

**Final Council motion D-1 BSAI Halibut PSC
6/8/14**

The Council requests all industry sectors (American Fisheries Act Catcher Processor, American Fisheries Act Catcher Vessel, Amendment 80, Freezer Longline Cooperative, and Community Development Quota) undertake voluntary efforts to reduce halibut mortalities in the BSAI resulting from halibut PSC use, as well as discards in the directed halibut fishery, by 10% from the current 5-year average levels, through the 2014-15 fishing seasons. To evaluate progress in these efforts, the Council also requests industry to report back to the Council on measures that are being implemented and developed and, to the extent possible, the effectiveness of those measures in terms of absolute reductions in halibut mortalities.

The Council strongly encourages NMFS to continue working closely with the Amendment 80 sector to develop deck sorting procedures and technologies that could reduce halibut mortalities, in order to initiate regulatory changes for a full-scale program.

The Council requests NMFS work together with the IPHC to provide halibut bycatch and discard size data from the Observer Program in a form that can be better incorporated into IPHC stock assessments.

The Council requests NMFS evaluate the potential for the Amendment 80 flatfish flexibility program, a change to the Amendment 80 trawl season opening date from January 20 to January 1, and changes to the current Amendment 80 area closures, to reduce halibut PSC use.

The Council adopts the following purpose and need statement for an analysis to reduce halibut PSC limits and other sources of mortalities in the BSAI fisheries.

Purpose and need:

Halibut is an important resource in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands that supports commercial and subsistence fisheries. Halibut is also incidentally taken in commercial groundfish fisheries managed by the Council, and in the directed halibut fishery.

Declines in halibut exploitable biomass since the late 1990s have raised concerns about levels of halibut PSC in the BSAI groundfish fisheries. This decline is particularly pronounced in Areas 4A, 4B, and 4CDE. These areas have incurred major reductions in halibut harvest limits since 2003. BSAI halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) in non-directed fisheries have not declined at a rate proportional to harvest reductions in the directed fishery, and the effect of bycatch on the directed fisheries in Area 4CDE is the most pronounced. The IPHC uses the previous year's actual bycatch amount to set the following year's halibut harvest limits; thus, short-term reductions in BSAI halibut PSC could have immediate implications for directed halibut users. Under National Standard 8, the Council must consider the sustained participation of communities when making fisheries management decisions.

The Council recognizes that efforts by various sectors of the industry in recent years have reduced halibut PSC; however, the current low status and continued declines in the halibut resource require immediate action by the Council and industry. Additional regulatory measures to avoid halibut, and further minimize halibut bycatch mortality would help to improve halibut stock conditions, could provide additional harvest opportunities in the directed halibut fishery, and be consistent with objectives under National Standard 9.

A range of management options are available to reduce halibut bycatch in the BSAI groundfish fisheries. These include reducing existing halibut PSC limits in the trawl and hook-and-line fisheries and changes in vessel operations that allow halibut to be returned to the sea sooner, thereby reducing halibut mortality.

Alternatives

More than one Alternative listed below may be selected (e.g., the Council could select Alternatives 2 and 3).

Alternative 1. No action.

Alternative 2. Amend the BSAI Groundfish FMP to revise halibut PSC limits as follows (More than one option can be selected).

Option 1. Establish seasonal apportionment of halibut PSC in the BSAI trawl limited access sector.

Option 2. Reduce halibut PSC limit for the BSAI Trawl Limited Access Sector by:

a) 10 percent b) 20 percent c) 30 percent or d) 35 percent

Option 3. Reduce halibut PSC limit for the Amendment 80 Sector by:

a) 10 percent b) 20 percent c) 30 percent or d) 35 percent

Option 4. Reduce halibut PSC limit for hook-and-line catcher vessel sector by:

a) 10 percent b) 20 percent c) 30 percent or d) 35 percent

Option 5. Reduce halibut PSC limit for hook-and-line catcher/processor sector by:

a) 10 percent b) 20 percent c) 30 percent or d) 35 percent

Option 6. Reduce the CDQ halibut PSQ limit by:

a) 10 percent b) 20 percent c) 30 percent or d) 35 percent

Alternative 3. Implement measures in the Amendment 80 sector to provide opportunities for deck sorting of halibut, or other handling practices that may provide an opportunity to reduce mortality of halibut that cannot be avoided.

As part of this analytical package include a review of:

- The levels of groundfish catch and halibut bycatch by groundfish sectors, and the size and age distribution of that bycatch, in the existing IPHC area (Closed Area) that is closed to the directed halibut fishery in the Bering Sea.
- Whether a halibut PSC limit would be appropriate to limit halibut bycatch in the directed sablefish IFQ fishery.
- Potential impacts of efforts to reduce halibut PSC mortality on existing and anticipated Chinook and chum salmon PSC management measures (i.e., IPAs).
- The range of potential approaches to establishing a halibut PSC limit based on projections of total biomass, projected spawning biomass, or other appropriate indices of abundance and productivity.
- Current protocols for rolling unused halibut between sectors, and the effect of those protocols on the achievement of OY and/or reductions in overall halibut PSC bycatch mortality
- Overview of available subsistence information for Areas 4CDE
- Fishing practices that reduce halibut bycatch in the directed halibut fishery

Further development of these alternatives and options could occur after Council review of an expanded IPHC discussion paper on the biological and management issues surrounding the accounting and management of all sizes of halibut that is anticipated to be completed later this year.