

# Halibut season to open March 15 with slight quota increase

Unlike last year, the United States and Canada were able to reach agreement this year on a coastwide Pacific halibut quota.

The quota was announced Feb. 1 at the conclusion of the International Pacific Halibut Commission's annual meeting in Victoria, British Columbia. The two nations each have three representatives on the commission.

The coastwide catch limit for 2019 is 38.61 million pounds, an increase of 1.4 million pounds or 3.8 percent from 2018.

The commission set a season of March 15 to Nov. 14 for all commercial fisheries in the United States and Canada.

"In IPHC Regulatory Area 2A, the tribal commercial fisheries and the incidental Pacific halibut fisheries will occur within these dates, and the non-tribal directed commercial fishery will consist of 10-hour derby fishing periods, including June 26, July 10, July 24, Aug. 7, Aug. 21, Sept. 4, and Sept. 18, with other possible dates to be determined by the IPHC secretariat," the IPHC said.

**Fresh start:** Last year's IPHC annual meeting deadlocked as U.S. and Canadian members were unable to agree on catch limits. The United States said Canada wanted a disproportionate harvest out of Area 2B (British Columbia). The impasse left the two countries to independently set catch limits for their respective areas in 2018.

For this year's meeting, several new faces were on the commission, and the body was able to come to a quota agreement.

National Marine Fisheries Service chief Chris Oliver, the lead U.S. representative on the halibut commission, issued a Feb. 4 written statement on the agreement.

"Based on input from stakeholders and analysis from commis-

## Halibut edges up

Here are the 2019 halibut catch limits, by regulatory area, expressed in millions of pounds.

Regulatory area	2018 catch limits	2019 catch limits
<b>2A</b> (California, Oregon, Washington)	1.32	1.65
<b>2B</b> (British Columbia)	7.10	6.83
<b>2C</b> (Southeast Alaska)	6.34	6.34
<b>3A</b> (Central Gulf of Alaska)	12.54	13.50
<b>3B</b> (Western Gulf of Alaska)	3.27	2.90
<b>4A</b> (Eastern Aleutians)	1.74	1.94
<b>4B</b> (Central, Western Aleutians)	1.28	1.45
<b>4CDE</b> (Bering Sea)	3.62	4.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>37.21</b>	<b>38.61</b>

*Note: Area limits include not only commercial catch but other categories such as recreational and subsistence catches and bycatch. In Alaska's two most productive areas, the commercial catch limit for 2019 is 8.06 million pounds in Area 3A and 3.61 million pounds in Area 2C.*

*Source: International Pacific Halibut Commission*

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sion science reports, the U.S. and Canada agreed to a rebalancing of the coastwide quota resulting in Canada receiving a 17.7 percent share and the U.S. receiving an 82.3 percent share," Oliver said. "While the overall quota for 2019 is a slight increase over 2018, the catch limits agreed to at the meeting reflect a sensible, conservative approach that will secure the future of this iconic and economically important species. We solved several challenging international fishery management issues and we accomplished our goal in the spirit of cooperation and compromise."

**Stock status:** This year's quota, while up a bit, is still a far cry from those seen in 2001-05, when coastwide halibut catch limits exceeded 73 million pounds annually.

Oliver, in his statement, summarized the status of the halibut stock: "The Pacific halibut stock has been in a low and declining state for the past 10 years. The current state is thought to be related to decadal shifts in environmental conditions affecting recruitment and unexplained low weight-at-age. In addition, recent IPHC stock assessments indicate that catch limits in the early 2000s were based on overly optimistic estimates of biomass, leading to higher fishing mortality rates than were intended."

The IPHC's next annual meeting is planned for Jan. 27-31, 2020, in Anchorage, Alaska. ⚓

— Wesley Loy