

Progress Made at International Halibut Meeting

Representatives from Nuuchahnulth Nations attended the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) annual meeting in Victoria at the end of January. Joining more than 250 other halibut industry stakeholders, Philip Edgar, Jack Thompson Jr., Larry Johnson, and Chuck McCarthy witnessed and discussed catch limits and other management issues concerning the Canadian and US halibut fishery. Jim Lane, Southern Region Biologist for Uu-a-thluk, also attended.

The mandate of the IPHC is to provide the information required to manage halibut for conservation and for developing sustainable halibut fisheries. The Commission is jointly funded by Canadian and American governments and is based at the University of Washington Seattle campus.

The Commission consists of staff and six appointed commissioners—three from Canada and three from the United States. Commissioner appointments are made by the respective governments and have previously been held by First Nations representatives, including Larry Johnson of Huu-ay-aht First Nations.

Each year the Commission listens to the concerns and advice of representatives from Canada and the US and makes management recommendations to both countries' governments. The following information summarizes the highlights of this year's meeting.

Health of the Halibut Stock

The amount of halibut in the Pacific Ocean has been declining over the last decade because of decreasing size and fewer younger fish to replace those that die or are caught. Commission staff previously predicted better times in the future with models that indicated lots of younger fish coming into the fishery. However, after five years, those fish never materialized.

After last year's IPHC meeting, the Commission and representatives from Canada and the US had serious concerns with the stock assessment information. By the summer of 2012, the Commission had hired two new scientists (one from Canada and one from the US) to take over stock assessment duties and address these concerns. This fresh look at the data resulted in a new interpretation of Pacific halibut abundance. Although the overall decline in halibut abundance was about 5% from last year, the declines appear to have slowed or leveled out. In fact, the abundance of adult females capable of spawning is apparently beginning to increase.

In contrast to this bit of good news, the new assessment indicates there is not now nor ever was any large abundance of young halibut

about to enter the fishery in the past five years. This lower abundance of younger fish is expected to last for several more years.

On the positive side, although the coast-wide amount of halibut is still declining, the abundance of halibut in BC waters has been increasing during this period.

Catch Limits

Keeping those facts in mind, the Commission is recommending catch limits for 2013 totaling 31,028,000 pounds, a 7.5% decrease from last year. The decreases in harvest are all coming from the Alaskan waters—the areas still experiencing declining abundance. For Area 2B (British Columbia), the Commission is recommending the same catch limits as in 2012, or 7,038,000 pounds. Fisheries and Oceans Canada will allocate this catch limit between commercial and sport fisheries. First Nations Food and Ceremonial harvests are in addition to this amount.

According to the Commission, these catch limits achieve a lower coast-wide harvest rate than in 2012 while recognizing the areas have shown continued improvement.

Performance Review

The Commission also reviewed the recommendations of a 2012 Performance Review and listened to stakeholder response and advice. The Commission has already taken action on several recommendations concerning increased openness and transparency in meetings and operations. They have committed to acting on other recommendations to improve procedures and processes.

Bycatch

The Commission again expressed concern about losses to the halibut stock through bycatch (the death of halibut in non-halibut fisheries). Significant progress in reducing this problem has already been achieved in British Columbia, Oregon, California, and Washington. Few reductions have happened in Alaska, where over 90% of the recorded bycatch occurs. New measures aimed at improving bycatch estimation, scheduled to begin in 2013, should help refine these estimates.

For more information about the 2013 halibut fishery, please contact Jim Lane at 250-724-5757 or by email at Jim.Lane@nuuchahnulth.org.



Commercial halibut fishermen measure and weigh their catch for market.
Image source: istockphoto/brytta

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Pacific halibut abundance has declined slightly overall, but in BC waters, the outlook is more positive.

Image source: istockphoto/choja.