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NOAA Proposes Rule to Reduce Charter Halibut Catch

NOAA today proposed reducing the number of halibut that charter vessel anglers in southeast Alaska can keep, from two each day to one.

"Sport charter fishing has grown in southeast Alaska while halibut abundance has decreased," said Doug Mecum, NOAA's Fisheries Service acting regional administrator for Alaska. "We're proposing to reduce the charter halibut catch to protect the halibut resource."

The proposed rule, which would take effect this spring, would allow each charter vessel client to use only one fishing line, and no more than six lines targeting halibut would be allowed on a charter vessel at one time. The rule would prohibit guides and crew from catching and retaining halibut while charter halibut clients are on board.

NOAA's Fisheries Service put a similar rule in place last spring, but sport charter halibut operators challenged it on procedural grounds and the agency withdrew the rule.

Public comment on the proposed rule is open through Jan. 21, 2009. After considering public comment, NOAA expects to publish a final rule in the spring of 2009. To read the proposed rule and see how to submit comments, go to <http://www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov>

Charter halibut operators in southeast Alaska waters have exceeded their guideline harvest level of 1.43 million pounds for the past four years. The actual sport charter harvest was 1.75 million pounds in 2004, 1.95 million pounds in 2005, 1.86 million pounds in 2006, and 1.92 million pounds in 2007. The guideline harvest level dropped to 0.93 million pounds for 2008. Managers expect that it will have been exceeded for 2008 when the harvest numbers are final.

The International Pacific Halibut Commission, with representatives from the U.S. and Canada, annually estimates halibut abundance in each halibut fishing area along the Pacific Coast. NOAA's Fisheries Service, in cooperation with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, establishes the charter vessel guideline harvest levels based on the commission's abundance estimates.

The commission annually establishes the commercial halibut fishery catch limits in each area, taking into account charter vessel harvests and other sources of halibut mortality in order to protect the halibut resource from overharvest.

The commission has reduced the commercial halibut catch in southeast Alaska from nearly 11 million pounds annually between 2004 and 2006 to just over six million pounds for 2008. The final commercial harvest level for 2009, proposed at four and a half million pounds, will be set by the International Pacific Halibut Commission in January.

NOAA understands and predicts changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and conserves and manages our coastal and marine resources. Visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.