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NOAA FISHERIES BEGINS RULEMAKING FOR CHARTER HALIBUT FISHING IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

Despite recent rejections of new restrictions to the Alaska halibut charter boat fleet, NOAA Fisheries Service and the state Department of Fish and Game are working to develop new management measures to help fishers avoid exceeding harvest levels.

NOAA Fisheries Service Alaska Region has initiated a rule-making process that will make changes in regulations for fishing for the charter halibut industry in southeast Alaska (area 2C).

This year, the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) recommended that the United States impose bag limit reductions on the sport charter fleet operating in south central (area 3A) and southeast Alaska. The IPHC recommendation came in response to the sport charter fleet having exceeded guideline harvest levels established by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

On March 1, 2007, the U.S. Department of State informed the IPHC that the United States did not accept the IPHC recommendation that concerned the reduction of daily bag limits for halibut caught from sport charter vessels in areas 2C and 3A. NOAA Fisheries Service is concerned that with the rejection of restrictions on the charter halibut boat fishing, recommended harvest limits will be exceeded.

"The specifics of the new restrictions will obviously need to be resolved through analysis of available biological, catch, and effort data as well as evaluation of public comments obtained during the rule making process. It is our intention to have the new rule in effect by June 1, 2007," said Doug Mecum, acting Alaska regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

"We believe it is appropriate to focus our efforts on analysis of alternatives for area 2C that include a two-halibut bag limit, with one of those halibut required to be of a certain size, for example a 32-inch minimum size or a trophy minimum size," Mecum added.

All of the other recommendations proposed by the IPHC were accepted.

The Alaska region of NOAA Fisheries is working with the state Department of Fish and Game to identify and discuss management measures other than a one-fish bag limit that could achieve halibut mortality reductions consistent with the goals of the IPHC recommendations. For example, in area 3A, a department of fish and game emergency order will restrict fishing for charter halibut skippers and crew in order to reduce halibut mortality by an amount comparable to the June 15 to June 30 one-fish bag limit proposed by the IPHC. This action will eliminate the need for federal rule making for the area 3A charter fishery.

Because the skipper and crew restriction alone is not adequate to reduce charter halibut mortality in area 2C to desired levels, NOAA Fisheries has initiated the separate regulatory action to address this issue. In addition to halibut mortality savings, the objective of NOAA Fisheries in implementing the substitute restrictions for area 2C are to minimize negative impacts on the charter fishery and its sport fishing clients, the coastal communities that serve as home ports for this fishery, and on fisheries for other species.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries in Alaska, please visit our websites at www.fakr.noaa.gov or at www.afsc.noaa.gov

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is celebrating 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.