

Halibut bycatch limits in the 2008 Alaska groundfish fishery

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Abstract

Bycatch of Pacific halibut in the groundfish fisheries off Alaska has been managed with Prohibited Species Catch limits. In 2008, the limits totaled 2,300 t (3.80 Mlb net) in the Gulf of Alaska and 4,575 t (7.58 Mlb net) in the Bering Sea, unchanged from 2007. The limits are set annually by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and are subdivided by gear type, target fishery, time period, and within several other management programs. In contrast to other bycatch species, the halibut limits are set as estimated mortality rather than total catch.

Introduction

This document summarizes the 2008 groundfish fishery off Alaska and the accompanying bycatch of Pacific halibut. All of the federally-managed groundfish fisheries off Alaska were managed with mortality limits, although certain gear types were exempted to encourage their use. If reached, a limit would have closed a fishery before the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of the target species was attained.

2008 Halibut bycatch limits and fishery closures

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) adopts halibut bycatch mortality limits for the Alaskan groundfish fisheries during its annual specification process in the fall of each year. The limits are set differently for each region (see NMFS management areas in Figures 1 and 2). For the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) fisheries, the bycatch limit is determined through a framework procedure, such that the limit can change annually based on a set of criteria. Limits for the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSA) fisheries are fixed in regulation and can only be changed through a formal plan amendment. The regulations allow the Council to apportion the trawl and fixed gear limits into seasonal or quarterly amounts, so that the groundfish fisheries can be efficiently prosecuted.

Gulf of Alaska

For the GOA, the Council used a framework approach to set the trawl limit of 2,000 t (3.3 Mlb net; Table 1). As in previous years, the GOA trawl limit was divided between the fisheries for shallow water and deep water complexes by specific season. However, the fifth seasonal apportionment (October 1 through December 31) was not divided between the complexes.

Bycatch management in the GOA fixed gear fisheries in 2008 was similar to previous years. The bycatch limit was set at 300 t (0.5 Mlb net) for all fixed gear fisheries, which was the same amount as in past years. The fixed gear fisheries targeted primarily on Pacific cod in the central and western GOA during the winter, and rockfish in the eastern GOA in the spring. All pot and jig gear fisheries, as well as the sablefish IFQ fishery, were exempted from mortality limits.

Several special programs exist in the GOA for which the Council has allocated specific halibut bycatch limits within the overall limit. In the first, the Rockfish Pilot Program (RPP) was

established to isolate trawling for certain rockfish species from other fisheries, with the rockfish trawling conducted under very restrictive rules. The RPP operates as a cooperative to which NMFS allocates a portion of the trawl halibut bycatch limit. The RPP bycatch limit is further divided between catcher/processors and catcher vessels (Table 2, part A). The limits are designed to keep bycatch to historic levels, and are in effect only in July, when the fishery is conducted.

Another program for halibut bycatch management in the Gulf of Alaska applies to vessels that participate in the Best Use cooperative created as a result of Amendment 80 to the BSA Fishery Management Plan (FMP). Briefly, Amendment 80 (A80) allows certain vessels to form a fishery cooperative to more efficiently conduct their fisheries. Importantly, A80 does not require vessels to fish for a cooperative, and some of the eligible vessels have chosen to remain independent. The A80 trawl vessels which do not fish in the RPP are excluded from directed fishing for Pacific ocean perch, pelagic shelf rockfish, and northern rockfish in the BSA. These excluded vessels are subject to limitations on their catch of other groundfish species and the associated halibut bycatch. This measure was adopted to protect the interests of fishers, who do not directly benefit from A80, from expansion into their fisheries by A80 participants. To limit the catches by this group, the Council created limits, or sideboards, on their catches. The halibut bycatch mortality sideboard limits for A80 vessels (Table 2, part B) are based on historic use of halibut bycatch by those vessels in the shallow-water and deep-water fisheries from 1998-2004.

The final apportionment of halibut bycatch in the GOA is a consequence of the American Fisheries Act (AFA). The AFA specified that certain trawl catcher/processors fishing for pollock in the BSA were prohibited from fishing for certain other groundfish species in the GOA. The AFA also specified limits on the amounts of other groundfish species those vessels were allowed to catch; these limits are termed sideboards. To support directed fishing for the groundfish sideboards, the Council set up halibut bycatch sideboards. These sideboards, as with the A80 program previously described, are also necessary to protect the non-AFA fleet and processors by, in effect, limiting the activities of the AFA vessels. The halibut bycatch mortality sideboard limits are based on the aggregate retained groundfish catch by the AFA catcher vessels in the shallow-water and deep-water categories, from 1995-1997, divided by the retained catch of all vessels in that fishery category for the same period. The 2008 limits are shown in Table 2, part C.

Bering Sea/Aleutians

The primary halibut bycatch mortality limits for the 2008 BSA trawl and fixed gear fisheries are listed in Table 3. The list represents fishery categories defined and implemented by BSA FMP Amendment 21. Limits for the individual fisheries were based on “need”, as recommended by industry representatives and adopted by the Council. The bycatch limits were apportioned by quarter or season. When a limit was reached, the entire BSA region was closed to further fishing until the next season, or for the remainder of the year. Bycatch limits for most trawl fisheries in 2008 were unchanged from 2007.

As in past years, the BSA fixed gear fisheries were initially allocated a total bycatch limit of 900 t but 7.5 percent (67 t) was reassigned to Community Development Quota (CDQ) fisheries, leaving a total of 833 t. This total was then divided between the hook-&-line fishery for Pacific cod and all other fisheries, with the cod fishery limit further divided between catcher/processors and catcher vessels (Table 4). All pot and jig fisheries were exempted from halibut mortality closures. The sablefish IFQ hook-&-line fishery was also exempted from the bycatch limit.

Trawl fisheries were provided an initial total bycatch mortality limit of 3,675 t in 2008 (Table 3). By regulation, a fixed amount of 275 t is reallocated to CDQ fisheries, leaving 3,400 t for all other trawl fisheries. With the passage of A80 to the BSA FMP, trawling is now separated into an A80 fleet, with the remainder termed a Limited Access fleet. The latter group includes the pollock cooperatives created by the AFA. Within the A80 fleet, the bycatch limit is subdivided between the Best Use cooperative and those vessels which did not join the cooperative, i.e., limited access. These subdivisions of the limit are shown in Tables 3 and 5.

In addition, the Council created bycatch limit sideboards for the AFA vessels to ensure their activities in non-AFA fisheries do not dilute the benefits to the non-AFA fleet in those fisheries. The sideboards are in Table 5.

In 2008, the CDQ program operated throughout the year. Under the program, 10 percent of the pollock TAC and 7.5 percent of all other groundfish TACs were allocated to the six CDQ programs. Ten percent of the trawl bycatch limit and 7.5 percent of the hook-&-line bycatch limit was allocated to the CDQ program, which were then subdivided among the six CDQ programs in relation to their groundfish allocations.

Table 1. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (metric tons, round weight) for the 2008 Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries. Exempted fisheries for 2008 include groundfish pots, jigs, and the IFQ hook-&-line fishery for sablefish.

Gear/Time Period	Bycatch Limit (t)
Trawl	2,000
Shallow water complex ¹	
January 20 – March 31	450
April 1 – June 30	100
July 1 – September 1	200
September 1 – October 1	150
October 1 – December 31	Remainder - no apportionment
Deep water complex ²	
January 20 – March 31	100
April 1 - June 30	300
July 1 – September 1	400
September 1 – October 1	Any rollover
October 1 – December 31	Remainder - no apportionment
Hook-&-Line	300
All species except demersal shelf rockfish	
January 1 – June 10	250
June 10 – September 1	5
September 1 – December 31	35
Demersal shelf rockfish (Southeast only)	10
Groundfish Pots & Jigs	Exempt
GRAND TOTAL	2,300

¹Shallow water complex: pollock, Pacific cod, shallow water flatfish, flathead sole, Atka mackerel, and other species.

²Deep water complex: rockfish, sablefish, deep water flatfish, and arrowtooth flounder.

Table 2. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (t) in other programs for managing halibut bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska in 2008.

A. Rockfish Pilot Program halibut bycatch mortality limits (t) by sector.

Program Sector	Shallow-water complex limit	Deep-water complex limit	Total
Catcher/processors	11	80	91
Catcher vessels	126	22	148
Total	137	102	239

B. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (t) for Amendment 80 vessels.

Season	Shallow-water target fisheries	Deep-water target fisheries
January 20 – April 1	10	23
April 1 – July 1	38	214
July 1 – September 1	29	104
September 1 – October 1	15	3
October 1 – December 31	45	74
Total	137	418

C. Halibut mycatch mortality limits (t) for American Fisheries Act trawl catcher vessels.

Season	Shallow-water targets	Deep-water targets
January 20 – April 1	153	7
April 1 – July 1	34	21
July 1 – September 1	68	28
September 1 – October 1	51	0
October 1 – December 31		61 (all targets)
Total		423

Table 3. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (metric tons, round weight) for the 2008 Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish fisheries. Exempted fisheries for 2008 include groundfish pots, jigs, and the IFQ hook-&-line fishery for sablefish.

Gear sector	Bycatch Mortality Limits (t)
A. Fixed Gear total	900
1) CDQ Apportionment	67
2) Sector total	833
a. Pacific cod H&L total	775
1. Catcher/processors	760
2. Catcher vessels	15
b. All other targets total	58
B. Trawl total	3,675
1) CDQ Apportionment	275
2) Sector total	3,400
a. Amendment 80 vessels	2,525
1. Best Use cooperative	1,837
2. Non-cooperative vessels	688
b. Limited access vessels	875

Table 4. Breakdown of 2008 fixed gear halibut bycatch mortality limits (t).

Fixed Gear	Catcher/processors	Catcher vessels
Hook-&-line Pacific cod	760	15
January 1 – June 10	314	10
June 10 – August 15	0	3
August 15 – December 31	446	2
Other hook-&-line (all vessels)	58	
May 1 – December 31	58	
Groundfish Pot & Jig	exempt	
Sablefish IFQ (hook-&-line)	exempt	
Total Fixed Gear Mortality Limit	833	

Table 5. Seasonal and fishery breakdown of 2008 trawl fishery bycatch mortality limits (t) for several sectors. Totals are shown in bold type.

Trawl fishery sector	Bycatch Limit (t)
<i>Amendment 80 Limited Access</i>	688
Yellowfin sole	363
January 20 – July 1	214
July 1 – December 31	149
Rock sole/flathead sole/other flatfish	224
January 20 – April 1	180
April 1 – July 1	20
July 1 – December 31	24
Turbot/sablefish/arrowtooth flounder	n/a
Rockfish	50
July 1 – December 31	50
Pacific cod	1
Pollock/Atka mackerel/other species	50
<i>Trawl Limited Access</i>	875
Yellowfin sole	162
Rock sole/flathead sole/other flatfish	0
Turbot/sablefish/arrowtooth flounder	0
Rockfish	3
Pacific cod	585
Pollock/Atka mackerel/other species	125
<i>AFA sideboards</i>	
Catcher vessels	1,225
Pacific cod trawl	887
Pacific cod hook-&-line or pot	2
Yellowfin sole total	101
Rock sole/flathead sole/other flatfish	228
Turbot/sablefish/arrowtooth flounder	2
Rockfish (June 1 – December 31)	2
Pollock/Atka mackerel/other species	5
Catcher/processors	286

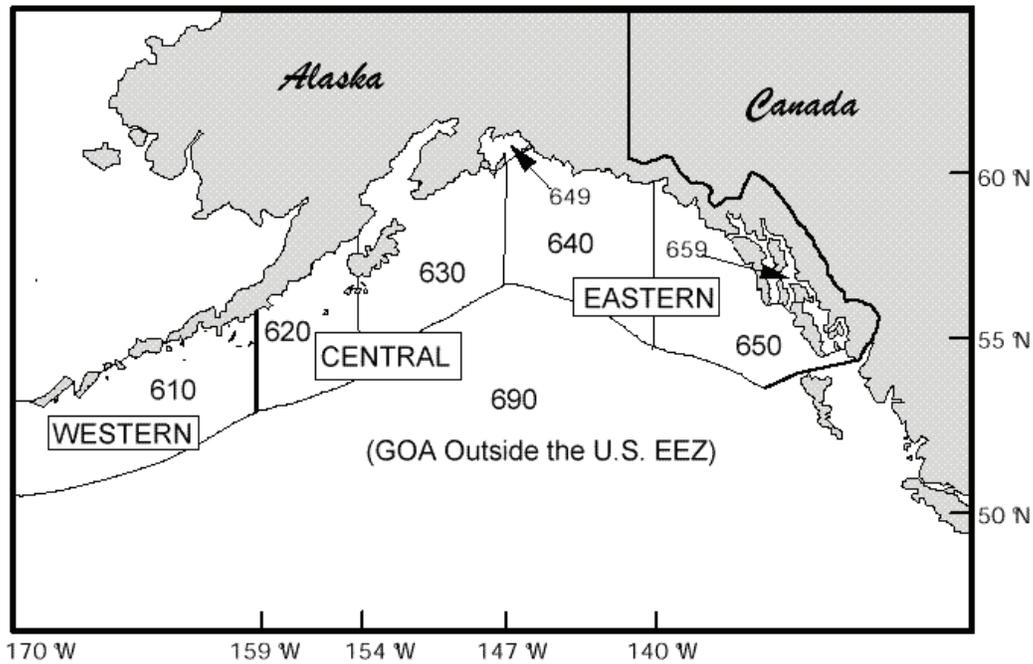


Figure 1. NMFS statistical (3-digit) and management areas for the Gulf of Alaska.

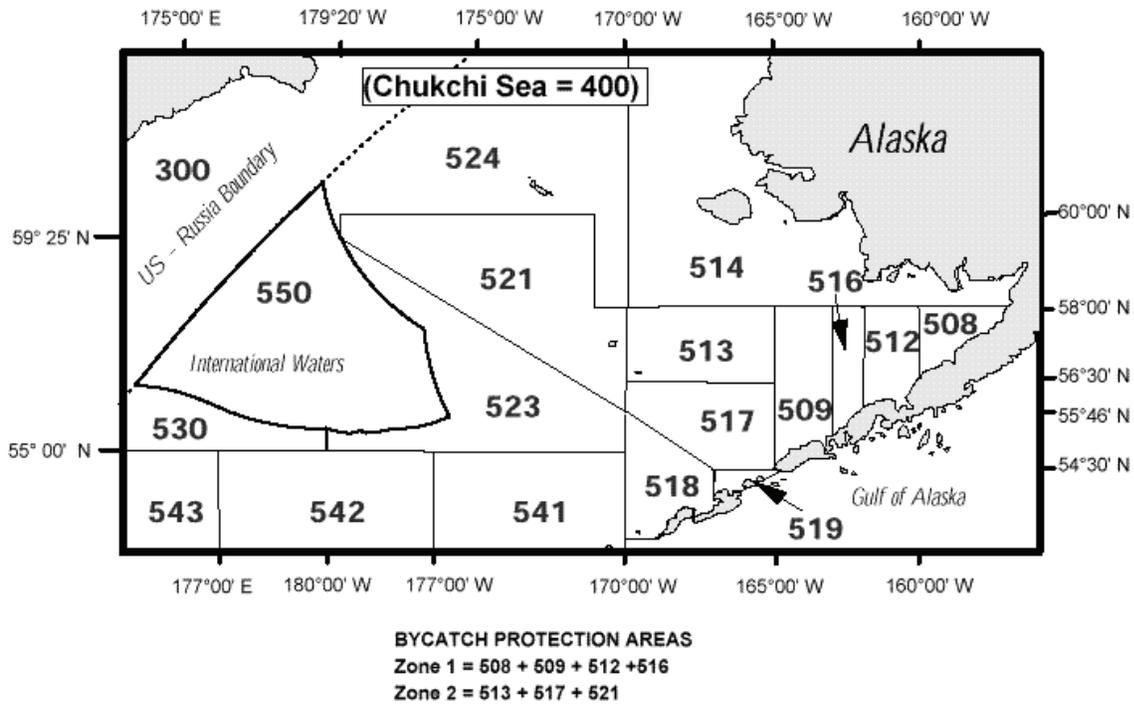


Figure 2. NMFS statistical areas for the Bering Sea/Aleutians.