

information as presented in, or summarized from, the current SAFE report, or as otherwise available from NMFS, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) or public testimony were considered when establishing the halibut PSC limits:

*(A) Estimated Halibut Bycatch in Prior Years*

The best available information on estimated halibut bycatch is data collected by observers during 2002. The calculated halibut bycatch mortality by trawl, hook-and-line, and pot gear through December 7, 2002, is 1,997 mt, 246 mt, and 2 mt, respectively, for a total halibut mortality of 2,245 mt.

Halibut bycatch restrictions seasonally constrained trawl gear fisheries during the 2002 fishing year. Trawling during the second season closed for the shallow-water complex on May 15 (67 FR 35448, May 20, 2002) and for the deep-water fishery complex on May 24 (67 FR 37726, May 30, 2002). Trawling during the third season closed for the shallow-water complex on August 5 (67 FR 51499, August 8, 2002) and for the deep-water fishery complex on August 2 (67 FR 51129, August 7, 2002). Trawling during the fourth season closed for both the shallow-water complex and the deep-water fishery complex on September 1 (67 FR 55730, August 30, 2002 and 67 FR 56320, September 3, 2002). Except for a brief period between November 6 and 10, 2002 (67 FR 67798, November 7, 2002), all trawling in the GOA closed (with the exception of pelagic trawl gear targeting pollock) for the remainder of the year on October 13 (67 FR 64066, October 17, 2002).

The amount of groundfish that vessels using trawl gear might have harvested if halibut catch limitations had not restricted the season in 2002 is unknown.

*(B) Expected Changes in Groundfish Stocks*

In December 2002, the Council adopted higher 2003 ABCs for flathead sole, arrowtooth, sablefish, other rockfish, northern rockfish, Pacific ocean perch, demersal shelf rockfish, and thornyhead rockfish than those established for 2002. The Council adopted lower 2003 ABCs for pollock, Pacific cod, and shallow water flatfish than those established for 2002. For the remaining targets, the Council

recommended that ABC levels remain unchanged from 2002. More information on these changes is included in the final SAFE report (November 2002) and in the Council and SSC December 2002 meeting minutes.

*(C) Expected Changes in Groundfish Catch*

The total of the 2003 TACs for the GOA is 236,440 mt, a decrease of less than 1 percent from the 2002 TAC total of 237,638 mt. Those fisheries for which the 2003 TACs are lower than in 2002 are pollock (decreased to 54,350 mt from 58,250 mt), Pacific cod (decreased to 40,540 mt from 44,230 mt), and other species (decreased to 11,260 mt from 11,330 mt). Those species for which the 2003 TACs are higher than in 2002 are shallow water flatfish (increased to 21,620 mt from 20,420 mt), flathead sole (increased to 11,150 mt from 9,280 mt), sablefish (increased to 14,890 mt from 12,820 mt), northern rockfish (increased to 5,530 mt from 4,980 mt), Pacific ocean perch (increased to 13,660 mt from 13,190 mt), demersal shelf rockfish (increased to 390 mt from 350 mt), and thornyhead rockfish (increased to 2,000 mt from 1,990 mt).

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

The most recent halibut stock assessment was prepared by the IPHC in December 2002. The halibut resource is considered to be healthy, with total catch near record levels. Using the low range of estimates, the current exploitable halibut biomass for 2003 in Alaska is estimated to be 263,086 mt. This is similar to the estimate of 273,950 mt for 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 equivalents) for

Alaska in 2003, the same as in 2002. Through December 31, 2003, commercial hook-and-line harvests of halibut in Alaska total 37,219 mt (round weight equivalents).

At its January 2003 meeting, IPHC staff reported on the assessment of the halibut stock in 2002. There were some significant 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 part of the halibut range. These changes created some uncertainty about differences in the biomass of the stock estimated from the current and previous assessments. Analyses were conducted for the 2002 assessment to ensure that the stock is not in danger of being overharvested. However, the IPHC staff intends to resolve these technical issues with the assessment over the next year. 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 counterbalancing, IPHC staff wish to complete their investigations before recommending any changes to 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 (dated December 2002), available from the IPHC on its website at <http://www.iphc.washington.edu/hal.com>.

*(E) Other Factors*

The proposed 2003 specifications (67 FR 76344, December 12, 2002) discuss potential impacts of expected fishing for groundfish on halibut stocks, as well as methods available for, and costs of, reducing halibut bycatch in the groundfish fisheries.