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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
March 11, 2011

### **Halibut Stock Decline Forces Increased Management Measures for Southeast Alaska Charter Fleet**

NOAA's Fisheries Service today announced it is implementing the regulatory recommendations of the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) due to concerns over declining halibut stocks. These regulations include limiting the maximum size of a halibut caught by charter anglers in southeastern Alaska to 37 inches, and retaining the one-fish-per-person-per-day rule that began in 2009.

The halibut stock is declining due to reduced numbers of fish reaching a catchable size range, lower growth rates, and higher than target harvest rates. The stock remains at risk of further declines. Conservation of the halibut resource is the primary concern and management objective of the measures.

At its annual meeting in January, the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) recommended the maximum size rule for charter anglers in Area 2C off southeastern Alaska as a way to maintain charter harvests at the annual guideline harvest level of 788,000 pounds in 2011. The Southeast Alaska charter fleet catch has exceeded its harvest level every year since 2004.

The IPHC's recommendation is based on the analysis and methods adopted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. Because of particular concerns for impacts on small businesses in southeast Alaska, NOAA's Fisheries Service intends to ask the council to review the methodology used to determine maximum size limits, including a 42-inch limit. If the council chooses to adopt a different limit than the IPHC has recommended, NOAA will go back to the IPHC to ask that they modify their recommendation to match that of the council.

"The declining halibut stock is impacting both charter and commercial halibut fishers all along the west coast from Washington State to Alaska," said Alaska Fisheries regional administrator Dr. James Balsiger. "NOAA's Fisheries Service is committed to working cooperatively with our international partners in Canada to jointly manage this important stock for the long-term benefit of both our countries."

NOAA's Fisheries Service has implemented numerous restrictions on the Area 2C charter fleet in an attempt to more closely align charter harvest with the limit, but those measures have been insufficient. Even with the one fish bag limit in 2010, charter halibut operators exceeded its harvest limit by 491,000 pounds, or 62 percent. Each year that the charter fleet exceeds its harvest limit, it leads to a lower fixed quota for the commercial fishery the following year. The commercial catch limit in area 2C is 73 percent lower in 2011 than it was in 2003.

The purpose of the rule is to allow charter halibut fishermen to continue their operations while staying within the harvest limit, and minimizing adverse effects on the charter fishery, its sport fishing clients, and the coastal communities that serve as home ports for the fishery. Allowing halibut to rebuild will best serve the economic interests of both the charter and commercial fisheries over the long term.

The harvest limit was adopted by the NPFMC and implemented by NOAA Fisheries in 2003. It is expected to be replaced by a catch sharing plan in 2012, which would establish management measures designed to prevent overharvesting of the halibut resource and result in a sustainable fishery.

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