

Joint NPFMC / IPHC Meeting

June 7, 2017, Juneau, AK

Agenda Item 4: Progress reports On Council Research and Management Priorities

4c. Halibut decksorting

Over the past several years NMFS has issued several exempted fishing permits (EFP) to permit otherwise unauthorized sorting of halibut prohibited species catch (PSC) on the deck of non-pelagic trawl catcher/processor vessels while targeting flatfish in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands. The EFPs test methods for quickly returning halibut to the water to reduce halibut PSC mortality in non-pelagic trawl fisheries. Under the EFP, vessels are allowed to sort halibut removed from a codend on deck and release those fish back into the water after sampling halibut for length and condition, using IPHC halibut mortality assessment methods, rather than routing halibut into the factory below deck where mortality is greatly increased. All groundfish and halibut harvested must be within existing allocations for groundfish and halibut mortality.

One objective of the halibut decksorting EFPs is to develop protocols that can be implemented in regulations in the future. The iterative EFP process has allowed for many process refinements that will provide a robust foundation for implementing a decksorting option in regulation. The current EFP expires at the end of 2017, and at least one more halibut decksorting EFP is anticipated for 2018, with further refinements based on what is learned during the EFP in 2017. The Council and NMFS intend to initiate a analysis later this year to allow decksorting of halibut on non-pelagic trawl catcher/processors in regulation. This option could be available for the 2019 fishing year at the earliest.

The intention is for decksorting to be an option for non-pelagic trawl vessels, rather than a requirement, and protocols are being established in order to ensure that there is clear communication between the vessel captain and observers about when a decksorting haul is planned. The ability to decksort effectively varies based on the vessel configuration, the target fishery, and environmental conditions. Attached is a report on EFP fishing in 2016, which was presented by the EFP project manager, John Gauvin, to the Council in December 2016, and to the IPHC in January 2017. In 2015 and 2016, vessels used deck sorting from May through December. He reported that in 2016, 12 boats participated in the EFP, and it is estimated that deck sorting under the EFP allowed a halibut savings of 290 mt. Beginning in 2017, vessels began deck sorting in the winter fisheries, and more vessels are participating in the EFP (27 to date). Through May 23, 2017, net savings of halibut mortality as a result of deck sorting are estimated at 253 mt.