

North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Dr. Bruce Leaman, Executive Director
International Pacific Halibut Commission
2320 West Commodore Way, Suite 300
Seattle, Washington 98199-1287

Dear Dr. Leaman:

On behalf of our Council, I am submitting our annual management letter which summarizes Council actions, recommendations, or issues which we believe are necessary for IPHC consideration at your upcoming annual meeting.

2015 Halibut Charter management measures

In December 2014, following review of the IPHC's preliminary 'blue line' information, analyses provided by Mr. Scott Meyers of ADF&G, and recommendations from its Halibut Charter Management Implementation Committee, the Council voted unanimously to recommend the following management measures for 2015:

FOR AREA 2C, SOUTHEAST ALASKA:

- one fish daily bag limit, with a reverse slot limit of U40"-O80" (must be less than or equal to 40" or greater than or equal to 80")
- if the final charter allocation is sufficiently higher than the 'blue line' to accommodate a change in the reverse slot limit, adjust the size of the lower limit upward to meet the allocation

FOR AREA 3A, SOUTHCENTRAL ALASKA:

- two fish daily bag limit
- one fish of any size, and maximum size of one fish is 29"
- one trip per day (limit each vessel to one trip per calendar day)
- one day per week closure (prohibition on halibut charter fishing on Thursdays, from June 15 through August 31)
- 5-fish annual limit
- if the final charter allocation is higher than the 'blue line', adjust the maximum size of the second fish upward to meet the allocation

The Council also discussed the very constrained timeline associated with development of annual management measures, given the need for ADF&G sport fish division to analyze potential management measures based on the IPHC interim meeting results and vet those through our Halibut Charter Committee in the short time between the IPHC interim meeting and the Council's December meeting. We did not resolve this issue, but discussed options including use of the previous year's IPHC 'blue line' as

the basis for the initial ADF&G analysis, and continuing to select annual management measure recommendations through the Committee and Council after the IPHC interim meeting.

Status of halibut retention in Area 4A pot gear

Previously the Council recommended that the IPHC approve the proposed allowance of halibut retention in sablefish pot gear in Area 4A . However, prior to approving such allowance, the IPHC requested that the Council develop associated regulatory measures which would result in a coordinated management approach to address some of the IPHC's concerns, most notably maximum retention allowances, or MRAs, which would limit the amount of halibut retention and ostensibly prevent targeting of halibut with pot gear.

Partly due to the press of other priorities, the Council has not yet fully developed those associated regulatory measures, and is currently scheduled to review a preliminary staff analysis in April 2015, at which time they will identify specific alternatives for consideration. We anticipate that the Council's intent with regard to establishment of an MRA, or other regulatory measures, will be available to the IPHC in time for its 2016 annual meeting, thereby providing the IPHC the opportunity to approve halibut retention in Area 4A sablefish pots at that time.

Status of GOA sablefish longline pot gear allowance

Due primarily to concerns with significant killer and sperm whale depredation of sablefish longlines in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA), the Council has developed a regulatory package which would potentially allow the use of pot gear in GOA sablefish fisheries. As part of that process, the Council established a Gear Committee comprised of industry representatives which was active in 2014 in assisting the Council with development of alternatives and options. The Council reviewed an initial analysis in December 2014, refined alternatives at that time, and scheduled this for final action at its April 2015 meeting. The Council's goal is to reduce whale depredation while minimizing concerns with gear conflict and grounds preemption. The alternatives under consideration are summarized below:

- allow pot longline gear in any or all of the following Gulf of Alaska areas – western GOA, central GOA, west Yakutat, and southeast outside
- a limit on number of pots per vessel, ranging from 60 to 400 pots
- potential requirement of gear tracking measures such as pot tags and buoy transponders
- potential gear retrieval requirements to reduce the time pots are on the grounds, including development of an electronic database of pots set, retrieved, or lost
- potential allowance of IFQ halibut retention

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands halibut PSC (bycatch) reduction package

At its June 2014 meeting the Council passed a motion outlining several alternatives, elements, and options for reducing halibut bycatch (PSC) in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BS/AI) groundfish fisheries. Part of that motion requested industry sectors to voluntarily reduce halibut bycatch by 10% from current levels. Based on information presented to the Council by NMFS at our December 2014 meeting, it appears that overall halibut mortality was decreased by 3% overall from the preceding five-year average (with significant variations across sectors). Additional industry sector reports, and Council review of an exempted fishing permit (EFP) application to allow deck sorting in certain fisheries, are scheduled for our February 2015 meeting.

In addition to other voluntary measures, deck sorting in particular appears to have the potential for additional reductions in halibut bycatch mortality in 2015 and beyond. At this time the applicant is working with NMFS to expedite internal agency review and approval so that the EFP could be in place in

time for the majority of the relevant 2015 fisheries. The Council is very supportive of progress with regard to deck sorting, and believes that the iterative processes involved in the proposed EFPs will provide an opportunity to maximize benefits of BS/AI bycatch mortality savings, particularly to directed halibut users in Areas 4C/D/E.

At that upcoming February 2015 meeting the Council will be reviewing the staff analysis of the BSAI halibut PSC reduction package, with the intent of taking final action at its June 2015 meeting. Alternatives being considered in that bycatch reduction package include sector-by-sector PSC limit reductions of up to 35% lower than the caps currently in regulation. Other information requested by the Council as part of this analytical package includes:

- levels of catch and bycatch in the existing IPHC closed area
- whether a halibut PSC limit should be applied to the directed sablefish IFQ fishery
- impacts of halibut PSC reduction efforts on chinook and chum salmon bycatch management measures
- potential approaches to establish a biomass-based halibut PSC limit
- review of current protocols for rolling unused halibut PSC between groundfish sectors
- review of subsistence information in Areas 4C/D/E
- fishing practices that reduce halibut bycatch (mortality) in the directed halibut fisheries

The Council motion also recognized the ongoing development of the IPHC's total mortality accounting approach, noting the possibility of adjustments to the elements and options within this package at its February 2015 meeting (where we will also meet jointly with the IPHC Commissioners on February 5).

Observer program improvements

NMFS representatives may provide additional detail to the IPHC on our recently restructured groundfish observer program, but we wanted to highlight a few program improvements in our 2015 annual deployment plan (ADP). These include an overall increase to 24% trip selection probability in the large vessel (partial coverage) trip selection stratum, which is a 50% increase in coverage over the 2014 rate. The small vessel sector (40' to 57.5') will be under a trip selection model as well in 2015, at an overall 12% selection rate. NMFS will not grant conditional releases in the large vessel trip selection pool in 2015, and conditional releases for the small vessel trip selection pool will only be made for life raft capacity situations. These changes in combination increase our overall coverage and improve our data collection efforts relative to bycatch monitoring and other observer program objectives.

Gulf of Alaska trawl bycatch management initiative

In addition to recent reductions in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) halibut bycatch (PSC) limits, the Council is in the process of developing a more comprehensive trawl bycatch management program in the GOA, aimed at further minimizing bycatch to the extent practicable. In October 2014 the Council passed a motion specifying the alternatives, elements, and options for this program, which centered around a fishery cooperative model with allocations of both target groundfish and PSC species. Several aspects of that program are being analyzed by staff before the Council can finalize the full scope of this initiative, including specific alternatives and elements. This issue will likely be reviewed again by the Council at our October 2015 meeting.

Joint meeting on February 5

On Wednesday, February 5, the Council and IPHC will meet jointly at the Renaissance Marriot hotel in Seattle, beginning at 10 am. An agenda for that meeting has been developed and published, and includes: discussion of the IPHC total mortality accounting framework, including an SSC review of that

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framework; discussion of the Council's BS/AI halibut PSC reduction package, including SSC review of that analysis; improving estimates (and reconciling estimates) of discard mortalities in all fisheries; discussion of potential abundance-based PSC limits; and, identification of areas of mutual interest in research and management. The Council looks forward to meeting with the IPHC on these issues. We also note the availability of our 'Navigating the Council Process' booklet (also posted on our website) which may be of use to those not typically engaged in the Council management process.

Myself, as well as Council Chairman Dan Hull and other Council members will be in attendance at your upcoming annual meeting in Vancouver, B.C., January 26-30. At that time I can provide additional information as necessary on the issues addressed in this letter.

Sincerely,



Chris Oliver
Executive Director