

Bering Sea fishermen press North Pacific Council on halibut bycatch

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Keith Pearson, left, pushes a halibut as the Auction Block Company crew offloads the fish from a boat, Aug. 9, 2016. The fish are sorted by size, iced and boxed for moving. (Anne Raup/ADN archive))

After years of deliberations, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council is inching toward a decision on whether to tie halibut bycatch limits in the Bering Sea to abundance indices.

The action, known formally as Bering Sea-Aleutian Islands halibut abundance-based management, or ABM, is intended to reduce bycatch of halibut in the Bering Sea by the Amendment 80 trawl fleet when the fish stocks are lower. The Amendment 80 fleet is a group of catcher-processor vessels that are allocated a portion of groundfish harvest. Each year, the fleet is bound to a hard limit on how many halibut they can take as bycatch, known as the prohibited species catch, or PSC limit.

That limit is fixed, however, while halibut stocks and the allowable catch for the directed fleet vary. Over the last six years, the council has been considering whether to instead adjust the PSC limit to fluctuate with halibut abundance indexes based on two surveys, effectively pushing more of the halibut available for harvest to the directed fishery fleet. Depending on which of four alternatives the council chooses — from no action to varying changes — the effects could range from a 45% cut to a 15% increase, depending on abundance.

Chris Woodley, executive director of the Groundfish Forum, a trade association representing members of the Amendment 80 fleet, said the draft environmental impact statement provided to the council points out that a shift to ABM would overall be detrimental economically.

“There are a number of things the Groundfish Forum is concerned about — the primary one being that the draft EIS is very clear that there is going to be little to no benefits to the halibut stocks or to conservation in general and that the net (economic) benefit to the nation is expected to be negative,” he said. “That’s very up front and very clear.”

The issue has been controversial from the beginning, in part because of the cost to the trawl fleet. The National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that cost to the Amendment 80 fleet would be between \$68 million and \$138 million, depending on fishing variables and the alternative implemented. By contrast, the draft EIS estimates that the economic benefit to the directed halibut fleet would be between \$1.1 million and \$2.2 million. There are about 835 crew positions in the Amendment 80 fleet, compared to about 400 in the directed fishery for halibut in the region. Because the loss is so large and the number of people relatively small, the reduced revenue would pencil out to about a \$30,000 loss per crew position in the Amendment 80 fleet under one alternative.

“There’s virtually zero upside to the directed fishery and a huge amount of downside to the Amendment 80 fishermen,” Woodley said.

Though the review concludes that the net benefit of implementing abundance-based management would be negative economically, both the social and economic impacts are considered. Diana Stram, a senior scientist with the NPFMC who worked on the document, said the statement about the net benefits is largely an economic one.

The council is bound to consider the 10 national standards under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which include standards like conservation, minimizing bycatch to the extent practical and minimizing costs. Stram said the council must balance its decision across those standards.

“Certain actions are going to be more related to one of the national standards than others,” she said. “What we do as analysts in the document is we try to provide some narrative to help the decision-makers understand how this plays into their actions, but the onus is on the council if one alternative is balancing one standard higher than another.”

None of the four alternatives have a significantly different impact on the spawning stock biomass for halibut in the Bering Sea, according to the draft EIS. That’s because the International Pacific Halibut Commission manages the halibut stocks as well and sets the catch limits based on its survey for sustainable harvest levels, Stram said. Whatever the council decides to do would only affect the amount of fish available for harvest, not the spawning stock.

Some fishermen in the Bering Sea region are pushing for the council to enact the motion both out of economic and sustainability concerns. The directed halibut fleet in the Bering Sea is one of the economic mainstays for coastal communities in Western

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Alaska. Halibut is also a critically important subsistence resource in many of the communities of the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, particularly as other stocks like crab decline.

St. Paul Island is one of those communities. The island, with a population of about 480 people, depends on subsistence foods and commercial fishing. Halibut is a staple there, and the community has a vested interest in the long-term sustainability of the stock, said Lauren Divine, the director of the ecosystem conservation office for the Aleut Community of St. Paul.

None of the alternatives are enough to do what the community feels is necessary, but they want to see something happen, she said.

A number of other halibut-dependent coastal communities have already stopped fishing for halibut, in part because of the decline connected with the static bycatch cap, Divine said. The community of St. Paul is home to a Community Development Quota group, the Central Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, and people on the island do depend on fishing jobs, but it's not just about the economics for community, Divine said.

"From an Indigenous community perspective, it's not just about money," she said. "It's a way of life people don't want to give up."

Heather McCarty, a fisheries analyst who works with the Central Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, said the group is advocating for Alternative 4, but feels for a number of reasons that the draft EIS doesn't provide enough information for the council to make a decision. For one, she said Alternative 4 is the only option that meets the council's purpose and needs statement for the project. For another, the draft EIS focuses on the perspectives of the CDQ groups, which may not always be the same as the perspectives of the communities.

The group supports the action because it would help spread out the burden of conservation to the trawl fleet, she said. Because the bycatch cap is static, in some years, the trawl fleet might be able to take nearly all the halibut available for harvest.

"The directed fishermen bear the entire burden of conservation," she said.

Divine said the Aleut Community of St. Paul also finds Alternative 4 preferable.

"Alternative 4 isn't enough, but it is a good start as we move into abundance-based management away from static caps," Divine said. "But I think this is going to be an ongoing (issue)."

Stakeholders on both sides of the discussion agree that the EIS has some information holes in it that need to be addressed before the council uses it to take action, including on topics such as the effects of climate change on fish populations.

The council is expected to take action on BSAI halibut abundance-based management at its upcoming meeting beginning Dec. 8.

Both McCarty and Divine said the communities aren't advocating for the trawlers to be completely closed, but for there to be a more equitable division.

National Standard 9 of the MSA requires the council to reduce bycatch to the extent practicable. The Amendment 80 fleet has taken multiple steps to reduce halibut bycatch as more attention has turned to the issue. Since 2007, the fleet's bycatch is down by 49%, the vessels have reduced their bottom contact by an estimate 90%, and are communicating about areas with higher halibut bycatch to avoid fishing there. They are also using excluders, deck sorting, avoiding night fishing and using small tows, among other efforts. In the past few years, the fleet has encountered high numbers of halibut on the grounds, such as in 2019, when record-breaking warm waters affected fisheries all over Alaska.

Woodley said one of the fleet's concerns is that the 2019 conditions will become a new normal, so the fleet wants more flexibility within bycatch regulations to adapt.

"We are committed to continued halibut bycatch reduction, but with halibut bycatch already so low and with all current tools fully utilized, future efforts will likely result in only small incremental improvements."

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