

Draft NPFMC April 4, 2011
D-2(b) GOA Halibut PSC limits motion

Purpose and need statement

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.

Alternatives for analysis

The Council directs staff to prepare the necessary analytical document to consider a reduction in GOA halibut PSC limits, through the 2012/2013 specifications process. The reductions in halibut PSC limits that were set in the Rockfish Program, but not removed from the 2,000mt PSC cap will be taken off the top, and there will be no further reductions in the Rockfish Program through this action. This action also assumes that a pro-rata adjustment will be made to seasonal apportionments for the trawl PSC limit (except under the suboption for Alternative 2, Option 2).

Alternative 1: Status quo

Alternative 2: 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: Apply the full trawl PSC limit reduction to the 5th season.

Option 3: AFA/Amendment 80/Rockfish Program sideboard limits will:

Suboption a) Be redefined as specific numbers (in mt) calculated against the status quo GOA halibut PSC limits

Suboption b) Be applied as percentages of reduced halibut PSC limit¹

A draft analysis should be available for review by the GOA Plan Team at its August meeting and provided to the Council for initial review at the Council's October 2011 meeting to ensure that any PSC reductions can be considered as part of the Council's 2012 annual specification process. This analysis should examine the effects of modifying halibut PSC as detailed in Section 3.6.2.1.1 of the GOA Groundfish FMP. The analysis should also examine the implications of Pacific cod sector splits on halibut PSC. This action should be prepared as an analysis that will be incorporated into the existing harvest specifications process. However, the Council may determine at Initial Review that it is more appropriate to proceed with this action as a separate amendment to the annual harvest specifications process that would modify the 2012 GOA halibut PSC limits.

In the future the Council intends to seek longer term solutions that incorporate halibut bycatch reduction by all gear types and fisheries in the GOA groundfish fisheries through Groundfish FMP and regulatory amendment. It is expected that the analysis to reduce halibut PSC limits through the harvest specifications process will inform Council direction for proceeding with longer term solutions. The Council's intent is to work with stakeholders to explore different approaches to halibut bycatch reduction, including individual accountability and incentive based approaches, that balance the interests of stakeholders and that provide the tools necessary to meet management and conservation objectives in the halibut and groundfish fisheries. In anticipation of a future discussion, the Council requested that staff prepare a white paper that surveys allocation of prohibited species catch in all fisheries management programs that allocate individual or cooperative catch programs in US, Canada, or other countries.

In furtherance of the above stated objectives, the Council will develop a comprehensive FMP amendment and regulatory amendment and analysis of ways to reduce halibut bycatch by all sectors and gear types engaged in GOA groundfish fisheries.

¹ This option applies only to the Rockfish Program