

North Pacific Fishery Management Council
C-8 Halibut Retention in BSAI Sablefish Pots
April 8, 2018

The Council adopts the following purpose and need statement and suite of alternatives for initial review.

Purpose and Need Statement:

Interactions with whales throughout the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands affect the ability of sablefish and halibut QS holders to harvest their IFQ by reducing catch per unit of effort and increasing fishing costs. Whale depredation is increasing for vessels fishing halibut IFQ with longline gear, and for halibut discarded when using pot gear to fish sablefish IFQ in the BSAI. The purpose of this action is to address whale depredation on discarded halibut and to allow for more efficient harvest of halibut in areas with whale depredation. Research into developing technological solutions to deter whales and changes in fishing strategies has not resolved this problem. The problem may be addressed by revisions to current regulations that authorize pot gear as legal gear to retain halibut in the BSAI. Allowing retention of halibut caught in pot gear in the BSAI could address the negative impacts of whale depredation on QS holders. This action seeks to reduce the problems associated with whale depredation, including unobserved halibut mortality, while minimizing gear conflicts.

The Council recommends the following revised alternatives, elements and options to allow halibut retention in pot gear in the BSAI.

Alternative 1: No action (status quo).

Alternative 2: Allow retention of legal-sized halibut in single or longline pot gear used to fish for halibut or sablefish IFQ/CDQ in the BSAI provided the IFQ/CDQ holder holds sufficient halibut IFQ/CDQ for that IFQ regulatory area.

Element 1: Gear retrieval

Option 1: No gear tending requirements (status quo)

Option 2: A vessel with unfished IFQ/CDQ onboard cannot leave gear on the grounds untended for more than (sub-options 5-10 days)

Element 2: Limit of a 9-inch maximum width of tunnel opening does not apply when vessel has unfished halibut IFQ/CDQ onboard.

Element 3: All vessels using pot gear to fish IFQ/CDQ are required to use logbooks and VMS.

Element 4: Require escapement mechanism in the mesh panels of pots.

Element 5: Establish regulations that would allow NMFS to close IFQ fishing for halibut if an overfishing limit is approached consistent with regulations in place for groundfish.

This analysis should examine:

- How fishing for IFQ/CDQ halibut and sablefish is defined, and whether additional regulatory clarifications are required to define IFQ/CDQ halibut and sablefish fishing for pot gear.
- Whether additional regulations (e.g., pot tags) are needed to account for IFQ/CDQ halibut and sablefish fishing with pot gear.
- The need and potential options for escapement mechanisms and gear modifications for pots intended to be used to fish halibut IFQ/CDQ.
- Potential gear conflict from the use, storage, retrieval, or loss of IFQ/CDQ halibut and sablefish pots and potential management measures to reduce gear conflict.
- The potential implications of allowing retention of IFQ/CDQ halibut and sablefish by vessels directed fishing for Pacific cod, crab, or other groundfish species.
- The potential scope of closure areas for pot gear (e.g., the Pribilof Islands Habitat Conservation Zone) that may be required to minimize the risk of overfishing Pribilof Islands Blue King Crab.

The Council requests that NMFS include IFQ pot gear effort in its annual inseason management report to the Council. The Council intends to review the effects of allowing retention of halibut in pot gear five years after implementation.

Staff should consider and address comments from the SSC and AP to the extent practicable.