

Pacific Halibut Bycatch Update – April 20, 2020

North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Halibut fisheries are vital to Alaska’s coastal communities, supporting subsistence and personal use needs, recreational fisheries, charter fisheries, commercial halibut fisheries, and groundfish fisheries. Whether caught incidentally as bycatch in recreational or commercial fisheries, halibut are tightly regulated, and in many cases these regulations require halibut to be discarded.

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) is responsible for the determining the size of the halibut stocks (via surveys and stock assessments) and establishing total annual catch limits for directed fisheries off Alaska, Canada, and the Pacific Northwest. In the Alaska region, the North Pacific Council (Council) and NOAA Fisheries are responsible for setting halibut bycatch limits, allocating the halibut catch limit to the charter and directed halibut fisheries through a catch share plan, and establishing regulations for the directed halibut fishery IFQ program.

In the recreational halibut fishery, halibut may be discarded because they are considered too small or large for the angler to retain, or they may be required by regulation to be discarded because they are not within a regulated size limit that allows legal retention, or would be in excess of daily bag limits. **In the commercial halibut fishery**, halibut are required to be discarded if they are below legal size (32”) or if the operator has no available Individual Fishing Quota. **In the federally managed commercial fisheries for groundfish** (cod, flatfish, rockfish, etc.) halibut bycatch is capped, and if the fishery reaches that cap, it is closed. All halibut bycatch in the federal groundfish fisheries is ‘prohibited species catch (PSC)’ and is required by law to be counted toward the cap and then discarded, in order to disincentivize bycatch. The rest of this update focuses on halibut bycatch in the groundfish fisheries.



Halibut Bycatch

Total halibut mortality (catch and bycatch) has fluctuated since the 1970s. Removals peaked in the mid-2000s and declined substantially since. Bycatch of halibut in groundfish fisheries began with major commercial exploitation of groundfish in the 1960s by foreign fleets, which were phased out after the passage of the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1976.

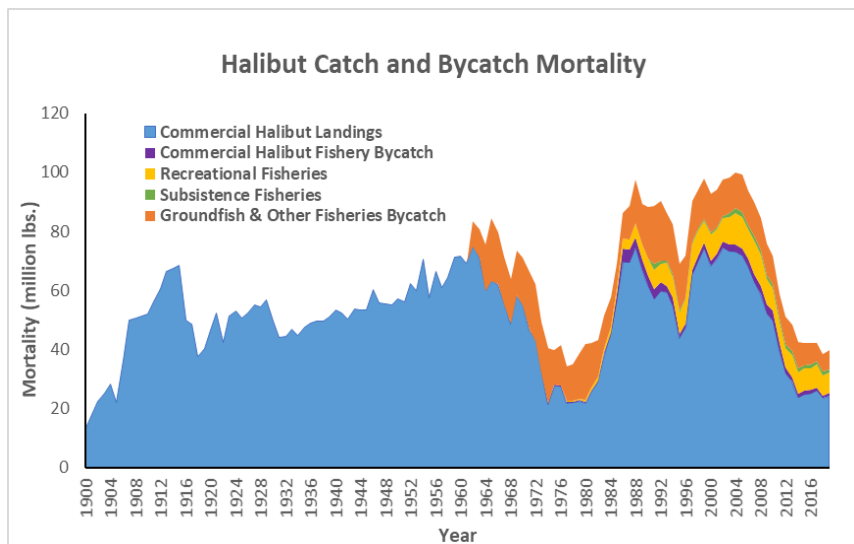


Figure 1. Fishing mortality of Pacific halibut by different sectors, 1900-2019. Source data: IPHC-2019-td-009.

Bycatch in non-directed fisheries accounted for 17% of the coastwide mortality in 2019. Due to regulations established by the Council to minimize bycatch to the extent practicable, and voluntary measures implemented by the groundfish fleets, halibut bycatch has been substantially reduced over time. Current halibut bycatch mortality in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) and Gulf of Alaska (GOA) groundfish fisheries is half of what it was in the early 1990s as shown in the figures below.

Total Pacific Halibut Mortality

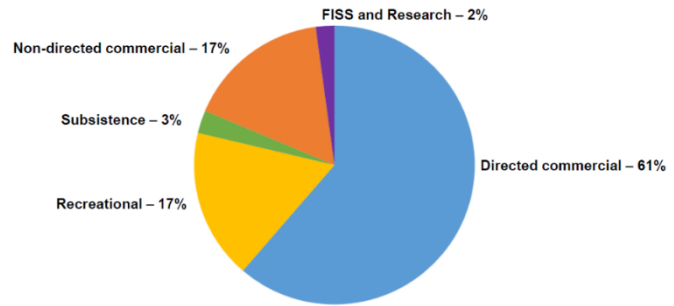


Figure 2. Percent of Pacific halibut removals by different sectors, 2019. Note that bycatch in the groundfish fisheries is labeled as “Non-directed commercial”. Source: Stewart et al. 2020. IPHC-2020-AM096-09 Rev_2

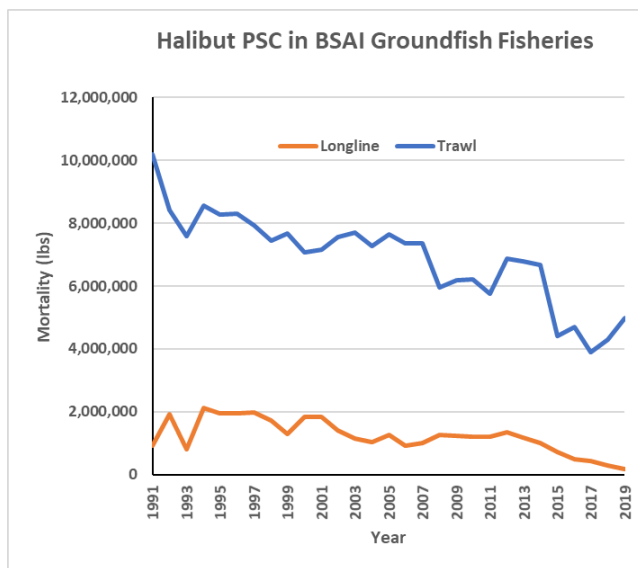


Figure 3. Bycatch mortality of halibut in BSAI groundfish fisheries. Data from AKFIN file: Halibut PSC (3-24-20).

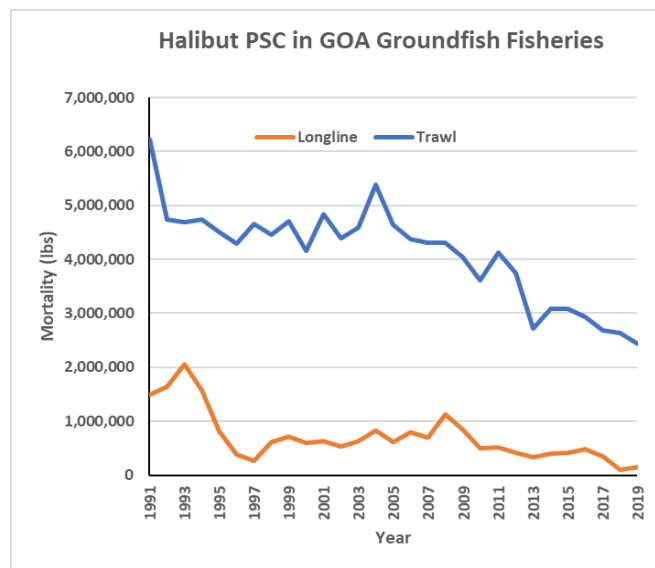


Figure 2. Bycatch mortality of halibut in GOA groundfish fisheries. Data from AKFIN file: Halibut PSC (3-24-20).

Status of the Halibut Stock

The halibut stock has declined substantially since its peak in the late 1990s as a result of poor recruitment. These declines have been particularly severe in the central and western GOA areas.

The IPHC projects that the halibut spawning stock will continue to decline in the next few years, even under a relatively conservative harvest rate policy.

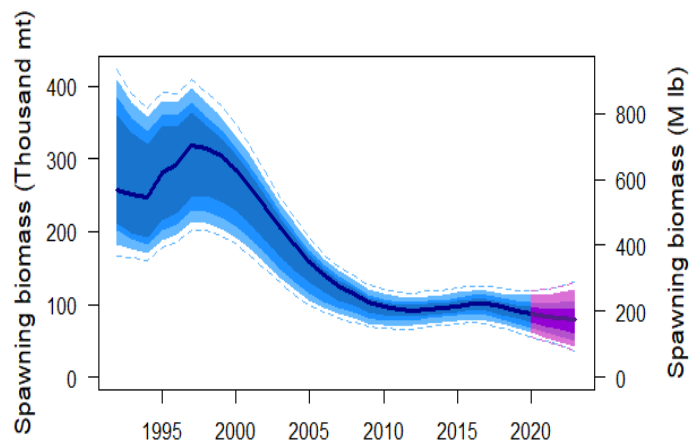


Figure 3. Model estimates of halibut spawning biomass 1990-2019, and projections to 2025. Source: Stewart et al. 2020. IPHC-2020-AM096-09 Rev_2

History of Major Halibut Bycatch Actions

The Council and NOAA Fisheries have taken many actions over the years to minimize bycatch of halibut to the extent practicable, while achieving groundfish optimum yield, consistent with the standard set forth in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. A history of relevant major actions is provided below.

History of major actions to reduce halibut bycatch in Federal groundfish fisheries off Alaska.

1973	Foreign trawling prohibited in eastern part of Bering Sea and in GOA areas to limit halibut bycatch through international convention and bilateral agreements.
1976	Closure areas to foreign trawling continued under Council management.
1978	GOA Groundfish FMP implemented with limits on halibut taken in foreign trawl fisheries.
1982	BSAI Groundfish FMP implemented with annual bycatch limits for foreign trawl fisheries.
1984	2 million mt Optimum Yield limit established in BSAI, which limits total catch, ecosystem impacts, and bycatch of crab and halibut.
1985	Annual halibut bycatch limits (PSC) implemented for domestic trawl fisheries in GOA (2000 mt). The PSC limits greatly limit the harvest of flatfish stocks well below Acceptable Biological Catch levels.
1990	Annual halibut PSC limits implemented for domestic longline fisheries in GOA (750 mt).
1990	Annual halibut PSC limits implemented for domestic trawl fisheries in BSAI (5,333 mt bycatch).
1990	Domestic groundfish observer program implemented to estimate total catch and discards.
1992	Annual halibut PSC limits implemented for domestic longline fisheries in BSAI (750 mt mortality) and reduced for trawl fisheries (5,033 mt bycatch).
1993	Halibut PSC limits in BSAI established as mortality limits and set at 3,775 mt for trawl fisheries and 900 mt for longline fisheries.
1995	Halibut and sablefish IFQ program implemented and halibut PSC reduced for Catcher Vessel hook and line sector to 300 mt to account for IFQ halibut that could be retained in sablefish fishery.
1998	Halibut donation program authorizes halibut PSC landed by Catcher Vessels to be donated for distribution to foodbanks.
1999	Halibut PSC limits for BSAI reduced by 100 mt with prohibition on bottom trawls for pollock fishing.
2007	Amendment 80 Program authorizes formation of BSAI bottom trawl Catcher Processor cooperatives to end race for fish and provides incentives to minimize bycatch.
2011	GOA Rockfish program implemented with a portion of halibut PSC unallocated (left in the water).
2014	Total halibut PSC limit for BSAI reduced by year phase-in to 3,515 mt overall by 2016, a 15-25% reduction for all sectors (to 1,745 mt for Am 80, 745 mt for trawl limited access, 710 mt for non-trawl, and 315 mt for CDQ); GOA sectors reduced to 1,972 mt overall, a 7-15% reduction (to 1,706 mt trawl, 266 mt hook-and-line).
2016	Council begins evaluation of scientific abundance-based PSC limits for halibut.
2020	Deck sorting of halibut on BSAI bottom trawl CPs authorized by regulation with catch handling and monitoring requirements.

Other actions related to halibut bycatch management include a halibut donation program to reduce waste, a comprehensive observer program to accurately estimate bycatch amounts, deck sorting to reduce mortality of halibut that come up in bottom trawls, and industry bycatch avoidance plans that provide incentives for the trawl fleet to avoid halibut bycatch.



The Council currently is examining abundance-based approaches to set halibut bycatch limits in the BSAI groundfish bottom trawl catcher-processor sector (Amendment 80 sector). When halibut abundance declines, halibut bycatch limits based on fixed amounts becomes a larger proportion of total halibut removals and can result in lower catch limits for directed halibut fisheries. Both the Council and the IPHC have expressed concern about impacts on directed halibut fisheries under the status quo and identified abundance-based halibut bycatch limits as a potential management approach to address these concerns.