

INTERNATIONAL PACIFIC HALIBUT COMMISSION

News Release

January 20, 2009

HALIBUT COMMISSION COMPLETES 2009 ANNUAL MEETING

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) completed its Eighty-fifth Annual Meeting in Vancouver, B.C., with Dr. Laura J. Richards of Nanaimo, B.C. presiding as Chair. The Commission is recommending to the governments of Canada and the United States catch limits for 2009 totaling 54,080,000 pounds, a 10.4% decrease from the 2008 catch limit of 60,400,000 pounds.

The Commission staff reported on the 2008 Pacific halibut stock assessment which implemented a coastwide estimation of biomass, with apportionment to regulatory biomass based on the data from the annual Commission assessment survey. While the total of the staff catch limit recommendations arising from IPHC survey-based apportionment of the estimated coastwide biomass was accepted, there were differences from staff recommendations for most areas, and the Commission requested additional investigation of apportionment methods during 2009.

For 2009, the Commission recommended a 20% harvest rate for use in Areas 2A through 3B. However, the Commission staff expressed concern over continued declining catch rates in Area 4A and conducted an analysis of productivity in this area during 2008. The analysis recommended a reduction of the harvest rate for this area to 15%, similar to that for other areas of the Bering Sea (Areas 4B and 4CDE). Catch limits adopted for 2009 were lower for most regulatory areas except Area 3B where the Commission, with advice from its advisory bodies, recommends a catch limit the same as that in 2008. The Area 4B recommended catch limit increased slightly for 2009. Decreased catch limits reflect stock biomass declines as the exceptionally strong 1987 and 1988 year classes pass out of the fishery. Recruitment from the 1999 and 2000 year classes is estimated to be above average but is several years away from making major contributions to the exploitable biomass of the stock.

Seasons and Catch Limits

The Commission received regulatory proposals for 2009 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 2009 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):

2009 Catch Limits

Regulatory Area	Catch Limit (pounds)
Area 2A	
Non-treaty directed commercial (south of Pt. Chehalis)	166,385
Non-treaty incidental catch in salmon troll fishery	29,362
Non-treaty incidental catch in sablefish longline fishery (N. of Pt. Chehalis)	11,895
Treaty Indian commercial	303,500
Treaty Indian ceremonial and subsistence (year-round)	29,000
Sport – North of Columbia River	214,110
<u>Sport – South of Columbia River</u>	<u>195,748</u>
Area 2A total	950,000
Area 2B (includes sport catch allocation)	7,630,000
Area 2C	5,020,000
Area 3A	21,700,000
Area 3B	10,900,000
Area 4A	2,550,000
Area 4B	1,870,000
Area 4C	1,569,000
Area 4D	1,569,000

Area 4E	<u>322,000</u>
Area 4 total	7,880,000
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Total	54,080

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada (DFO) will allocate the 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 and Area 4C Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) and CDQ to be fished in Area 4D.

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. The Commission surveyed the Area 2A directed commercial/incidental halibut fishery license holders for their preferred starting date for the directed commercial fishery. There was a range of views on starting dates with most harvesters supporting opening during June and largest proportion favored June 24. In Area 2A, seven 10-hour fishing periods for the non-treaty directed commercial fishery are recommended: June 24, July 8, July 22, August 5, August 19, September 2, September 16, September 30, 2009. 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 approved a season opening date of March 21 for the U.S. and Canadian Individual Quota fisheries, and Treaty tribal fisheries in Area 2A. The Saturday opening date is to facilitate marketing. Therefore, seasons will commence at 12 noon local time on March 21 and terminate at 12 noon local time on November 15, 2009 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 fall within March 21 - November 15, 2009.

Regulatory Changes and Issues

For Alaska, the Commission revised the sport regulation that had stated no person shall possess on board *a fishing vessel*, including charter vessels and pleasure craft, halibut that has been filleted, mutilated, or otherwise disfigured in any manner except that each halibut may be cut into no more than two ventral and two dorsal pieces and two cheeks, all with skin on. The revision changes the reference from *fishing vessel* to *vessel*, and adds an exemption so that halibut in excess of the possession limit may be possessed on the vessel for transportation of halibut, when the vessel is not carrying gear.

The Commission approved a change to the 72-hour restriction prior to the Area 2A directed commercial fishery which would change the restriction to affect all vessels, not just setline vessels, and would require vessels and skippers fishing before the 72-hours immediately prior to the opening to offload their catch or submit to a hold inspection. Without this change, enforcement officers could not tell if fish was caught before or within the 72-hour period.

The Commission approved a regulation that allowed fishing in multiple regulatory areas (4A, 4B, 4C, or 4D), provided a certified observer is on board; or a Vessel Monitoring System is on board and the vessel does not possess at any time on board more halibut than the IFQ allowed for the area currently being fished. In both cases, the halibut needs to be identifiable by regulatory area. This is a regulation that was adopted in 2008 but was not recorded correctly as part of the IPHC regulations in the U.S. Federal Register.

Other Actions

The catch in sport fisheries and enforcement of sport fishing regulations, particularly for charter vessels, were discussed at length. There was support in concept for the development of a harvest tag or ticket for data collection in all recreational halibut fisheries in Alaska and for accurate and timely accounting. The Commission will send letters to the NPFMC and ADF&G acknowledging this support. In 2009, the Commission and agency staff will work with sport representatives to review IPHC Alaska sport regulations and determine if changes are necessary. The Commission staff will also work with ADF&G and NMFS staffs to provide clearer documentation of the Alaska sport regulations.

The Commission also considered the proposed NMFS one-fish bag limit for charter fisheries in Area 2C for 2009. The Commission expressed its desire to see implementation of effective management measures for this fishery, in consideration of the Guideline Harvest Level of 788,000 lb defined for this fishery. The Commission will therefore monitor the implementation of the NMFS proposed rule. In the event of

conservation concerns, the Commission will be prepared to take extraordinary action at an intercessional meeting in 2009 to pass IPHC regulations commensurate with the intent to conserve the resource, should there be any delay or problem with the implementation schedule for the NMFS regulation.

An industry proposal to allow the retention of legal-sized Area 4A IFQ halibut during the Bering Sea sablefish pot fishery was discussed. Although the Commission determines the legal gear for the halibut fishery, the Conference Board requested that the NPMFC IFQ Implementation Team discuss this issue. Accordingly, the Commission will send a letter to the NPFMC to have their advisory body review this proposal.

An industry proposal to reduce the commercial size limit for halibut was reviewed but not adopted. The IPHC staff is continuing its investigation of how a reduced size limit would affect assessment, yield, and long-term productivity of the halibut stock and has not endorsed such a change.

The Commission's advisory bodies supported the coastwide assessment model but continued to seek additional discussion on the best method to apportion the coastwide biomass to regulatory areas. The Commissioners directed the staff to conduct additional consultation with industry in the late spring of 2009 to review apportionment procedures and identify preferred methods.

The Commissioners also directed the staff to conduct a workshop in the fall of 2009 to examine the estimation of sublegal-sized bycatch mortality and the methods by which this mortality is incorporated into the stock assessment and harvest policy. The Commission wishes to review these procedures and impacts during its review of the 2009 stock assessment.

The Commission honoured Mr. Joel Thomas of Port Townsend, WA as the seventh recipient of the IPHC Merit Scholarship. Mr. Thomas was unable to attend the meeting due to class requirements but was previously presented with 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 recommended regulations for the 2009 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 Seattle, WA from January 25-29, 2010. The United States Government Commissioner, Dr. James W. Balsiger of Juneau, AK, was elected Chair. The Canadian Government Commissioner, Dr. Laura J. Richards of Nanaimo, B.C., was elected Vice-Chair for the coming year. Other Canadian Commissioners are Larry Johnson (Parksville, B.C.) and Gary Robinson (Vancouver, B.C.). The other United States Commissioners are Ralph Hoard (Seattle, WA) and Phillip Lestenkof (St. Paul, AK). Dr. Bruce M. Leaman is the Executive Director of the Commission.

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