

TABLE 6.—PROPOSED 2004 APPORTIONMENT OF PACIFIC HALIBUT PSC TRAWL LIMITS BETWEEN THE TRAWL GEAR DEEP-WATER SPECIES COMPLEX AND THE SHALLOW-WATER SPECIES COMPLEX

[Values are in metric tons]

Season	Shallow-water	Deep-water	Total
January 20–April 1 .....	450	100	550
April 1–July 4 .....	100	300	400
July 4–September 1 .....	200	400	600
September 1–October 1 .....	150	( <sup>1</sup> )	150
Subtotal:			
January 20–October 1 .....	900	800	1,700
October 1–December 31 .....			300
Total .....			2,000

<sup>1</sup> No apportionment between shallow-water and deep-water fishery complexes during the 5th season (October 1–December 31).

Based on public comment and information contained in the final 2003 SAFE report, which will be available in December 2003, the Council may recommend, or NMFS may make, some changes in the seasonal, gear-type, and fishing-complex apportionments of halibut PSC limits for the final 2004 harvest specifications. NMFS will consider the following types of information in setting final halibut PSC limits.

*(A) Estimated Halibut Bycatch in Prior Years*

The best available information on estimated halibut bycatch is data collected by observers during 2003. The calculated halibut bycatch mortality by trawl, hook-and-line, and pot gear through October 11, 2003, is 1,915 mt, 294 mt, and 14 mt, respectively, for a total halibut mortality of 2,223 mt.

Halibut bycatch restrictions seasonally constrained trawl and hook-and-line gear fisheries during the 2003 fishing year. Trawling was closed during the second season for the shallow-water complex on June 19 (68 FR 37094, June 23, 2003), during the fourth season for the shallow-water complex on September 12 (68 FR 54395, September 17, 2003), during the second season for the deep-water fishery complex on May 16 (68 FR 27479, May 20, 2003), and during the fifth season for all trawling on October 15 (68 FR 59889, October 20, 2003). The use of hook-and-line gear for groundfish other than DSR and sablefish closed during the second season on August 1 (68 FR 46502, August 6, 2003) and for the remainder of the year on September 28 (68 FR 56788, October 2, 2003).

The amount of the groundfish TACs that vessels using trawl gear might have harvested if halibut catch limitations had not restricted the season in 2003 is unknown.

*(B) Expected Changes in Groundfish Stocks*

Proposed 2004 ABCs for arrowtooth flounder and Pacific ocean perch are higher than those established for 2003. Proposed 2004 ABCs are lower for Pacific cod, flathead sole, sablefish, and northern rockfish than those established for 2003. Proposed 2004 ABC levels for the remaining target species are unchanged from 2003. More information on these changes is included in the final SAFE report (November 2002) and in the Council and SSC October 2003 meeting minutes.

*(C) Expected Changes in Groundfish Catch*

The total of the proposed 2004 TACs for the GOA is 227,797 mt, a decrease of 3.7 percent from the 2003 TAC total of 236,440 mt. Those fisheries for which the 2004 TACs are lower than in 2003 are Pacific cod (decreased to 36,809 mt from 40,540 mt), flathead sole (decreased to 10,770 mt from 11,150 mt), sablefish (decreased to 11,400 mt from 14,890 mt), northern rockfish (decreased to 4,900 mt from 5,530 mt), and “other species” (decreased to 10,847 mt from 11,260 mt). There are no species for which the proposed 2004 TACs are higher than in 2003.

*(D) Current Estimates of Halibut Biomass and Stock Condition*

The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) conducted the most recent halibut stock assessment in December 2002. The halibut resource is considered to be healthy, with total catch near record levels. The current exploitable halibut biomass for 2003 is estimated to be 263,086 mt. This is similar to the estimate of 273,950 mt in 2002.

The exploitable biomass of the Pacific halibut stock apparently peaked at 326,520 mt in 1988. According to the

IPHC, the long-term average reproductive biomass for the Pacific halibut resource was estimated at 118,000 mt. Long-term average yield was estimated at 26,980 mt, round weight. The species is fully utilized. Recent average catches (1994–96) were 33,580 mt for the U.S. and 6,410 mt for Canada, for a combined total of 39,990 mt for the entire Pacific halibut resource. This catch was 48 percent higher than long-term potential yield, which reflects the good condition of the Pacific halibut resource. In January 2003, the IPHC recommended commercial catch limits totaling 36,812 mt (round weight) for Alaska in 2003, the same as in 2002. Through December 31, 2002, commercial hook-and-line harvests of halibut in Alaska total 37,219 mt (round weight).

At its January 2003 meeting, IPHC staff reported on the assessment of the halibut stock in 2002. There were some significant technological changes in the assessment as a result of changes in the underlying data being analyzed and the persistence of smaller sizes at age in the central portion of the halibut range. Analyses were conducted for the 2002 assessment to ensure that the stock is not being overharvested. However, the IPHC staff intends to resolve these technical issues with the assessment in 2003. In addition, IPHC staff are investigating a new harvest policy that may result in greater stability in the yield from the fishery and insulate the process of setting catch limits from technological changes in the assessment. This harvest policy will also be reviewed by the IPHC. The resolution of technical issues of the assessment may indicate a larger estimate of biomass in the central region of the stock distribution, but application of the proposed harvest policy might dictate slightly lower yields. Because these two processes may be somewhat