

NOAA establishes permit system for halibut charter boats

2011: Captains will need permit based on time fished in 2004-'05 and in 2008.

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Aspiring charter boat captains will have to find someone willing to sell them a permit before taking clients fishing for halibut from the central Gulf of Alaska to Southeast Alaska as part of efforts to avoid overfishing.

New rules published Tuesday go into effect in early 2011. They will effectively shut the door on the growing halibut charter boat business along a long stretch of Alaska coastline.

Charter boat guides who have been in business certain years will be able to get permits, but newcomers will have to find someone with a transferable permit willing to sell.

The restriction is needed to keep the growing number of charter boats from overfishing for halibut, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"The new program will stabilize the guided charter fishing sector, maintain access to the fishery for businesses that participated in recent years, and allow access for others who can obtain transferable permits," said Doug Mecum, Alaska's acting regional administrator of NOAA Fisheries.

But some opponents of the move complain that commercial fishermen, who already get the lion's share of the allocation, are getting protection.

Homer charter boat captain Bob Howard said the rules will put him out of business unless he can find a transferable permit.

"I don't qualify for a permit," said Howard, a retired, 65-year-old civil engineer who got into the charter boat business in 2001, then went out of business until 2006 while he spent \$100,000 upgrading the 32-foot Sea Nymph.

The rule "has put a bunch of people out of business," said the former president of the Alaska Charter Association, representing about 180 businesses statewide.

To qualify for a permit, charter boat operators must have taken at least five fishing trips in either 2004 or 2005, and at least five in 2008. Some permits under the program would be transferable.

Howard said association members are split on the issue, with some supporting the move to limit newcomers and others opposed. He's against the move because it limits competition in what had been a free enterprise system, he said.

"It simply eliminates competition and ultimately I believe the level of service our recreating public will receive will deteriorate," Howard said.

Linda Behnken, executive director of the 100-member Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, said the council is trying to prevent the charter industry from exceeding its halibut allocation while bringing more

stability and professionalism to that side of the business.

The charter boat industry for years has exceeded its allocation without penalty, while the commercial side is severely penalized if it goes over its limit, she said.

The overage for charter boats last year was estimated at 65 percent, she said.

Behnken said the association had hoped the limited access program would be in place this year instead of 2011.

"Our hope is that by providing that measure of stability to the charter industry, they will be better able to work together to control their harvest to their allocation," she said.

Howard said it's unclear how many charter boats will qualify for permits under the new system.

"It will be interesting to see when the dust settles what is left to take the recreating public fishing," he said.

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