



Contact: Julie Speegle
907-586-7032

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NOAA seeks public input on sustainable management of halibut stock

NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking public comment on a draft rule, called a catch sharing plan, designed to sustainably manage the halibut stock in southeast Alaska and the central Gulf of Alaska.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended the rule to establish a clear allocation between the commercial and charter sectors that fish in these areas.

Currently, the commercial and charter halibut fisheries are managed under different programs. The commercial halibut fishery has been managed under a catch limit program since 1995. The charter halibut sector has been managed under a different harvest guideline since 2003, which gives charter fishermen a number of fish they can catch per guided angler per day, but does not ensure the overall catch stays within a definitive catch limit.

The proposed catch sharing plan, which is scheduled to be in place by 2012, is designed to foster a sustainable fishery by preventing overharvesting of halibut and would introduce provisions that provide flexibility for charter and commercial fishermen.

Under this draft rule:

- The total commercial and charter catch limit for each management area would be allocated between the commercial and charter sectors.
- The International Pacific Halibut Commission, through which the United States and Canada jointly manage the halibut resource from California to the Bering Sea, would determine total commercial and charter catch limits for southeast Alaska and the central Gulf of Alaska each year before the fishing season.
- Upon acceptance of the International Pacific Halibut Commission catch limits by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Commerce, NOAA's Fisheries Service would publish a rule implementing the catch limits as part of its annual management measures for the halibut fishery.
- Allocations to the charter and commercial sectors would vary with changes in the number of halibut available for harvest as determined by the best available science.
- Charter harvest limits would be determined before the beginning of the charter fishing season, which generally runs from February 1 to December 31, to enable charter business operators and anglers to plan for the upcoming season.
- The catch sharing plan would authorize transfers of commercial halibut individual fishing quota to charter halibut permit holders for harvest by anglers in the charter halibut fishery.
- Those transfers would offer charter vessel anglers in southeastern Alaska and the central Gulf of Alaska an opportunity to catch additional halibut, up to specified limits.

The proposed rule filed with the Federal Register today. The 45-day public comment period runs until September 6.

For more information go to
<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/halibut/sport.htm>

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