

Halibut bycatch limits in the 2011 Alaska groundfish fishery

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Abstract

Bycatch of Pacific halibut in the groundfish fisheries off Alaska is managed with Prohibited Species Catch limits. The limits, first established by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council in the early 1990s, are subdivided by gear type, target fishery, time period, and among several management programs. Halibut limits are set as mortality rather than total catch. In 2011, the limits totaled 2,300 t (3.80 million pounds) in the Gulf of Alaska and 4,575 t (7.58 million pounds) in the Bering Sea, unchanged since 2008. However, under a reduction plan for the Bering Sea trawl fishery limit, only 3,575 t of the fishery's 3,675 t limit was allocated to the affected fisheries. The reduction plan concludes in 2012.

Introduction

This document summarizes the management of halibut bycatch in the 2011 groundfish fishery off Alaska. These fisheries are managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), following advice and recommendations developed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council). The Council sets limits to the amount of halibut bycatch mortality which is allowed to occur annually in the groundfish fisheries. If a fishery's limit is reached, the fishery is closed and no further directed fishing is allowed. Certain gear types, e.g., pots or jigs, are exempted from closures due to their low bycatch properties and to encourage their use.

2011 halibut bycatch limits and fishery closures

The Council adopts halibut bycatch mortality limits for the Alaskan groundfish fisheries during its annual specification process in the fall of each year. Currently, the limits are set by region (see management areas in Figs. 1 and 2). For the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) fisheries, the bycatch limits are set through a framework procedure which enables the limits to be changed annually based on a set of criteria, although the Council has never made any changes. Limits for the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI) fisheries are fixed in regulation and can only be changed through a formal amendment. For both regions, regulations allow the Council to apportion the trawl and fixed gear limits into seasonal or quarterly amounts to enable the groundfish fisheries to maximize their groundfish catch within the specified limits. A complete history of the halibut bycatch limits is in Table 1.

Gulf of Alaska

For the GOA in 2011, the Council set a trawl fishery limit of 2,000 t (3.3 million pounds¹; Table 2). The trawl limit was divided by season for shallow water and deep water fisheries, as has been the practice since 1991. However, the fifth seasonal apportionment (October 1 through December 31) was not divided between the complexes.

¹ Throughout this report, weights in net pounds (head off, eviscerated) will be provided which are equivalent to the metric tons round weight (head on, not eviscerated).

Bycatch management in the GOA fixed gear fisheries in 2011 was similar to previous years in the manner that limits were assigned to specific fisheries. The bycatch limit was set at 300 t (0.5 million pounds; Table 2) for all fixed gear fisheries, which was the same amount since 1995. 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 Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) fishery, were exempted from mortality limits.

Several special programs exist in the GOA for which the Council has assigned specific halibut bycatch limits from the overall limit. 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 allows for the formation of cooperatives (“coops”), to which the Council allocates a portion of the trawl halibut bycatch limit. The RPP bycatch limit is further divided by the Council between catcher/processors and catcher vessels (Table 3, part A). The limits are designed to keep bycatch from increasing above historic levels.

Another program for halibut bycatch management in the Gulf of Alaska applies to vessels that participate in the Alaska Seafood Cooperative, which was created through Amendment 80 to the BSAI Fishery Management Plan (FMP). Briefly, Amendment 80 (A80) allows vessels to form fishery coops to more efficiently conduct their fisheries. Importantly, A80 does not require vessels to join a coop, although in 2011 all A80 vessels belonged to one of two coops. The A80 coop 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 GOA. These excluded vessels are subject to limitations on their catch of other groundfish species and the associated halibut bycatch. These limitations were adopted to protect the interests of GOA trawl fishers who are not in an A80 coop, from expansion by A80 coop vessels into their GOA fisheries. To limit the catches by the A80 coop vessels in the GOA, the Council created limits, or sideboards, on their catches. The halibut bycatch mortality sideboard limits for A80 vessels (Table 3, 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 BSAI were prohibited from fishing for certain other groundfish species in the GOA. The AFA also specified limits on the amounts of other non-pollock groundfish species those vessels were allowed to catch; these limits are termed sideboards. To support directed fishing for the groundfish sideboard species, the Council set halibut bycatch limits. These limits (Table 3, part C) are based on the proportion of the total groundfish catch caught by the AFA catcher vessels from 1995-1997.

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands

The halibut bycatch mortality limits for the 2011 BSAI trawl and fixed gear fisheries totaled 4,575 t (7.4 million pounds, Table 4), unchanged since 1999.

As in past years, the BSAI fixed gear fisheries were allocated a total bycatch limit of 900 t (1.49 million pounds), but 7.5% (67 t; 0.11 million pounds) was reassigned to Community Development Quota (CDQ) fisheries, leaving 833 t (1.38 million pounds). This was divided between the hook-&-line fishery for Pacific cod and all other fixed gear fisheries. The cod fishery limit was further divided between catcher/processor and catcher vessels (Table 5). All pot and jig fisheries were exempted from halibut mortality closures. The sablefish IFQ hook-&-line fishery was also exempted from the bycatch limit.

The total trawl fishery bycatch mortality limit was 3,675 t (6.0 million pounds), but only 3,575 t (5.9 million pounds) was assigned to trawl fisheries in 2011 (Table 4). By regulation, a fixed amount of 326 t (0.5 million pounds) is reallocated to CDQ fisheries, leaving 3,249 t (5.4 million pounds) for all remaining trawl fisheries. With the passage of A80 to the BSAI FMP, trawling is now separated into an A80 fleet and a Limited Access fleet. The latter group includes the pollock coops created by the AFA. Within the A80 fleet, the bycatch limit is subdivided between the Alaska Seafood Cooperative and the Alaska Groundfish Cooperative.

In addition, the Council created bycatch limit sideboards for the AFA vessels which apply to these vessels when they fish in non-AFA fisheries (Table 6), i.e., any target species other than pollock. These bycatch limit sideboards were created to ensure that this sector would not enter other fisheries and adversely impact vessels operating in those other fisheries.

The CDQ program operated throughout the year and 10% of the pollock total allowable catch (TAC) and 7.5% of all other groundfish TACs were allocated to the six CDQ programs. A fixed amount of the trawl bycatch limit (326 t) and 7.5% of the hook-&-line bycatch limit was allocated to the CDQ program, which was then subdivided among the six CDQ programs in proportion to their groundfish allocations.

Table 1. Halibut bycatch limits in the Alaska groundfish fishery since 1990.

A. Metric tons, round weight					
Gulf of Alaska			Bering Sea/Aleutians Islands		
Time Period	Trawl	Fixed Gears	Time Period	Trawl	Fixed Gears
1990-1994	2,000	750	1991	5,333 ^a	None
1995+	2,000	300	1992	5,033 ^a	750
			1993	3,775	750
			1994-1998	3,775	900
			1999-2008	3,675	900
			2009	3,625 ^b	900
			2010	3,625 ^b	900
			2011	3,575 ^b	900
			2012	3,525 ^b	900

^a Limit is in terms of catch for 1991-1992, and mortality in subsequent years.

^b Values shown indicate the actual amount allocated by the Council; limit specified in regulations was 3,675

B. Millions of pounds, net weight					
Gulf of Alaska			Bering Sea/Aleutians Islands		
Time Period	Trawl	Fixed Gears	Time Period	Trawl	Fixed Gears
1990-1994	3.30	1.20	1991	8.80 ^a	none
1995+	3.30	0.50	1992	6.60 ^a	1.20
			1993	6.26	1.20
			1994-1998	6.26	1.50
			1999-2008	6.10	1.50
			2009	6.00	1.50
			2010	6.00	1.50
			2011	5.90	1.50
			2012	5.80	1.50

^a Limit is in terms of catch for 1991-1992, and mortality in subsequent yearS.

Table 2. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (t, round weight) for the 2011 Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries. Exempted fisheries for 2011 include groundfish pots, jigs, and the Individual Fishing Quota hook-&-line fishery for sablefish.

Gear/Time Period	Bycatch Limit (t)
Trawl	2,000
Shallow water complex ¹	
January 20 – April 1	450
April 1 – July 1	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
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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
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Groundfish Pots & Jigs	Exempt
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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 3. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (t) in other programs for managing halibut bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska in 2011.

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 bycatch mortality limits (t) for non-exempt 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	62 (all targets)	
Total	423	

Table 4. Halibut bycatch mortality limits (t, round weight) for the 2011 Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish fisheries. Exempted fisheries for 2011 include those fishing pots or jigs for groundfish, and the Individual Fishing Quota hook-&-line fishery for sablefish. Note that some totals may not sum precisely due to rounding.

Gear sector	Bycatch Mortality Limits (t)
A. Fixed Gear fisheries	900
1) CDQ Apportionment	67
2) Fixed gear 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 fisheries	3,675
Amount allocated	3,575
1) CDQ Apportionment	326
2) Trawl gear sector total	3,249
a. Amendment 80 coops	2,375
b. Limited access sector	875

Table 5. Breakdown of 2011 Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands region fixed gear limited access sector halibut bycatch mortality limits (t).

Fixed Gear	Catcher/processors	Catcher vessels
Hook-&-line Pacific cod	760	15
January 1 – June 10	455	10
June 10 – August 15	190	3
August 15 – December 31	115	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 6. Seasonal and fishery breakdown of 2011 trawl fishery bycatch mortality limits (t) for Limited Access and AFA sectors.

Trawl Limited Access	Bycatch Limit (t)
Yellowfin sole	167
Rock sole/flathead sole/other flatfish	0
Turbot/sablefish/arrowtooth flounder	0
Rockfish	5
Pacific cod	453
Pollock/Atka mackerel/other species	250
Total	875

Sideboards for AFA fleet in non-AFA fisheries	
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	0
Rockfish (June 1 – December 31)	2
Pollock/Atka mackerel/other species	5
Catcher/processors	286

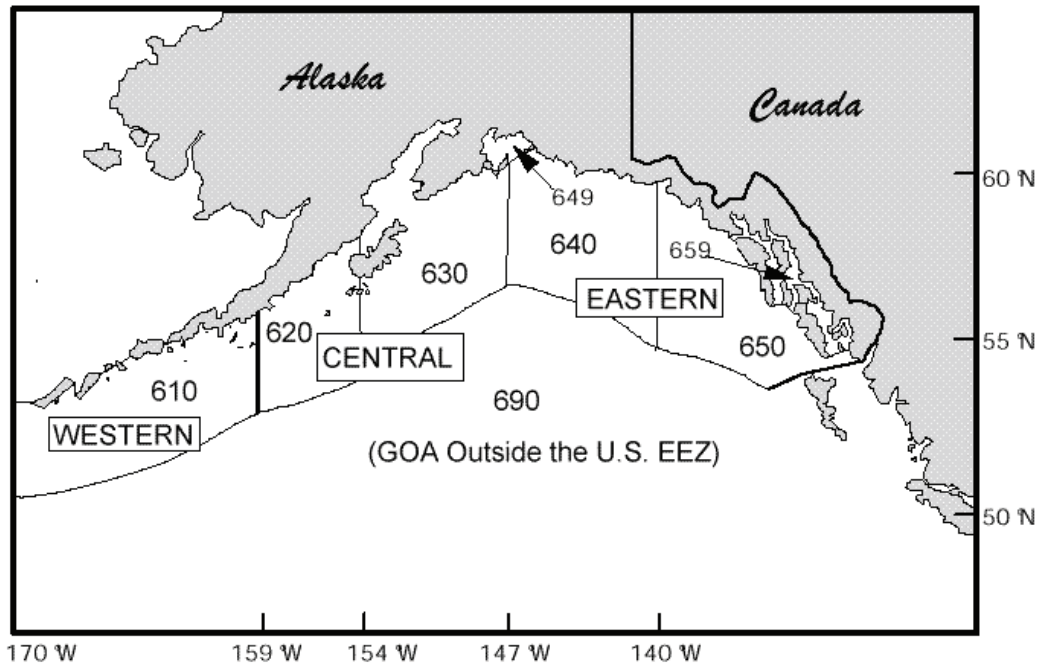


Figure 1. NMFS statistical and management areas for the Gulf of Alaska.

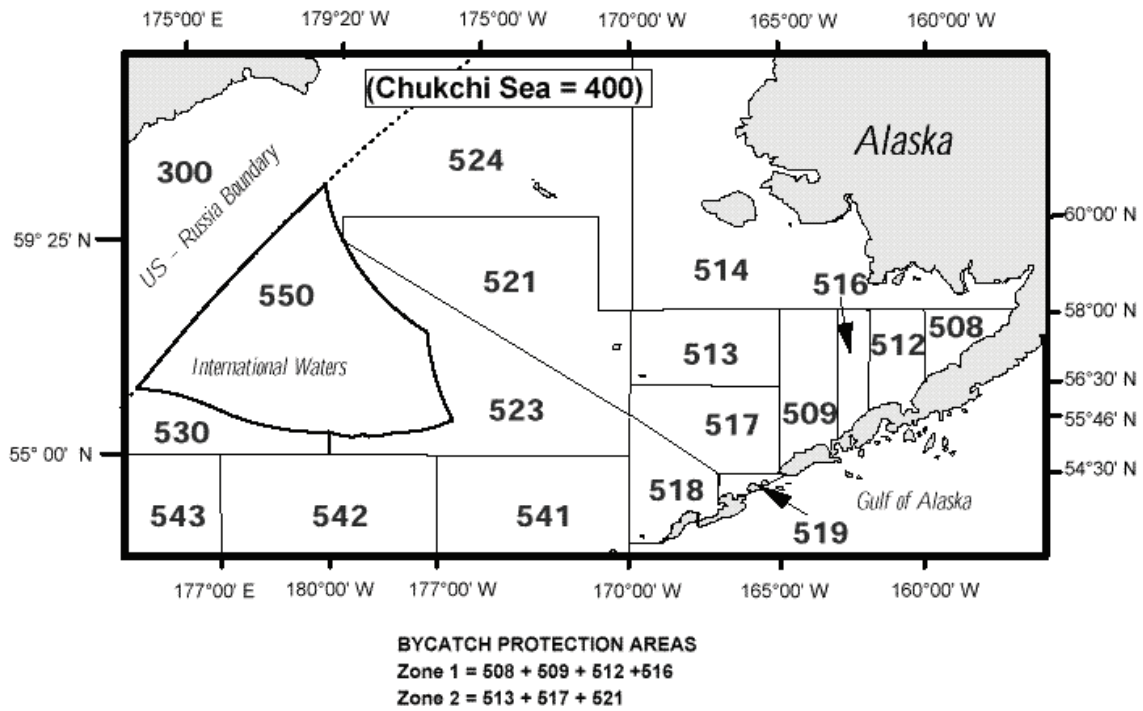


Figure 2. NMFS statistical and management areas for the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands.