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Grin and bear it - those of you supporting taking no action on the proposed staff recommendations to reduce halibut allocations for Area 2C.

Some of us may seem like we're some pretty tough characters (and we are) but we would rather die trying to save our way of life, our livelihood. Frankly, it's discouraging to read that several fishing organizations, who intend to speak on their own behalf, will not be opposing the proposed reductions in halibut allocations in Area 2C. Citing low catch rates for halibut and a need to be conservative in order to rebuild halibut stocks.

This begs the question: Are we really following good science?

The pit tag is a cylinder that is attached to the halibut, inside the cylinder is a micro-computer that collects the movement of the halibut, its depth and location. This data is sent via satellite after the cylinder disengages from the halibut over time. Many of us will readily admit there is a real shortage of funds for a fully implemented pit tag study. Instead, we are gullible enough to trust the limited data being presented to us.

What about the first-hand knowledge that long-term fishermen are qualified to bring to the table? There is an inexhaustible supply of working knowledge that is not being tapped into; the seasoned fisherman with significant time on the grounds, running the gear, sees what's coming up and what's not. One can conjecture that the fishing grounds were empty because 5 other boats just fished the same area. Of course vessel survey results show fewer fish and lower catch rates with this ongoing overlap of fishing skewing vessel survey catch rates downward. Specific ocean entrance corridors experience greater increased fishing pressure. Logbook data supports this statement.

What else can these diehards with vengeance fishermen tell us?

Dogfish, there is lots of them, and once the gear is down, the hooks fill up fast with dogfish. Many fishermen say they've never seen so many dogfish. And in case you need a more authoritative opinion then read this:

Abundance, Life History, and Population Demographics of Spiny Dogfish
Dr. Gordon Kruse (UAF), Dr. Vincent Gallucci (University of Washington)

They (dogfish) tend to school in large numbers, hunt in groups as well as individually, and comprise a major portion of fish biomass in coastal Northeast Pacific waters.

[...] Dogfish occur frequently as fisheries by-catch and are viewed as a pest in many areas because they must be discarded and often cause fishing gear damage.

There is also an abundance of ling cod and sharks that have to be shaken off the gear affecting the CPUE (catch per unit effort). These species eat crabs, blackcod, halibut and pretty much anything they can prey on. In Alaska, we believe there should be a directed fishery for spiny dogfish to promote a very under utilized and non-utilized resource.

Fishermen know what is coming up in the bellies of their catch. Baby crabs and lots of them. Those who have been around awhile know that the offshore crab stocks plummeted from over-fishing by the crab fleet. Hey, call it what it is. Here in Pelican, the dead loss that went overboard while unloading was staggering during the heydays of the 1980's. With little or no crab fishing occurring for the past two decades, these crabs are coming back. (This is the same thing that Kodiak experienced in the king crab and shrimp industry.) Predator-prey correlations in biological population growth models affect the abundance of species.

The western Alaska and Bering Sea crab and pollock populations are decreasing and efforts to conserve and rebuild healthy populations will take considerable time to rebuild. The Americanization of the fishery caused over-capitalization in the fleet. A fleet that hammered the grounds with crab pots and trawl gear, both practices influence habitat productivity and viability. Crab stocks are down from over-fishing and the productivity of the fishing grounds are damaged from the impacts of crab pots and trawl gear.

And what about the unknown and unreported halibut bycatch from every user group in every area? The productivity of halibut is influenced by these numerous unknown variables. We need a better understanding of these factors influencing population dynamics, in order to not keep taking too much of a bountiful resource. For over 80 years the IPHC has managed the halibut resource well enough to have a viable fishery, because they were listening to commercial halibut fishermen from both countries, British Columbia, Alaska, Washington and Oregon.

Another significant variable is the unknown percentage of interception of the halibut resource by guided sport harvest in all areas, especially Areas 2B and 2C and 3A. The numbers provided by ADFG are guess estimations. And the Canadians do not know actual sport fish harvest either. The sport harvest has no hard numbers to quantify actual harvest. Creel census surveys are seasonal. The sport fish season is 300 days and two fish per day; the actual harvest level is excessive. The sport harvest should have to account for every pound harvested. For guided sport people their resource is people, there are more and more people who want the experience of fishing, but the resource is limited.

All areas should have to equitably bear the pain of reduced halibut allocations. Especially since the limited data from the pit tags study reflect an eastward migration of halibut – let a greater percentage of halibut move eastward across the gulf thus shortening the time needed to replenish and improve halibut productivity in Area 2. The Canadians need to be reasoned with and persuaded to bear a fair share burden of reduced allocations. Area 2C fishermen have been cut over and above the 60/40 split.

The IPHC should maintain an allocation of coast-wide harvest rates for 3A, 3B and 4A at 2006 levels to provide eastward migration of halibut until 2C and 2B CEY improves. Decrease the harvest rate analysis for 2C and 2B quota by only 10 percent per year, especially since mid-term outlook is positive, with stronger than average recruitment projected for the 1994-1996 year classes with controls in place for sport fish catch. This makes more sense and would place a share of the burden coast wide especially with implementation of the new coast wide model formula.

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