

The Council has long been cognizant of and continues to recognize the extreme importance of halibut to all resource user groups. The Council also acknowledges that, for a wide variety of reasons, the dynamics of the directed and non-directed halibut fisheries have changed significantly since halibut PSC limits were first established. Given concerns with the current halibut PSC limits in the GOA, and the effect this bycatch has on both directed fishing opportunities and productivity of the stock, there is a need to evaluate existing halibut PSC limits and the way in which these limits are established.

MOTION:

The Council revises its previous approach to reducing halibut PSC limits in the GOA and initiate action to remove GOA halibut PSC limits from the annual harvest specifications process through an amendment to the GOA Groundfish FMP that would set halibut PSC limits in federal regulation whereby halibut PSC limits may be revised through subsequent regulatory amendment. This action, which would mirror the process for BSAI groundfish fisheries, is outlined as follows:

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

Currently, the GOA Groundfish FMP and NMFS rule-making harvest specifications annually establish a 2,000 mt halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limit for trawl gear and a 300 mt halibut PSC limit for hook and line gear. The GOA Groundfish 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-PSC fishery category.

The Council is concerned about the feasibility of revising GOA halibut PSC limits through groundfish harvest specifications and recognizes that addressing halibut PSC limits in this manner on an annual basis is not in the best interest of the Council's deliberative process in the long run.

With the exception of ~~bycatch~~ PSC limit reductions in the IFQ sablefish fishery and the Rockfish Pilot Program, the current ~~bycatch limits~~ PSC limits have not been revised since 1989 for trawl gear and 1995 for hook and line gear (~~Amendment 18~~). Since that time there have been significant changes in groundfish and halibut management programs and fishing patterns, environmental conditions, fishing technology, and 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~~ limits are also critical to the prosecution of many groundfish fisheries operating in the GOA.

Since the existing GOA halibut PSC ~~caps~~ limits 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 percent over the past decade. In recent years, the directed halibut catch limits in 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 percent. ~~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. and the Guideline Harvest Level (GHL) to the charter halibut sector in Area 2C has been reduced by a similar percentage.

The Guideline Harvest Level (GHL) for the charter sector in Area 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 PSC limits 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.

While the IPHC accounts for bycatch mortality when establishing catch limits for the directed fisheries in order to maintain the halibut stock's productivity, it is the Council's responsibility to manage halibut PSC limits and meet the requirements of National Standard 9 to minimize bycatch.

Alternative 1 (Status quo). Retain the process for changing GOA halibut PSC limits through the annual groundfish harvest specifications process.

Alternative 2. Amend the GOA Groundfish FMP to remove setting GOA halibut PSC limits from the annual harvest specifications process. GOA halibut PSC limits would be established (and amended) in federal regulation.

Option 1 (Status quo). Retain the existing 2,000 mt trawl and 300 mt hook and line halibut PSC limits and write them into regulation.

Option 2. Revise the current GOA halibut PSC limits and write the new limits into regulation.

Suboption 1. Reduce the halibut PSC limit for hook and line gear CP sector by:

- a) 5 percent
- b) 10 percent
- c) 15 percent

Suboption 2. Reduce the halibut PSC limit for hook and line gear CV sector by:

- a) 5 percent
- b) 10 percent
- c) 15 percent

Suboption 3. Reduce the halibut PSC limit for trawl gear by:

- a) 5 percent
- b) 10 percent
- c) 15 percent

Suboption 3.1. Apply the full trawl PSC limit reduction to the 5th season only.

Suboption 3.2. AFA/Amendment 80/Rockfish Program sideboard limits will be:

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

In addition, the GOA halibut PSC analysis should be revised to include (to the extent practicable):

1. A discussion of status quo management of the charter halibut sector under the GHL program, in addition to the proposed Catch Sharing Plan management program.
2. A discussion of mid-season implementation.
3. Comments from AP and SSC.
4. A discussion of the potential benefits and impacts of modifying seasonal and fishery complex apportionment of the trawl halibut PSC limit, and application of an annual, rather than seasonal, amendment 80 sideboard.
5. A discussion of halibut bycatch and available information on state water, state managed fisheries, including pot and jig Pacific cod fisheries, Prince William Sound hook and line Pacific cod fisheries, PWS, Chatham, and Clarence Strait sablefish fisheries, and rockfish fisheries.

Schedule: Initial Review in February 2012/Final Action in April 2012/Implementation in 2013 (mid-year)