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ALASKA REGION Saltwater Recreational Fishing Action Agenda

November 2011

NOAA



A Message from the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

I am pleased to share with you the NOAA Fisheries' Alaska region saltwater recreational fishing action agenda for 2012. Prepared by regional NOAA Fisheries staff in consultation with members of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee's Recreational Fisheries Working Group and other members of the public, this plan follows through on commitments made in the National Recreational Fisheries Action Agenda to develop regional plans that focus on actions where you live and fish.

Since September 2009 when NOAA announced its commitment to a *Recreational Fisheries Engagement Initiative*, we have taken concrete actions to strengthen our ties with recreational fishermen across the nation. From appointing a new National Policy Advisor for Recreational Fisheries and nominating regional recreational fishing coordinators to hosting collaborative workshops on key issues and increasing our level of collaboration with our MAFAC advisors and anglers like you, we have worked to fulfill our commitments. These individual actions represent significant steps that build cooperation and create momentum.

These regional action plans are another step forward. Each plan is organized around the five priority goals you identified during the 2010 Saltwater Recreational Fishing Summit. The objectives, activities, expected deliverables, and timelines reflect our best thinking on how we can make progress on the issues you raised.

Please take a moment to read through the plan, share it with your friends and colleagues, and let us know what you think. We would like to know because these action agendas are not an end in themselves, but rather a means-to-that-end we all seek – healthy fish stocks, vibrant and satisfying recreational fisheries, and a trusting relationship. We know that success will be judged not on the number of our promises, but on the strength of our actions and we encourage you to work with us as we work to implement the plans.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can best move forward together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Schwaab', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Eric Schwaab
Assistant Administrator
NOAA Fisheries Service

Background

In 2009, the Alaska Sport Fish Harvest Survey showed that anglers fished approximately 914,000 days and spent over \$407 million on fishing trips and durable equipment in marine waters.¹ A 2007 survey estimated the total economic impact from recreational fishing (in both fresh and marine waters) in Alaska to be as high as \$1.4 billion.² Alaska's 40,544 miles of coastline represents 40% of the U.S. total and provides endless recreational fishing opportunities in both fresh and marine waters. The most commonly caught species in marine waters off Alaska are Pacific halibut (*Hippoglossus stenolepis*), Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus spp.*), rockfish (*Sebastes spp.*), lingcod (*Ophiodon elongatus*), several species of char (*Salvelinus spp.*), and shellfish. This action plan is focused on marine waters, but also includes salmon, an anadromous species.

Pacific halibut is the primary recreational species managed by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in Alaska. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (State) manages most recreational fisheries in Alaska. This responsibility includes issuing angler fishing licenses; licensing fishing guides; licensing charter vessels; administering the charter vessel logbook program; estimating recreational harvest and effort using creel census, logbook, and mail survey information; and managing non-halibut species.

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) and NMFS manage the Pacific halibut fishery through regulations established under the Northern Pacific Halibut Act of 1982 (Halibut Act). The IPHC promulgates regulations governing the Pacific halibut fishery under the Convention between the United States and Canada for the preservation of the halibut fishery of the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea. Regulations proposed by the IPHC are subject to approval by the Secretary of State with concurrence from the Secretary of Commerce.

The Halibut Act also authorizes the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) to develop regulations in addition to, and not in conflict with, approved IPHC regulations. Such Council regulations may be implemented by NMFS only after approval by the Secretary of Commerce. Due to the overlap of halibut and non-halibut recreational fishing, NMFS collaborates with the State in the management of recreational halibut fisheries. Further, recreational data collected by the State is used on a national level to report catch as part of the Marine Recreational Information Program.

In addition to Pacific halibut, other important recreational issues fall under NMFS authority. This includes funding to the State for data collection programs to support recreational fishery management. In addition, the NMFS Habitat Conservation Division works in coordination with industry, stakeholder groups, government agencies, and private citizens to avoid or offset the adverse effects of human activities on essential fish habitat and living marine resources in Alaska.

¹ Fisheries Economics of the U.S. statistical series 2009: http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st5/publication/econ/2009/NPacifc_Tables_Econ.pdf.

² Southwick Associates, W.J. Romberg., A.E. Bingham, G.B. Jennings, and R.A. Clark. Economic impacts and contributions of sportfishing in Alaska, 2007.

Regional Overview

The State has regulatory authority over the majority of recreational fisheries in Alaska's marine waters. Current issues that involve NMFS primarily focus on the proposed halibut Catch Sharing Plan, Charter Halibut Limited Access Program (effective February 1, 2011), and a restrictive bag and size limit for halibut anglers fishing from a charter vessel in Southeast Alaska.

The proposed Catch Sharing Plan and Charter Halibut Limited Access Program dramatically changed the regulatory and policy landscape for guided halibut anglers in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska. The proposed Catch Sharing Plan, recommended to NMFS by the Council, would establish a clear allocation of halibut resources between guided recreational and commercial setline sectors. The proposed Catch Sharing Plan builds on the Charter Halibut Limited Access Program, which limits the number of charter vessels participating in the guided sport fishery for halibut.

Recreational concerns arising from regulatory actions primarily focus on allocation among the commercial sector, charter halibut sector, non-charter halibut anglers, commercial fisheries bycatch, and subsistence users. The halibut resource is fully utilized among these groups and has become particularly contentious in Southeast Alaska, where harvestable halibut biomass has declined, resulting in a reduction in commercial quota and sport charter catch. This controversy, along with the previously described actions, have highlighted a desire by constituents to improve data reporting and quality—including timely reporting of recreational halibut catches—and the need for social and economic data collection and analyses to inform managers about the impacts associated with their decisions. The State collects much of the recreational catch data through a combination of mail-out surveys, creel sampling, and saltwater logbooks. NMFS and the State work cooperatively to coordinate data collection to ensure State and federally managed programs are adequately supported.

In addition to managing Pacific halibut, NMFS also supports habitat restoration. Habitat restoration projects occur throughout Alaska, and include both marine and anadromous fish habitat. These projects are not necessarily focused on recreational fisheries, but have obvious benefits for species important to recreational anglers.

Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1: Improve Recreational Fishing Opportunities

Objective ►► Ensure quality recreational fishing habitat

Project ►► Work with federal and state agencies and local communities to implement Fish Habitat Partnerships under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan

NMFS is a partner with other federal and state agencies and local communities in the Mat-Su basin, Kenai Peninsula, and Southwest Alaska to implement Fish Habitat Partnerships under the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. These efforts identify important habitat areas for salmon and other aquatic organisms, protect and restore habitats that support recreational fisheries, and increase related public education and outreach. Specific restoration efforts include improving anadromous fish passage to spawning areas, restoring natural hydrology to anadromous fish streams, establishing riparian zones to improve spawning habitats, and removing marine debris along Alaska's coastline.

Deliverable ►► Complete restoration projects for coastal, marine, and anadromous fish habitats, and communicate with the public about habitat issues.

Timing ▶▶ Restoration projects are ongoing. Specific projects are identified by the Fish Habitat Partnerships on an annual basis. Project status and completion information are contained in an annual summary of relevant restoration work publically available on the NMFS Alaska Region webpage: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/habitat/default.htm>

GOAL 2: Improve Recreational Catch, Effort, and Status Data

Objective ▶▶ **Create a reporting system for tracking halibut caught under the proposed Guided Angler Fish Program (GAF)**

Project ▶▶ **Electronic reporting system**

NMFS will work cooperatively with potential GAF participants to create an electronic reporting system for the proposed GAF. This reporting system will allow GAF participants, NMFS, and NOAA Office of Law Enforcement to monitor halibut harvest amounts and account balances in near-real time.

Deliverable ▶▶ NMFS will provide federally permitted charter halibut participants an electronic reporting system that uses a web-based application to track halibut caught under the proposed GAF. In addition, NOAA Fisheries will work with the State of Alaska to modify the sport charter logbook to facilitate its use by enforcement officers in concert with the GAF reporting system.

Timing ▶▶ The web-based application and logbook modifications are anticipated to be completed by June 30, 2012.

Objective ▶▶ **Improve the accessibility and quality of recreational catch and effort data reported in the sport charter logbook program**

Project ▶▶ **Grant Federal Assistance Funding to the State**

This project is intended to improve data accessibility and quality control by electronically storing trip-level logbook information using image recognition software and improving staff knowledge about reporting requirements.

Deliverable ▶▶ The State of Alaska will write a performance report describing the progress, challenges, problems, and accomplishments associated with efforts to improve data quality and accessibility in the charter logbook program.

Timing ▶▶ The performance report will be completed by September 30, 2012.

Objective ▶▶ **Grant the State Federal Assistance Funds to help attain coded wire tag sampling goals in the Southeast Alaska marine sport fishery**

Project ▶▶ **Fund fishery samplers**

The contribution of Alaska and non-Alaska hatchery Chinook salmon, exploitation, survival, and other statistics are estimated using coded wire tag sampling, harvest, and recovery information. Financial support from NMFS to the State will fund five additional recreational fishery samplers in Juneau and four in Ketchikan.

Deliverable ▶▶ Increased port sampler presence to improve data collection of coded wire tagged salmon caught in recreational fisheries, which will contribute to a Fishery Data Series Report prepared by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Timing ▶▶ The project will occur from July 1, 2011, to June 30, 2012, with a published report summarizing results expected in 2013.

GOAL 3: Improve Social and Economic Data on Recreational Fisheries

Objective ▶▶ Conduct Alaska saltwater sportfishing economic survey

Project ▶▶ Economic survey

NMFS will collect data from resident and non-resident anglers on their saltwater fishing activities, expenditures, preferences, and attitudes toward saltwater recreational fishing in Alaska. Data collected through this survey will be used to estimate the demand for saltwater fishing in Alaska and for conducting analyses to determine how factors such as fisheries regulations affect behavior and the value of recreational fishing trips.

Deliverable ▶▶ A social and economic survey designed to collect data for analyses to determine the value of recreational saltwater fishing in Alaska.

Timing ▶▶ Survey and data collection will occur in 2012 with analyses to follow.

Objective ▶▶ Create Alaska recreational charter vessel guide and owner data collection system

Project ▶▶ Cost and earnings survey

Project goals are to develop and test two data collection instruments for deployment in the charter vessel fleet in Alaska. The intention is to gather information about costs, earnings, and behavior of the guided fishing fleet. The first instrument is a web-based portal that will collect information from charter operators about their charter trips, including information on spatial behavior. The second is an annual cost and earnings survey of charter vessel operators. Quantitative testing of these instruments will occur through focus groups and cognitive interviews with charter operators and business owners.

Deliverable ▶▶ Development of data collection instruments for gathering information in the saltwater charter vessel fishing sector in Alaska.

Timing ▶▶ Data collection instrument development testing will be completed in 2012 and will be deployed in the field when funding becomes available.

Goal 4: Improve Communication

Objective ▶▶ Create recreational fishing constituent database to help establish regular and better communication with recreational fishers

Project ▶▶ Constituent database

The Alaska Regional Office will develop a recreational angler e-mail list to distribute information, news releases, and links specific to recreational angling interests in Alaska.

Deliverable ▶▶ A regional recreational fishing constituent database specific to Alaska, with contact information of interested recreational constituents, for use in communications between NMFS and recreational interests.

Timing ▶▶ Initial e-mail list will be compiled no later than May 31, 2012, with ongoing updates.

Objective ▶▶ Create a recreational fishing-themed booth and educational materials to be on display and distributed at Alaska-based sport fish-related events, such as outdoor recreation events, boat shows, maritime festivals, etc.

Project ▶▶ Events planning

Increase public awareness of NMFS involvement in recreational fishing by attending at least one Alaska-based sport fish-related event in 2012. NMFS will staff a booth highlighting various aspects of NOAA's role in recreational fisheries, including the science that underpins regulatory actions, how NMFS works with the Council, and the opportunities and economic benefits of recreational fishing in Alaska. Educational materials will be distributed to interested members of the public.

Deliverable ▶▶ Recreational fishing-themed booth and educational materials to be used at outreach events.

Timing ▶▶ A booth and educational materials will be designed and presented at a recreational fisheries event by December 2012.

Objective ▶▶ Develop website hosted by NMFS Alaska Region designed specifically for web visitors interested in recreational fishing

Project ▶▶ Website

Gather information relevant to recreational fisheries for web page content and work with the Alaska Region webmaster on a specialized recreational fishing web page. Design will include links to the Council actions relevant to the halibut catch sharing plan and will guide users to help track the public process of recreational issues, provide information on habitat restoration through the Fish Habitat Partnership program, and provide summaries of grant projects supported by NMFS that relate to recreational fishing interests.

Deliverable ▶▶ Publish a user-friendly website designed to increase presence of recreational fishing information on NMFS Alaska Region website and inform general public of recreational fishing issues relevant to Alaska.

Timing ▶▶ Website design has been ongoing, with majority of work completed no later than April 2012.

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