

Halibut Catch Sharing Plan Summary

prepared by NPFMC staff

- The halibut catch sharing plan (CSP) has been under development, in various forms, for over 15 years, initiated by a rapidly growing charter sector harvest and a coincident decline in overall halibut quotas. It is not a brand new program – these fisheries have essentially been operating under a catch sharing program for the past four years, the difference being the charter sector was managed to a slightly different (slightly higher) target, called the Guideline Harvest Level, which changes only with large shifts in halibut abundance. There has been a one fish bag limit in Area 2C (southeast Alaska) for the past 3 years. Area 3A (southcentral) continues to operate under a two-fish limit.
- Council programs must be reviewed and approved by Secretary of Commerce (National Marine Fisheries Service), and then implemented, monitored and enforced by NMFS. Under the Halibut Act, overall catch limits for halibut are set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission, and allocations among user groups are set by the Council for Alaska waters.
- Council has 11 voting members: 4 are designated seats for State/Federal agency leaders; currently, 1 is a sport fish representative (former charter operator); 1 is academic/NGO; and 5 are from Alaska or the Pacific Northwest and are involved in commercial fishing operations (salmon, halibut, groundfish). Of these at least 3 are also involved in subsistence fisheries.
- The International Pacific Halibut Commission sets the overall annual catch limits for halibut – after allowing for subsistence, unguided sport catch, and bycatch, the remaining amount is a combined catch limit for commercial and charter sectors. It is this combined catch limit which is allocated under the Catch Sharing Plan, after deducting for wastage estimates from both sectors.
- The catch sharing plan requires both commercial and charter sectors to share in the burden of conservation based on receiving percentage allocations of an overall catch limit. It does not reallocate halibut, relative to recent harvest levels, from the charter to the commercial sector.
- The charter allocations in the catch sharing plan were intended to: (1) reflect more recent harvest levels by the charter sector, and (2) allow the allocation percentage to fluctuate annually at different levels of halibut abundance (with relatively higher allocations to the charter sector in years of lower abundance, when that sector would be most affected).
- Assertions that this management program establishes or will result in a one-fish limit in southcentral Alaska in 2014 are unfounded. If the Catch Sharing Plan had been in place in 2013, the charter allocation would have been 18.3% of the combined catch limit in Area 2C (southeast), and would have resulted in continuation of a one-fish bag limit in that area. In Area 3A (southcentral), the allocation would have been 17.5% of the combined catch limit for that area (slightly higher than the 2012 harvest), and would have resulted in NO change to bag limits (i.e., the limit would have remained two fish of any size). Barring a significant reduction in halibut abundance in 2014, a two-fish bag limit is expected to continue in Area 3A (southcentral).

- The catch sharing plan also specifies an annual process for determining charter harvest restrictions (if any are necessary) prior to the fishing year, to keep charter harvest within the allocation. The rule allows for use of the Council process and a council committee comprised of charter operators in Area 2C and 3A to recommend management measures, which allows use of the most recent information on charter effort and harvest each year.
- In the event management measures are necessary in Area 3A in the future to keep the charter sector within its allocation, moving to a one-fish bag limit would NOT be the first management measure under consideration. For example, less onerous measures would first be considered, such as a two-fish limit where one of the fish would be of any size and a second fish of a smaller size, or restricting overall effort (again, for example) by setting an annual limit on the number of halibut each angler can harvest, or closing the fishery on certain day(s) of the week. Automatically moving to a one-fish limit is not part of the rule.
- In areas where a one-fish bag limit does exist (currently Area 2C – southeast Alaska), the guided angler fish (GAF) provision will allow flexibility for individual operators to choose to lease a limited amount of commercial IFQ to provide clients additional opportunity, up to the unguided daily bag limit (currently, two fish).