

counterbalancing, IPHC staff intend to complete their investigations before recommending any changes to the present catch limits or the harvest policy. While the trajectory of the halibut stock biomass is downward, the biomass is still above the long-term average level and is expected to remain above this level for the next several years.

Additional information on the Pacific halibut stock assessment and the proposed harvest policy may be found in the IPHC's 2002 Pacific halibut stock assessment (December 2002), available from the IPHC on its Web site at <http://www.iphc.washington.edu/hal.com>. IPHC will consider the 2003 Pacific halibut stock assessment for 2004 at its January 2004 annual meeting when it sets the 2004 commercial halibut fishery quotas.

#### (E) Other Factors

The allowable commercial catch of halibut will be adjusted to account for the overall halibut PSC mortality limit established for groundfish fisheries. The 2004 groundfish fisheries are expected to use the entire proposed halibut PSC limit of 2,300 mt. The allowable directed commercial catch is determined by accounting for the recreational and subsistence catch, waste, and bycatch mortality and then providing the remainder to the directed fishery. Groundfish fishing is not expected to adversely affect the halibut stocks.

Methods available for reducing halibut bycatch include:

(1) Reducing halibut bycatch rates through the Vessel Incentive Program (described below); (2) publication of individual vessel bycatch rates on the NMFS Alaska Region home page at [www.fakr.noaa.gov](http://www.fakr.noaa.gov); (3) modifications to gear; (4) changes in groundfish fishing seasons; (5) individual transferable quota programs; and (6) time/area closures.

Reductions in groundfish TAC amounts provide no incentive for fishermen to reduce bycatch rates. Costs that would be imposed on fishermen as a result of reducing TAC amounts depend on the species and amounts of groundfish foregone.

Trawl vessels carrying observers for purposes of complying with observer coverage requirements (§ 679.50) are subject to the Vessel Incentive Program. This program encourages trawl fishermen to avoid high halibut bycatch rates while conducting groundfish fisheries by specifying bycatch rate standards for various target fisheries.

Current regulations (*see* § 679.2 Authorized fishing gear, number 12)

specify requirements for biodegradable panels and tunnel openings for groundfish pots to reduce halibut bycatch. As a result, low bycatch and mortality rates of halibut in pot fisheries have justified exempting pot gear from PSC limits.

The regulations also define pelagic trawl gear in a manner intended to reduce bycatch of halibut by displacing fishing effort off the bottom of the sea floor when certain halibut bycatch levels are reached during the fishing year. The definition provides standards for physical conformation (§ 679.2, *see* Authorized fishing gear number (11)) and performance of the trawl gear in terms of crab bycatch (§ 679.7(a)(14)). Furthermore, all hook-and-line vessel operators are required to employ careful release measures when handling halibut bycatch (§ 679.7(a)(13)). These measures are intended to reduce handling mortality, thereby lowering overall halibut bycatch mortality in the groundfish fisheries, and to increase the amount of groundfish harvested under the available halibut mortality bycatch limits.

NMFS and the Council will review the methods available for reducing halibut bycatch listed here to determine their effectiveness, and will initiate changes, as necessary, in response to this review or to public testimony and comment.

#### Halibut Discard Mortality Rates

The Council recommended that the recommended halibut discard mortality rates (DMRs) developed by the staff of the IPHC for the 2003 GOA groundfish fisheries be used to monitor halibut bycatch mortality limits established for the 2004 GOA groundfish fisheries. NMFS concurs with this recommendation. The IPHC recommended use of long-term average DMRs for the 2001–2003 groundfish fisheries. The IPHC also recommended a provision that DMRs could be revised should analysis indicate that a fishery's annual DMR diverges substantially (up or down) from the long-term average. Most of the IPHC's assumed DMRs were based on an average of mortality rates determined from NMFS observer data collected between 1990 and 1999. DMRs were lacking for some fisheries, so rates from the most recent years were used. For the "other species" fishery, where insufficient mortality data are available, the mortality rate of halibut caught in trawl, hook-and-line, and pot gear Pacific cod fisheries were recommended as a default rate. The DMRs proposed for 2004 are unchanged from those used in 2003 in the GOA. The proposed DMRs for hook-and-line targeted

fisheries range from 8 to 24 percent. The proposed DMRs for trawl targeted fisheries range from 58 to 72 percent. The proposed DMRs for all pot targeted fisheries is 14 percent. The proposed 2004 DMRs are listed in Table 7. The justification for these proposed DMRs is discussed in Appendix A of the final SAFE report dated November 2002.

TABLE 7.—PROPOSED 2004 PACIFIC HALIBUT DISCARD MORTALITY RATES FOR VESSELS FISHING IN THE GULF OF ALASKA

[Listed values are percent of halibut bycatch assumed to be dead]

Gear/Target	Mortality rate
Hook-and-line:	
Pacific cod .....	14
Rockfish .....	8
Other species .....	14
Sablefish .....	24
Trawl:	
Pelagic pollock .....	72
Rockfish .....	69
Shallow-water flatfish .....	69
Pacific cod .....	61
Deep-water flatfish .....	60
Flathead sole .....	58
Rex sole .....	61
Non pelagic pollock .....	61
Arrowtooth flounder .....	62
Atka mackerel .....	70
Sablefish .....	66
Other species .....	61
Pot:	
Pacific cod .....	14
Other species .....	14

#### Non-exempt American Fisheries Act (AFA) Catcher Vessel Groundfish Harvest and PSC Limitations

One of the provisions implemented by AFA regulations was to place groundfish harvesting and processing limitations, also called sideboards, on AFA catcher/processors and catcher vessels in the GOA. These limitations are considered necessary for fishermen and processors who have received exclusive harvesting and processing privileges under the AFA to protect the interests of fishermen and processors who have not directly benefitted from the AFA. Under the AFA regulations, AFA catcher/processors (§ 679.4 (l)(2)(i)) are prohibited from fishing for any species of fish (§ 679.7(k)(1)(ii)) and from processing any groundfish harvested in Statistical Area 630 of the GOA (§ 679.7(k)(1)(iv)). The Council recommended that certain AFA catcher vessels in the GOA be exempt from groundfish harvest limitations. Exempted AFA catcher vessels in the GOA are those less than 125 ft (38.1 m) LOA whose annual Bering Sea and