

PFMC Narrows Focus on Abundance-Based Management for Pacific Halibut Bycatch in Bering Sea

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The North Pacific Fisheries Management Council clarified their focus to tie the management of halibut bycatch in the Bering Sea to abundance in a new motion that, after one amendment, was passed unanimously.

The final Council motion revised the purpose and need statement and the alternatives for an initial review analysis that will likely come at the April council meeting, scheduled for April 5-6, 2021.

The new Purpose and Need Statement reads as follows:

“Halibut is an important resource in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI), supporting commercial halibut fisheries, recreational fisheries, subsistence fisheries, and groundfish fisheries. The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) is responsible for assessing the Pacific halibut stock and establishing total annual catch limits for directed fisheries and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is responsible for managing prohibited species catch (PSC) in U.S. commercial groundfish fisheries managed by the Council. The Amendment 80 sector is accountable for the majority of the annual halibut PSC mortality in the BSAI groundfish fisheries. While the Amendment 80 fleet has reduced halibut mortality in recent years, continued decline in the halibut stock requires consideration of additional measures for management of halibut PSC in the Amendment 80 fisheries.

“When BSAI halibut abundance declines, PSC in Amendment 80 fisheries can become a larger proportion of total halibut removals in the BSAI, particularly in Area 4CDE, and can reduce the proportion of halibut available for harvest in directed halibut fisheries. The Council intends to establish an abundance-based halibut PSC management program in the BSAI for the Amendment 80 sector that meets the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, particularly to minimize halibut PSC to the extent practicable under National Standard 9 and to achieve optimum yield in the BSAI groundfish fisheries on a continuing basis under National Standard 1. The Council is considering a program that links the Amendment 80 sector PSC limit to halibut abundance and provides incentives for the fleet to minimize halibut mortality at all times. This action could also promote conservation of the halibut stock and may provide additional opportunities for the directed halibut fishery.”

Three alternatives are described for analysis in setting PSC limits. Limits have historically been set so much higher than actual bycatch (also called ‘use’) that they don’t impact flatfish operations. The effort here is to reset bycatch limits so they rise or fall with Pacific halibut abundance.

All alternatives use two indices (surveys by the International Pacific Halibut Commission and by National Marine Fisheries Service) to cover the full age and size range of Pacific halibut in the area.

Alternative 2 uses a 3X2 look-up table with PSC limits that range from current PSC limit to 20% below current limit. PSC limit is determined annually based on survey values from the most

recent year available. The six cells in the table look at two indices, each separated in three levels: high, medium, and low. The values in the cells range from a low of 1,396 mt of halibut bycatch to a high of 1,745 mt annually.

Alternative 3 uses a 4X2 look-up table with PSC limits that range from 15% above current PSC limit to 30% below current limit. The eight cells in the table use two indices to create a range from 1,222 mt to 2,007 mt.

Alternative 4 uses a 4X2 look-up table with PSC limits that range from current PSC limit to 45% below current limit. The low range is 960 mt going to a maximum of 1,745 mt.

Options for each Alternatives 2-4 in the motion are:

Option 1: PSC limit is determined using a 3-year rolling average of survey index values instead of the most recent survey value.

Option 2: PSC limit varies no more than (suboptions: 10% or 15%) per year.

Option 3: Establish an annual limit of (suboptions: 80% or 90%) of the PSC limit generated by the look-up table. In 3 of 7 years, the A80 sector may exceed the annual limit up to the PSC limit generated by the look-up table. If the A80 sector has exceeded the annual limit in 3 of the past 7 years, then (suboptions: 80% or 90%) of the PSC limit generated by the look-up table is a hard cap for that year.

Option 4: (mutually exclusive with Options 2 and 3) PSC unused in one year may roll to the following year to increase the PSC limit generated by the lookup table up to 20%. Any PSC savings in excess of 20% would stay in the water.

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