



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration**  
*National Marine Fisheries Service*  
P.O. Box 21668  
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

April 26, 2021

Dear Alaska Native Representative:

With this letter, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is notifying you that a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) on setting Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) halibut prohibited species catch (PSC) limits based on Pacific halibut abundance levels will be presented to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) for final action at their December 2021 meeting. The Council's schedule and agenda for the December meeting may be found at: <https://www.npfmc.org/at-a-glance/>. It is unknown at this time whether the December meeting will be held online or in person in Anchorage, AK. More information on participation options will be posted on the Council's web site closer to December. Additional related documents, including the alternatives analyzed, may be found at: <https://www.npfmc.org/tag/halibut-abm/>.

We invite you to participate in the process and contribute toward the final decisions. NMFS expects to publish the Draft EIS in the Federal Register in the latter half of summer 2021. NMFS will notify you of the publication along with instructions to submit public comments on the document, including comments on the alternatives analyzed and preliminary results. Finally, NMFS and the Council will be seeking additional public input on this action through the Council process prior to the Council taking final action in December. Methods to provide such input will be found through the Council's December agenda, once it is posted to the Council's web site: <https://www.npfmc.org/at-a-glance/>.

The Council has been managing Pacific halibut bycatch by a range of measures since the start of the BSAI Fishery Management Plan in 1982 and is currently examining approaches to set halibut PSC limits for the Amendment 80 sector<sup>1</sup> groundfish fishery in the BSAI based on halibut population abundance. Existing halibut PSC limits are a fixed amount of halibut mortality in metric tons. When halibut population abundance declines, halibut PSC becomes a larger proportion of total number of halibut being taken and can result in lower catch limits for directed (i.e., commercial) halibut fisheries. Both the Council and the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) have expressed concern about impacts on directed halibut fisheries under the status quo (currently) and identified abundance-based management of halibut PSC limits as a potential management approach to address these concerns. This action is focused on PSC limits for the Amendment 80 sector because those vessels are responsible for the majority of halibut PSC taken each year. Under the alternatives analyzed in the Draft EIS, the Amendment

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<sup>1</sup> Amendment 80, implemented in 2008, allocates BSAI yellowfin sole, flathead sole, rock sole, Atka mackerel, and Aleutian Islands Pacific ocean perch to the head and gut trawl Catcher/Processor sector, and allows qualified vessels to form cooperatives.



80 sector's halibut PSC would increase when halibut abundance increases and would decrease when halibut abundance decreases. None of the alternatives would affect halibut subsistence fishing.

Modifying PSC limits at this time to link PSC limits to halibut abundance may achieve the goals of 1) providing flexibility to the Amendment 80 groundfish fisheries in times of high halibut abundance, 2) protecting spawning biomass of halibut especially at low levels, and 3) stabilizing variability in PSC limits from year to year. All of these goals may provide additional harvest opportunities in the directed halibut fishery.

The Council has reviewed multiple discussion papers and revised alternatives for this action since 2016. The Council has selected two surveys that each produce an abundance index to track Pacific halibut abundance and guide setting PSC limits in the Amendment 80 BSAI groundfish fisheries. One abundance index is from the NMFS Alaska Fishery Science Center Eastern Bering Sea shelf bottom trawl survey and the other is from the IPHC setline survey covering IPHC Areas 4ABCDE. Both indices represent the best available scientific information.

This Draft EIS will provide a review of the current halibut bycatch issues and an analysis of potential ways to move the decision-making process forward. The Draft EIS, once published for public review and comment, will be the primary analytical document to present methods to determine abundance-based halibut PSC limits in the BSAI Amendment 80 sector. The alternatives to the status quo analyzed in the Draft EIS include three alternatives under consideration by the Council. These have been developed through multiple discussion papers, Council considerations, and consultations with stakeholders. Each of these alternatives employ a "lookup table" approach to set PSC limits based on the status of halibut resulting from both the IPHC setline and eastern Bering Sea trawl surveys. Trawl and setline survey estimates seem to indicate that halibut PSC limits will decrease between 3 to 15 percent over the next several years under all non-status quo alternatives being considered. Estimates over a longer time frame show the possibility of improved halibut abundance. As PSC limits for the Amendment 80 sector decrease, it is expected that the directed fishery harvest yield would increase over time, since more fish would survive and contribute to the halibut stock biomass, resulting in increased numbers of halibut available for harvest.

The purpose of the Draft EIS is to inform decision makers and the public of the potential impacts of halibut abundance management to the halibut resource, the fishing industry, coastal communities, and other parts of the human environment. Alternatives developed during the EIS public process will be designed to minimize to the extent practicable detrimental impacts to the halibut resource, the fishing industry, and coastal communities. A Final EIS will be published prior to final approval of this action by the Secretary of Commerce. For further information on the contents of this Draft EIS, please contact Diana Stram at [diana.stram@noaa.gov](mailto:diana.stram@noaa.gov) or Joseph Krieger at [joseph.krieger@noaa.gov](mailto:joseph.krieger@noaa.gov) or (907) 586-7882.

NMFS has special obligations to consult and coordinate with tribal governments and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) corporations on a government-to-

government basis pursuant to Executive Order 13175 and the Executive Memorandum of April 29, 1994, on “Government-to-Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments.” As a result of your tribal or ANCSA corporation status, you have the opportunity to comment to NMFS at any time; however, comments submitted during the Council process in developing and analyzing the alternatives would be helpful in developing the EIS. Additionally, a recent Presidential memorandum<sup>2</sup> affirms the Federal government's commitment to including Tribal voices in policy deliberations that affect Tribal communities and recognizes that strong communication is fundamental to a constructive relationship. I encourage you to submit written comments according to the instructions on the Council meeting agenda for this topic.

Additionally, you have the opportunity to consult with and provide comments to NMFS via remote video chat or by telephone. To request a meeting with NMFS, please contact Joseph Krieger at the above phone number or email address.

I look forward to working with you through the completion of this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JB', with a small dot above the 'i'.

James W. Balsiger, Ph.D.  
Administrator, Alaska Region

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<sup>2</sup> Link to the Presidential memorandum:  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/26/memorandum-on-tribal-consultation-and-strengthening-nation-to-nation-relationships/>