

Revised Draft GOA Halibut Prohibited Species Catch Limit Action Plan¹

June 22, 2011

Proposed action

Revise the GOA Halibut Prohibited Species Catch Limits through the annual groundfish harvest specifications process for 2012/2013.

Problem statement²

The GOA Groundfish FMP and NMFS rule making establish a 2,000mt halibut PSC limit for trawl gear and a 300mt halibut PSC limit for hook and line gear. The FMP authorizes the Council to recommend, and NMFS to approve, annual halibut mortality limits as a component of the proposed and final groundfish harvest specifications. Halibut PSC limits are set separately for trawl and fixed gear, which may be further apportioned by season, regulatory area, and/or target fishery.

Since the existing GOA halibut PSC caps were established, the total biomass and abundance of Pacific halibut has varied and in recent years the stock has experienced an ongoing decline in size at age for all ages in all areas. Exploitable biomass has decreased 50% over the past decade. In recent years, the directed halibut catch limits in the GOA regulatory areas 2C, 3A and 3B have declined steadily. From 2002 to 2011 the catch limit for the combined areas 2C, 3A, and 3B declined by almost 50%. While total biomass is high, much of this biomass is made up of smaller fish that are more vulnerable than larger fish to trawl gear.

With the exception of bycatch reductions in the IFQ sablefish fishery, and the Rockfish Pilot Program, the current bycatch limits have not been revised since 1989 (Amendment 18). Since that time there have been significant changes in groundfish and halibut management programs and fishing patterns, environmental conditions, fishing technology, and our knowledge of halibut and groundfish stocks. Halibut is fully utilized in the directed sport, subsistence and commercial fisheries and is of significant social, cultural and economic importance to communities throughout the geographical range of the resource. Halibut PSC allowances are also critical to the prosecution of many groundfish fisheries operating in the GOA.

The GHL for the charter sector in 2C has declined from 1,432,000 to 788,000 net pounds in the last 5 years, and progressively restrictive management measures have been implemented to keep this sector within its GHL.

Recognizing the significant decline in exploitable biomass, the uncertainties about current halibut stock dynamics and the effect of current bycatch levels on the halibut catch limits and biomass and all user groups, the Council acknowledges a need to evaluate existing halibut PSC limits and consider reductions.

Analysis

EA, RIR³, IRFA

Applicable laws

MSA, NEPA, EO 12866, Regulatory Flexibility Act

Range of alternatives¹

Alternative 1: Status quo

¹ Adopted by the Council in June 2011

² Adopted by the Council in April 2011

³ Only Alternative 2, Suboption 2(b) would amend federal regulations; therefore only it requires an RIR/IRFA. The RIR would not be submitted to the Secretary if the Council takes no action on Suboption 2.

Alternative 2: GOA Halibut PSC limit reduction

Option 1: Reduce the halibut PSC limit for hook-and-line gear by

- a) 5%.
- b) 10%.
- c) 15%.

Option 2: Reduce the halibut PSC limit for trawl gear by

- a) 5%.
- b) 10%.
- c) 15%.

Suboption 1: Apply the full trawl PSC limit reduction to the 5th season.

Suboption 2: AFA/Amendment 80/Rockfish Program sideboard limits will:

- a) Status quo. Applied as percentages against the GOA halibut PSC limit
- b) Redefined in mt, calculated against the status quo GOA halibut PSC limits

Staff resources

NPFMC	Jane DiCosimo	action plan, EA document coordination; introduction; background; purpose and needs, biological impacts on resources and fisheries: halibut (commercial halibut setline, guided sport, sport, subsistence); commercial groundfish: (trawl, longline); marine mammals, seabirds, ecosystem, habitat, cumulative effects
contractor	Darrell Brannan	economic/social impacts on groundfish fisheries and halibut fisheries in EA, RIR/IRFA
NPFMC	Mark Fina	economic impacts on groundfish fisheries
contractor	Marcus Hartley	commercial groundfish database/tables
contractor	Mike Downs	communities impact analysis
AKFIN	Michael Fey	data support
NMFS SF	Mary Furuness	in-season management, sideboards
	Obren Davis	in-season management, <i>Federal Register</i> publication
	Tom Pearson	in-season management, <i>Federal Register</i> publication
	Josh Keaton	data summaries of halibut catch rates as a function of total halibut catch by complex/year/target/season/area
	Melanie Brown	incorporation into groundfish specifications package for Secretarial submission
	Ben Muse	incorporation into groundfish specifications IRFA
IPHC	Gregg Williams	halibut information (stock assessment/"bycatch"/wastage/effects of proposed reductions of halibut PSC)
NMFS AFSC	Jim Ianelli	general GOA Groundfish Plan Team coordination
NOAA GC	Maura Sullivan	applicable laws

Major issue

- The Council identified its intent for proposed changes to GOA halibut PSC limits to be in effect in 2012. To ensure that the final groundfish harvest specifications are a logical outgrowth of proposed specifications, the Council *should select a Preliminary Preferred Alternative (PPA) during its initial review* of the draft analysis scheduled for October 2011.
- The expedited timeline for implementation poses a number of *implementation hurdles* that previously were identified to the Council and will be addressed in the analysis.

- The existing in-season adjustment authority, established under § 679.25 Inseason adjustments⁴, would not extend to the adjustment of a halibut PSC limit for the start of the next fishing year.
- NMFS staff identified that “The potential scope of the analysis required to assess the implications of changing the overall GOA halibut PSC could be substantial and could compromise the ability of the agency to complete the analytical and rulemaking processes required to implement the annual harvest specifications in a timely manner. . . . Ideally, this potentially complicated analysis would be undertaken independent of the annual harvest specification process as a separate action.”
 - Final harvest specifications typically publish in the *Federal Register* by mid-March each year. A delay in publication could occur due to inclusion of the proposed action (which may revise both harvest specifications (i.e., PSC limits) AND corresponding federal regulations that implement the halibut PSC sideboard limits which may result in 1) additional review time because of potential controversy of the proposed action, 2) the potential need to respond to additional public comment on this added element, and 3) the potential promulgation of federal regulations associated with Option 3.
 - To speed implementation of harvest specifications for 2012 (but at the cost of additional staffing requirements) NMFS AKRO may trifurcate the proposed action into 1) prioritized publication of harvest specifications for 2012/2013 (i.e., OFLs, ABCs, TACs); 2) trailing publication of revised halibut PSC limits and seasonal apportionments; and 3) trailing regulatory amendment for revised halibut PSC sideboard limits, as needed.

Minor issue

- Consideration of the effects of the proposed action on seasonal apportionments of halibut PSC limits, as outlined in the GOA Groundfish FMP (see Appendix 1 below) will *not* be addressed in this analysis because they are interpreted to be outside the bounds of this proposed action and will occur during the harvest specifications agenda item.
- Council recommendations for seasonal apportionments of TACs and halibut PSC limits are based on in-meeting recommendations from its Advisory Panel and public testimony, which are based on in-meeting SSC recommendations for OFLs and ABCs. Because the different drafts of the analyses will be prepared before these panels adopt their recommendations, those recommendations can be incorporated into the analysis only after each Council meeting in which they occur. The Council’s timeline results in each draft of the analysis being out of synchrony with the best available information that will be presented during the meetings when actions are taken.

The Council’s timeline does not allow the inclusion into the public review draft analysis of the best available scientific information on the status of stocks (i.e., biennial Summer 2011 GOA Groundfish Survey), which will be adopted in the GOA Groundfish SAFE Report at the same meeting as the PA for this proposed final action. Therefore the Council will adopt its PPA in October and its PA in December, without the benefit of having the proposed and final, respectively, harvest specifications incorporated into the analysis because those decisions do not happen until the meeting in which the analysis is reviewed and action taken. The document submitted to the Secretary will contain all the new scientific data collected by the 2011 trawl survey, along with SSC and Council recommendations on OFLs, ABCs, and TACs. The public will have an opportunity to comment on 1) proposed specifications during the comment period that may overlap the December 2011 Council meeting on

⁴“The adjustment of a TAC or PSC limit for any species under paragraph (a)(1)(iii) of this section must be based upon a determination by the Regional Administrator that the adjustment is based upon the best available scientific information concerning the biological stock status of the species in question and that the currently specified TAC or PSC limit is incorrect. Any adjustment to a TAC or PSC limit must be reasonably related to the change in biological stock status.”

the proposed harvest specifications and 2) the proposed rule for amending the federal regulations (to convert percentage sideboards into fixed (mt) sideboards), if adopted by the Council. Delays associated with the need to reanalyze the impacts could be mitigated if the Council clearly identifies its intention *as early as possible* that its preferred alternative on this action may be bifurcated (or trifurcated) if an action option in the RIR is selected in the PA. Scheduling the proposed action during an off-year for the GOA trawl survey would allow the most recent conditions in effect to be incorporated in the public review draft analysis provided to the Council, but would delay implementation.

Timeline to implementation

February 2010	NMFS discussion paper
June 2010	NPFMC discussion paper on FMP criteria
October 2010	NPFMC supplemental discussion paper/Northern Economics tables
December 2010	NPFMC supplemental discussion paper
April 2011	IPHC discussion paper/NMFS AKRO SF discussion paper Council adopts purpose statement and alternatives
May 2011	Interagency Staff Conference Call to Review Draft Action Plan; data requests
June 2011	Council adopts draft Action Plan/Analytical Outline under Executive Director's Report (B-1); AFSC provides draft proposed GOA groundfish OFLs and ABCs
August 2011	GOA Groundfish Plan Team reviews preliminary analysis of proposed action Initial review draft is released.
September 2011	Supplemental analysis using GOA Groundfish Plan Team OF and ABC recommendations will be provided, if time permits. Council approves initial review draft analysis and selects PPA
November 2011	NMFS publishes PPA as part of proposed 2012/2013 harvest specifications
December 2011	Final action/selection of PA/guidance on bifurcation of 2012/2013 harvest/halibut PSC limit specifications
March 2012	NMFS publishes PA as part of final 2012/2013 harvest specifications or bifurcates (or trifurcates) specification of 2012/2013 halibut PSC limits (and halibut PSC sideboard limits) (TBD)

(Future) Alternative Approaches (Cumulative Effects)

- All of the above could be incorporated into next (2013/2014) groundfish harvest specification process
- Analysis of GOA halibut PSC sideboard limits could be deferred to a separate analysis or combined with the intermediate step.
- Intermediate step: GOA Groundfish FMP amendment and regulatory amendment to remove halibut PSC limits from the harvest specifications process under the FMP and implement halibut PSC limits in regulation, as occurs under BSAI Groundfish FMP (timeline TBD)
- Long term step: “comprehensive” rationalization plan to allocate halibut PSC limits: exploratory discussion paper of all other “bycatch” allocations programs and previous NPFMC initiatives (October 2011)

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⁵ These annotations refer to GOA Groundfish FMP criteria for adjusting halibut PSC limits (see Appendix 1)

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APPENDIX 2. FINAL 2011 AND 2012 PACIFIC HALIBUT PSC LIMITS, ALLOWANCES, AND APPORTIONMENTS

APPENDIX 3. GOA HALIBUT PSC LIMITS

Appendix 1. GOA FMP policy regarding halibut PSC limits
(Section 3.6.2.1.1 Apportionment and Seasonal Allocation of Pacific Halibut)

Apportionments of PSC limits, and seasonal allocations thereof, will be determined annually by the Secretary of Commerce in consultation with the Council. Separate PSC limits may be established for specific gear. PSC limits, apportionments, and seasonal allocations will be determined using the following procedure:

1. Prior to the October Council meeting. The GOA Groundfish Plan Team will provide the Council the best available information on estimated halibut bycatch and mortality rates in the target groundfish fisheries.
2. October Council meeting. While developing proposed groundfish harvest levels under Section 3.2.3, the Council will also review the need to control the bycatch of halibut and, if necessary, recommend proposed halibut PSC mortality limits and apportionments thereof. The Council will also review the need for seasonal allocations of the halibut PSC. The Council will make proposed recommendations to the Secretary about some or all of the following:
 - a. the regulatory areas and districts for which PSC mortality limits might be established;
 - b. PSC for particular target fisheries and gear types;
 - c. seasonal allocations by target fisheries, gear types, and/or regulatory areas and district;
 - d. PSC allocations to individual operations; and
 - e. types of gear or modes of fishing operations that might be prohibited once a PSC is reached.

The Council will consider the best available information in doing so. Types of information that the Council will consider relevant to recommending proposed PSCs include:

- a. estimated change in biomass and stock condition of halibut;
- b. potential impact on halibut stocks;
- c. potential impacts on the halibut fisheries;
- d. estimated bycatch in years prior to that for which the halibut PSC mortality limit is being established;
- e. expected change in target groundfish catch;
- f. estimated change in target groundfish biomass;
- g. methods available to reduce halibut bycatch;
- h. the cost of reducing halibut bycatch; and
- i. other biological and socioeconomic factors that affect the appropriateness of specific bycatch measures in terms of objectives.

Types of information that the Council will consider in recommending seasonal allocations of halibut include:

- a. seasonal distribution of halibut;
- b. seasonal distribution of target groundfish species relative to halibut distribution;
- c. expected halibut bycatch needs on a seasonal basis relevant to changes in halibut biomass and expected catches of target groundfish species;
- d. expected bycatch rates on a seasonal basis;
- e. expected changes in directed groundfish fishing seasons;
- f. expected start of fishing effort; and
- g. economic effects of establishing seasonal halibut allocations on segments of the target groundfish industry.

3. As soon as practicable after the Council's October meeting, the Secretary will publish the Council's recommendations as a notice in the Federal Register. Information on which the recommendations are

based will also be published in the Federal Register or otherwise made available by the Council. Public comments will be invited by means specified in regulations implementing the FMP for a minimum of 15 days.

4. Prior to the December Council meeting. The Plan Team will prepare for the Council a final Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report under Section 3.2.3 which provides the best available information on estimated halibut bycatch rates in the target groundfish fisheries and recommendations for halibut PSCs. If the Council requests, the Plan Team also may provide PSC apportionments and allocations thereof among target fisheries and gear types, and an economic analysis of the effects of the apportionments.

5. December Council meeting. While recommending final groundfish harvest levels, the Council reviews public comments, takes public testimony, and makes final decisions on annual halibut PSC limits and seasonal apportionments, using the factors set forth under (2) above relevant to proposed PSC limits, and concerning seasonal allocations of PSC limits. The Council will provide recommendations, including no change for the new fishing year, to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation.

6. As soon as practicable after the Council's December meeting, the Secretary will publish the Council's final recommendations as a notice of final harvest specifications in the Federal Register. Information on which the final harvest specifications are based will also be published in the Federal Register or otherwise made available by the Council.

Appendix 2. Flowchart of Current GOA Halibut Prohibited Species Catch Limits



