC to include in its analysis methods to limit the directed fishing for halibut using pot gear, and to consider appropriate methods for the timing of pot removal and the marking of buoys (such as with radar reflectors).

Abundance-Based Management of all Halibut Removals

The Commission noted that a management proposal for managing all halibut removals – under the 32-inch commercial fishery size limit (U32) as well as above the limit (O32) – had been submitted but subsequently withdrawn during the meeting. Noting the questions raised by the original recommendation, the Commission directed the Staff to prepare a discussion paper on the biological and management issues surrounding such a concept, in order to inform future discussions of the feasibility of managing U32 removals.

Other Actions

Survey Expansion

The Commission approved the expansion of the IPHC's annual setline survey to include previously unsurveyed areas between 10 and 400 fathoms' depth. The setline survey currently samples at depths from 20 to 275 fathoms in most areas, and there are some gaps within that range. The expansion is designed to provide better data for the stock assessment through more complete coverage of all halibut habitat. The expansion is proposed to occur over a period of five years, until the whole range has been surveyed, and will be initiated with Areas 2A and 4A in 2014. Further analysis of the proposed expansion will occur this year, and will be used to guide implementation in future years. Additional details of the survey expansion plan are available in this year's Bluebook:

(http://www.iphc.int/publications/bluebooks/IPHC_bluebook_2014.pdf).

Management Strategy Advisory Board

At the 2013 Annual Meeting, the Commission approved the formation of a Management Strategy Advisory Board (MSAB) to advise it on the development and evaluation of candidate objectives and strategies for managing the halibut resource. The Commission received two reports from the MSAB on progress made in 2013, which are available here: <http://www.iphc.info/msab>

Halibut Bycatch

The Commission received a presentation from its Bycatch Project Team (HBWG II), which outlined progress made during the past year on its four objectives: quantifying bycatch, documenting impacts to the fishery and resource, exploring options to mitigate impacts, and identifying options to reduce bycatch. The Project Team's draft report and comments are posted on the IPHC website at <http://www.iphc.int/research/245-bycatch.html>.

The Project Team identified next steps for the immediate term and for the coming year. Actions for the coming months included 1) completing revisions to the bycatch report in response to Project Team and public feedback; and 2) organizing an initial meeting between IPHC Commissioners and the NPFMC to facilitate discussion and collaboration on potential bycatch reduction targets, management measures, and monitoring programs that fall under the Council's authority.

Actions proposed for the coming year include 1) discussing the development of a broader strategy or set of principles for addressing bycatch, including exploration of a number of alternative concepts for dealing with bycatch; and 2) discussing a plan for examining the magnitude and impacts of other sources of halibut mortality. The Project Team presentation is posted at <http://www.iphc.int/meetings/2014am/bycatchpresentation2014amv4.pdf>.

The Commission approved the Project Team's proposed next steps and appointed Commissioners Boyce and Alverson to guide the effort on behalf of the Commission.

Performance Review

The Commission reviewed the implementation of recommendations from the 2012 Performance Review. Action taken since the review has produced increased openness and transparency in Commission meetings and operations, and the recommendations have been incorporated into ongoing work to improve the Commission's procedures and processes, including the development of scientific advice, planning and review of research, and operation of the advisory bodies.

The Commission reviewed draft revisions to its rules of procedure and financial regulations, which were developed in response to the performance review, and expects to approve them within the next two months. The Commission also reviewed a draft progress report on the performance review and its follow-up actions, and directed the report to be posted for the public. Performance review information, including the progress report, can be found on the Commission website at <http://iphc.int/meetings-and-events/review.html>.

IPHC Merit Scholarship

The Commission honored Mr. Spencer Lunda of Juneau, Alaska, as the twelfth recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Lunda was present to accept the scholarship at the opening public session of the Annual Meeting.

Upcoming Meetings

The 2014 Interim Meeting of the Commission will be held December 2-3, 2014, in Seattle, Washington. This Interim Meeting will be held in a larger venue in order to make it more accessible to the public. The next Annual Meeting of the Commission is planned for January 26-30, 2015, in Vancouver, British Columbia. The 2016 Annual Meeting is tentatively slated for January 25-29 in Juneau, Alaska.

Commission Membership

Canadian Government Commissioner Paul Ryall of Vancouver, British Columbia, was elected Chair for the coming year. United States Government Commissioner Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, Alaska, was elected Vice-Chair. The other Canadian Commissioners are David Boyes of Courtenay, British Columbia, and Ted Assu of Campbell River, British Columbia. Commissioner Assu replaced Commissioner Michael Pearson at the conclusion of the Annual Meeting. The other United States Commissioners are Robert Alverson of Seattle, Washington, and Donald Lane of Homer, Alaska, both appointed in early January this year.

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