

### Allocation of Prohibited Species Catch Limits for Halibut, Crab, Salmon, and Herring

Due to the lack of new information concerning PSC limits and apportionments in October 2003, the Council recommended using the halibut, crab, and herring 2003 PSC amounts for the proposed 2004 amounts. The Council will reconsider these amounts in December 2003, based on recommendations by the Plan Team and the SSC. Regulations at § 679.21(e)(1)(vii) specify a scheduled reduction of chinook salmon PSC limits until the final limit is reached in 2004. For 2004, the proposed chinook salmon PSC limit for the pollock fishery is 29,000 fish. Regulations at § 679.21(e)(1)(i) allocate 7.5 percent or 2,175 chinook salmon as the proposed PSQ for the CDQ program and the remaining 26,825 chinook salmon to the non-CDQ fisheries.

PSC limits for halibut are set in regulations at § 679.21(e). For the BSAI trawl fisheries, the limit is 3,675 mt of Pacific halibut mortality and for non-trawl fisheries, the limit is 900 mt of mortality. PSC limits for crab and herring are specified annually based on abundance and spawning biomass.

The red king crab mature female abundance is estimated from the 2002 survey data to be 18.6 million king crab and the effective spawning biomass is estimated to be 37.7 million pounds (17,100 mt). Based on the criteria set out at § 679.21(e)(1)(ii), the proposed 2003 PSC limit of red king crab in Zone 1 for trawl gear is 97,000 animals as a result of the mature female abundance being above 8.4 million king crab, and the effective spawning biomass estimate being greater than 14.5 (6,577 mt), but less than 55 million pounds (24,948 mt).

Regulations at § 679.21(e)(3)(ii)(B) establish criteria under which NMFS must specify an annual red king crab bycatch limit for the Red King Crab Savings Subarea (RKCSS). The regulations limit the RKCSS red king crab bycatch limit to up to 35 percent of the trawl bycatch allowance specified for the rock sole/flathead sole/"other flatfish" fishery category. The limit must be based on the need to optimize the groundfish harvest relative to red king crab bycatch. The Council

recommended, and NMFS approves, a proposed red king crab bycatch limit equal to 35 percent of the trawl bycatch allowance specified for the rock sole/flathead sole/"other flatfish" fishery category within the RKCSS.

Based on 2002 survey data, the *Chionoecetes bairdi* crab abundance is estimated to be 464.9 million animals. Given the criteria set out at § 679.21(e)(1)(iii), the proposed 2004 *C. bairdi* crab PSC limit for trawl gear is 980,000 animals in Zone 1 and 2,970,000 animals in Zone 2 as a result of the *C. bairdi* crab abundance estimate of over 400 million animals.

Under § 679.21(e)(1)(iv), the PSC limit for *C. opilio* crab is based on total abundance as indicated by the NMFS annual bottom trawl survey. The *C. opilio* crab PSC limit is set at 0.1133 percent of the Bering Sea abundance index. Based on the 2002 survey estimate of 1.49 billion animals, the calculated limit is 1,169,000 animals. Because this limit is less than 4.5 million, under § 679.21(e)(1)(iv)(B), the proposed 2004 *C. opilio* crab PSC limit is 4,350,000 million animals.

Under § 679.21(e)(1)(vi), the proposed PSC limit of Pacific herring caught while conducting any trawl operation for groundfish in the BSAI is 1 percent of the annual eastern Bering Sea herring biomass. NMFS's best estimate of 2003 herring biomass is 152,574 mt. This amount was derived using 2002 survey data and an age-structured biomass projection model developed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). Therefore, the proposed herring PSC limit for 2004 is 1,526 mt.

Under § 679.21(e)(1)(i), 7.5 percent of each PSC limit specified for crab and halibut is reserved as a PSQ reserve for use by the groundfish CDQ program. Regulations at § 679.21(e)(3) require the apportionment of each trawl PSC limit into PSC bycatch allowances for seven specified fishery categories.

Regulations at § 679.21(e)(4)(ii) authorize the apportionment of the non-trawl halibut PSC limit among five fishery categories. The proposed fishery bycatch allowances for the trawl and non-trawl fisheries are listed in Table 6.

Regulations at § 679.21(e)(4)(ii) authorize exemption of specified non-trawl fisheries from the halibut PSC limit. As in past years, NMFS after

consultation with the Council, is proposing to exempt pot gear, jig gear, and the sablefish IFQ hook-and-line gear fishery categories from halibut bycatch restrictions because these fisheries use selective gear types that take comparatively few halibut. In 2003, total groundfish catch for the pot gear fishery in the BSAI was approximately 17,929 mt with an associated halibut bycatch mortality of about 3 mt. The 2003 groundfish jig gear fishery harvested about 156 mt of groundfish. Most vessels in the jig gear fleet are less than 60 ft (18.3 m) LOA and are exempt from observer coverage requirements. As a result, observer data are not available on halibut bycatch in the jig gear fishery. However, a negligible amount of halibut bycatch mortality is assumed because of the selective nature of this gear type and the likelihood that halibut caught with jig gear have a high survival rate when released.

As in past years, the Council recommended that the sablefish IFQ fishery be exempt from halibut bycatch restrictions because of the halibut retention requirements of the sablefish and halibut IFQ program (subpart D of 50 CFR part 679). The IFQ program requires legal-sized halibut to be retained by vessels using hook-and-line gear if a halibut IFQ permit holder is aboard and is holding unused halibut IFQ. This provision results in reduced halibut discard in the sablefish fishery. In 1995, about 36 mt of halibut discard mortality was estimated for the sablefish IFQ fishery. A similar estimate for 1996 through 2003 has not been calculated, but NMFS has no information indicating that it would be significantly different.

Regulations at § 679.21(e)(5) authorize NMFS, after consultation with the Council, to establish seasonal apportionments of PSC allowances. In October 2003, the Council proposed no seasonal apportionments, except for the trawl bycatch allowance for halibut bycatch specified for the rockfish trawl fishery. The intent of this proposal was to reduce halibut bycatch during the first quarter when halibut bycatch is the highest. NMFS anticipates that the Council will recommend additional seasonal apportionments during its December 2003 meeting.