

The Wheel Watch

a newsletter of the

Fishing Vessel Owners' Association

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Dear Members

This newsletter will discuss the events of your life unfolding before at the Pacific Council, North Pacific Council, IPHC, Washington D.C., and markets.

****NPFMC****

Abundance Based Management

The Council action that forces the Amendment 80 factory trawl fleet to reduce their halibut bycatch numbers by up to 35% was ruled a correct action by the Federal District Court in Anchorage on November 8, 2024. The current reduction is at 25% and it could go higher.

Summary of Key Points

- On November 8, 2024, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska (Judge Gleason) issued a decision upholding Amendment 123 to the BSAI Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. The ruling, which rejected challenges by the Ground Fish Forum, affirms the adoption of “Abundance-Based Management” of halibut bycatch by the Amendment 80 (A80) sector. As a result, the lower bycatch limits in Amendment 123 will remain in effect, benefiting halibut users and halibut-dependent communities throughout the BSAI and beyond.
- In a thorough and well-reasoned opinion, the federal district court rejected each of A80’s challenges to the new limits — held that Amendment 123 did not violate the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA); the Administrative Procedure Act (APA); or the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
- The court also rejected A80’s assertions that purported economic losses from lower bycatch limits make Amendment 123 impracticable. Explaining that “‘practicable’ is not the same as zero cost,” the court affirmed the balance Amendment 123 strikes. As the court explained, the “Council and NMFS weighed the potential for the Amendment 80 sector to mitigate negative economic impacts through operational choices; weighed the retrospective estimate of revenue impacts included in the [FEIS] and weighed the non-quantifiable conservation, social, and management benefits of the abundance-based management of halibut PSC.” This analysis, the court found, “shows that NMFS adequately explained its conclusion that Amendment 123 was practicable, in compliance with National Standard 9.”

Next Steps

- With Judge Gleason’s decision, the court entered final judgment on all of A80’s claims. The decision can be appealed to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.
- A80 has 60 days (until **Tuesday, January 7, 2025**) to file a Notice of Appeal. There is no requirement to wait, and they can file a Notice of Appeal at any time. If no appeal is filed by that date, then the case is over. We will just have to wait and see what A80 decides to do.

Council Meeting December 2

On December 2, the IFQ Committee of the Council will meet to discuss the 5-year review of the IFQ program. Amendments can be suggested to the program at this time. The Council will discuss the IFQ review on December 9, 2024. Below are some of the results of the new review of the IFQ program.

Figure 80. Number of QS Holders by IF Fishery and Generation

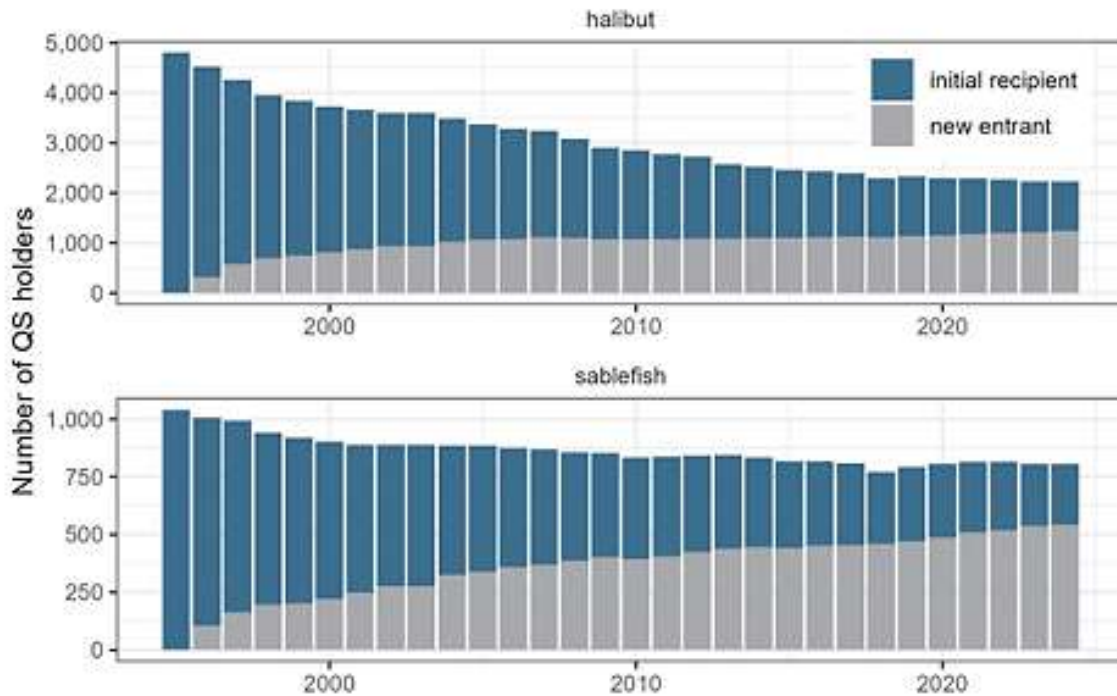


Figure 57. Number of Small, Medium, and Large Onshore Buyers/Processors by Alaska Region

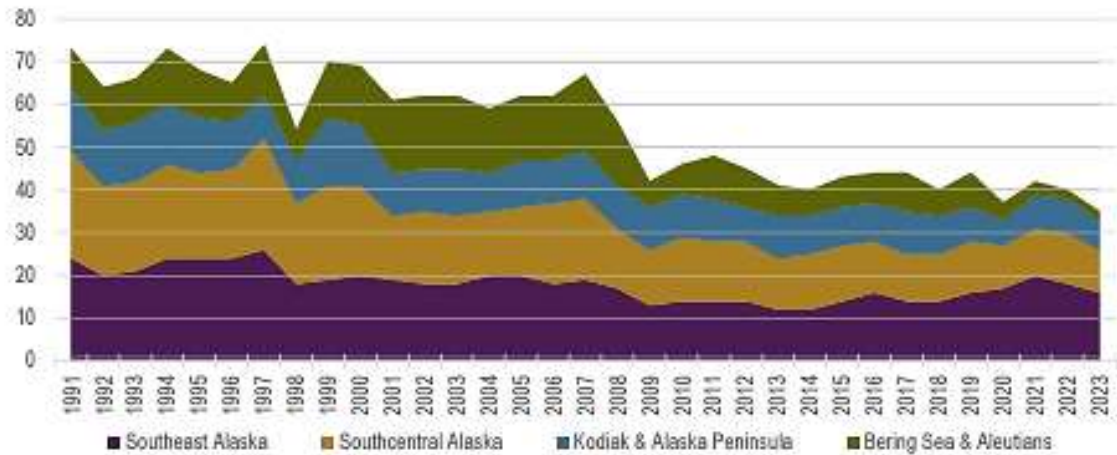


Figure 36. Fleet Composition of the Halibut and Sablefish IFQ Fleet

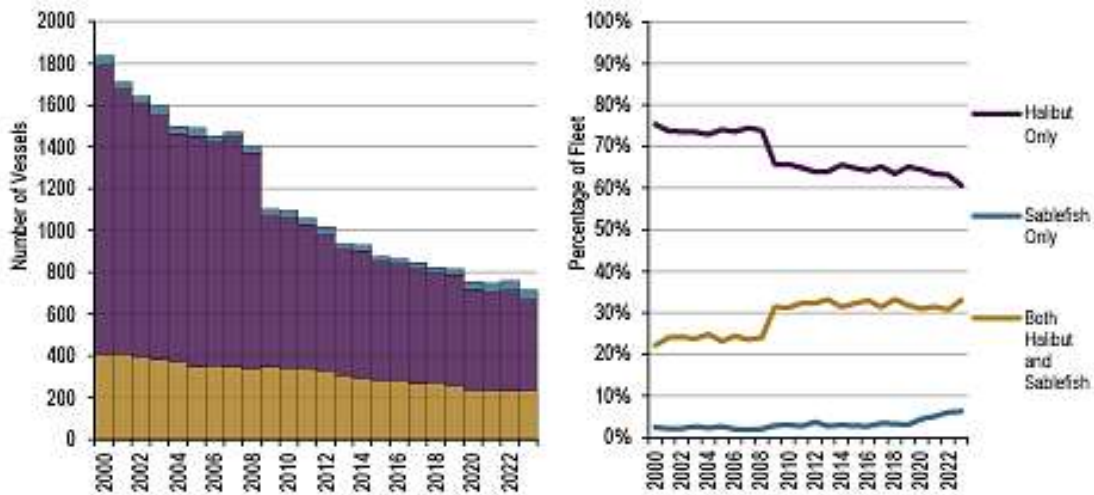


Table 40. Halibut IFQ Fishery Catcher Vessel Hired Master Harvest of IFQ by Regulatory Area

Year	2C	3A	3B	4A	4B	4C/4D	All
2014	1.20%	38.30%	49.10%	43.60%	52.10%	45.10%	32.60%
2015	1.30%	36.60%	45.80%	40.30%	43.80%	40.10%	30.20%
2016	1.20%	36.80%	45.50%	41.40%	42.30%	36.50%	29.40%
2017	1.10%	35.70%	44.00%	37.60%	45.80%	41.30%	29.20%
2018	1.10%	37%	45.20%	39.80%	45.50%	38.70%	30.50%
2019	0.90%	34.40%	45.20%	38.90%	49.50%	35.80%	29.10%
2020	0.90%	32.90%	41.70%	38.80%	48.10%	30.10%	27.60%
2021	0.30%	31.20%	39%	34.80%	44.50%	29.80%	26.20%
2022	0.70%	31.30%	37.70%	34.70%	42.20%	27.50%	26.40%

The program seems to be working as designed. The number of hired masters is down to 26% and down to 36% for sablefish operations.

Sablefish Harvest Limits 2025

The NPFMC will likely adopt the Plan Team’s sablefish harvest recommendations below for 2025. This will represent about a 6% increase in the Gulf areas overall. All GOA areas are up slightly for 2025. The only area that observed a drop was the Aleutian area.

Whale Adjusted Catch Tables by Region

Year Region	2024				2025		2026	
	OFL _w	ABC _w	TAC	Catch*	OFL _w	ABC _w **	OFL _w	ABC _w **
BS	--	11,450	7,996	3,940	--	13,898	--	13,723
AI	--	13,100	8,440	1,266	--	12,175	--	12,022
GOA	--	22,596	22,596	13,406	--	24,038	--	23,737
WGOA	--	4,699	4,699	2,101	--	4,996	--	4,934
CGOA	--	9,651	9,651	5,655	--	10,257	--	10,128
**WYAK	--	2,926	2,926	2,172	--	3,125	--	3,086
**EY/SEO	--	5,320	5,320	3,478	--	5,660	--	5,589
Total	55,084	47,146	39,032	18,612	58,532	50,111	57,797	49,482

*As of October 10, 2024 Alaska Fisheries Information Network. (www.akfin.org).

**After 95:5 trawl split shown above and after whale depredation methods described above.

Below are the last 5 years of sablefish estimated recruits, spawning biomass and total biomass.

Comparison of the 2023 SAFE Model (23.5) estimates and the 2024 SAFE Model (23.5) estimates

Year	Recruits (Millions)		SSB (kt)		Biomass (kt)	
	2023 SAFE	2024 SAFE	2023 SAFE	2024 SAFE	2023 SAFE	2024 SAFE
2020.0	40.6	42.7	94.0	95.0	540.0	554.0
2021.0	75.1	82.4	109.0	110.0	627.0	649.0
2022.0	42.7	25.1	131.0	133.0	677.0	682.0
2023.0	26.7	27.9	157.0	161.0	695.0	698.0
2024.0	NA	NA	NA	191.0	NA	705.0

Spawning biomass only includes female sablefish. The overall biomass is now over 700 thousand metric tons.

Figures

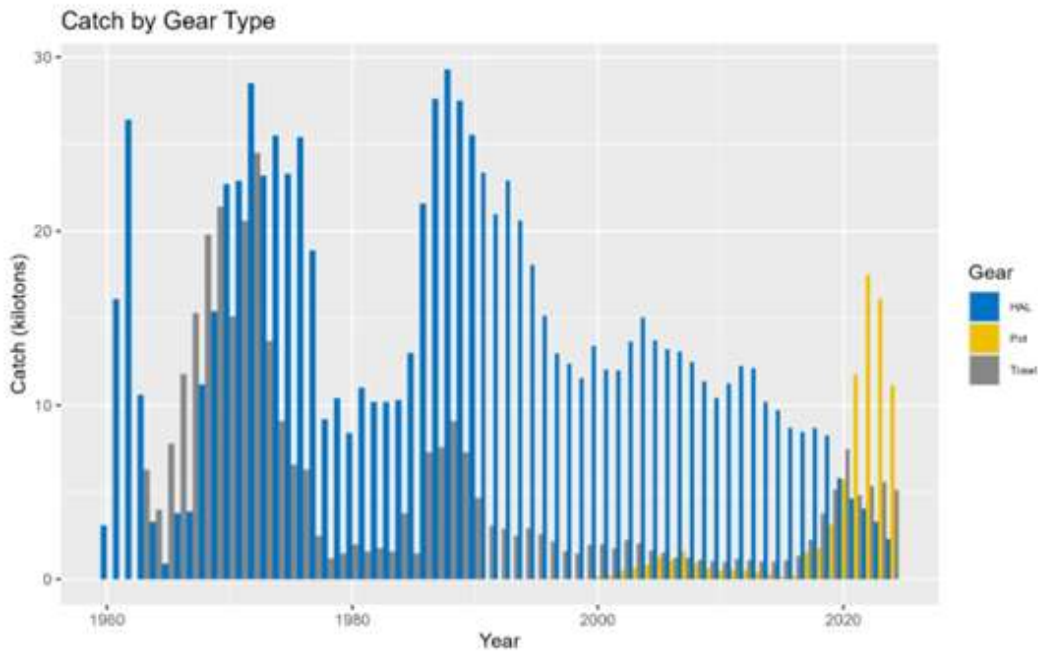


Figure 3.1. Sablefish catch (kt) by gear type. Note that hook and line (HAL) and pot gear catch are combined into a single 'fixed gear' fleet in the model.

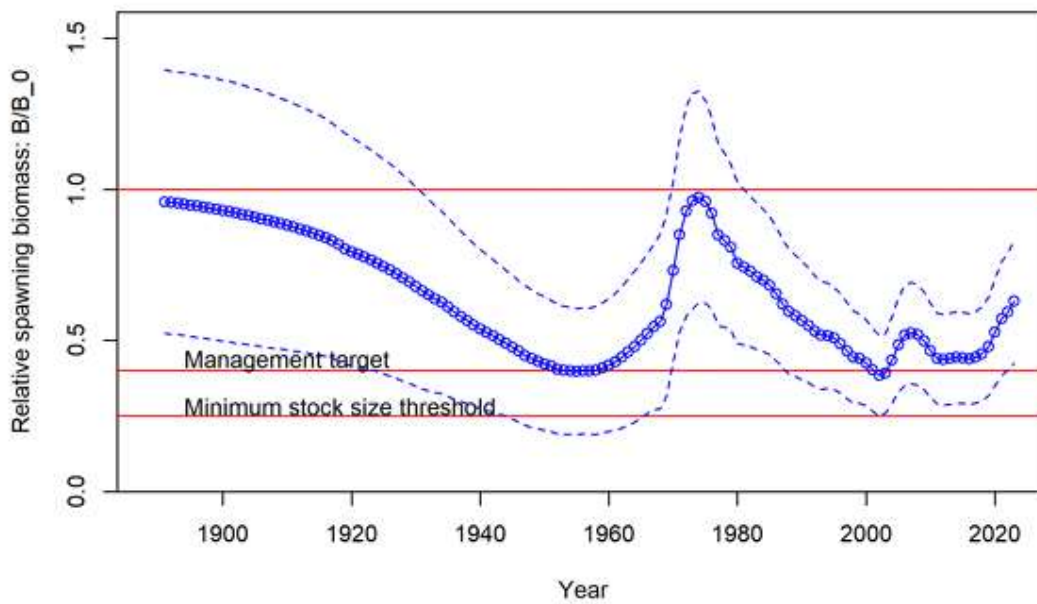


Figure 3.8c. Time series of total biomass relative to the unfished biomass for west coast USA sablefish (reproduced here with permission from Johnson et al. 2023).

Future Decisions

At the March 2025 meeting, the NPFMC will take final action on the release of small sablefish. If the vote is yes, this should be implemented for the 2026 season

PFMC

The sablefish resource has greatly expanded off Washington, Oregon, and California during the last nine years, similar to Alaska. The PFMC sets harvest limits every two years so this year the allowable catch limit (CL) will go up 238%.

	2023 ALL	2025	2026
Sablefish North of 36° N Latitude	8486 MT	28,688MT	27,238 MT
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Tier Limits for 2025	246,824 lbs.	112,193 lbs.	64,110 MT
Tier Limits for 2026	234,312 lbs.	106506 lbs.	60,860 MT

New Resolutions for Action

The Council has scheduled a meeting March 5-11, 2025 in Vancouver, Washington to take preliminary action on amendments to the tiered IFQ program. There are two big initial decisions. NMFS has determined they must impose a 3% IFQ tax on delivery prices, similar to your tax in Alaska. The Council will also take action to allow you to use any legal non-trawl gear to catch your sablefish. You will be able to use pots or hook & line. Final action on these two items will take place at the Council meeting June 12-18, 2025 in California. These changes should be implemented for the 2026 season.

Gear Marking

Beginning for the 2026 season, your gear will need to be marked as follows:

No less than 20 fathoms of buoy line will need a specific rope color from the bags down. The suggestion is red and white for pot gear, and green and white for hook & line gear. Here is an example of a marked gear done for Dungeness crab:



Your surface gear of buoys can be up to 10 fathoms (60 feet) in length. The buoys will need to have a cattle tag (see previous page) tied to each buoy with vessel identification, along with ID on the buoys. You can use a zip tie to put on the cattle tag.

The reason for this is due to a lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity. When humpback whales and other whales get entangled in fishing gear, less than half the gear is identifiable to a particular fishery. The pot sablefish fishery had 2 entanglements in the last 20 years and recently off Oregon, a humpback got entangled in halibut gear. The big focus is on the Dungeness pot fishery. **For those of you that may catch tiered sablefish with pots, and then catch your halibut north of Chehalis with hook & line, you will need to have two sets of cattle tags: one when pot fishing and one set for hook & line. Sorry.**

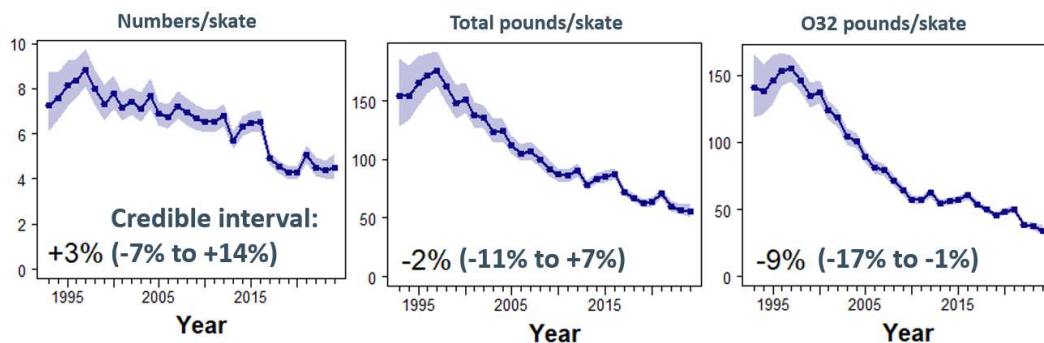
****IPHC****

The IPHC held their interim meeting November 25-26, 2024. The following data was presented. The line survey was greatly reduced due to costs, however the total number of halibut of all sizes appears to be up 3%, total halibut pounds down 2% and legal-size O32 fish down 9%.

Summary of results

- Fishing mortality increased slightly from 2023, despite a lower TCEY in 2024
- Continued shift from older to younger fish in both the fishery and FISS
- Assessment results indicate that spawning biomass is lower than estimated last year
- The stock remains at a low productivity level due to low weight-at-age and low recruitment through at least 2016

Coastwide FISS trends



Below are the legal WPUE for each regulatory area. Overall, the WPUE is down 9% coastwide for 032 fish.

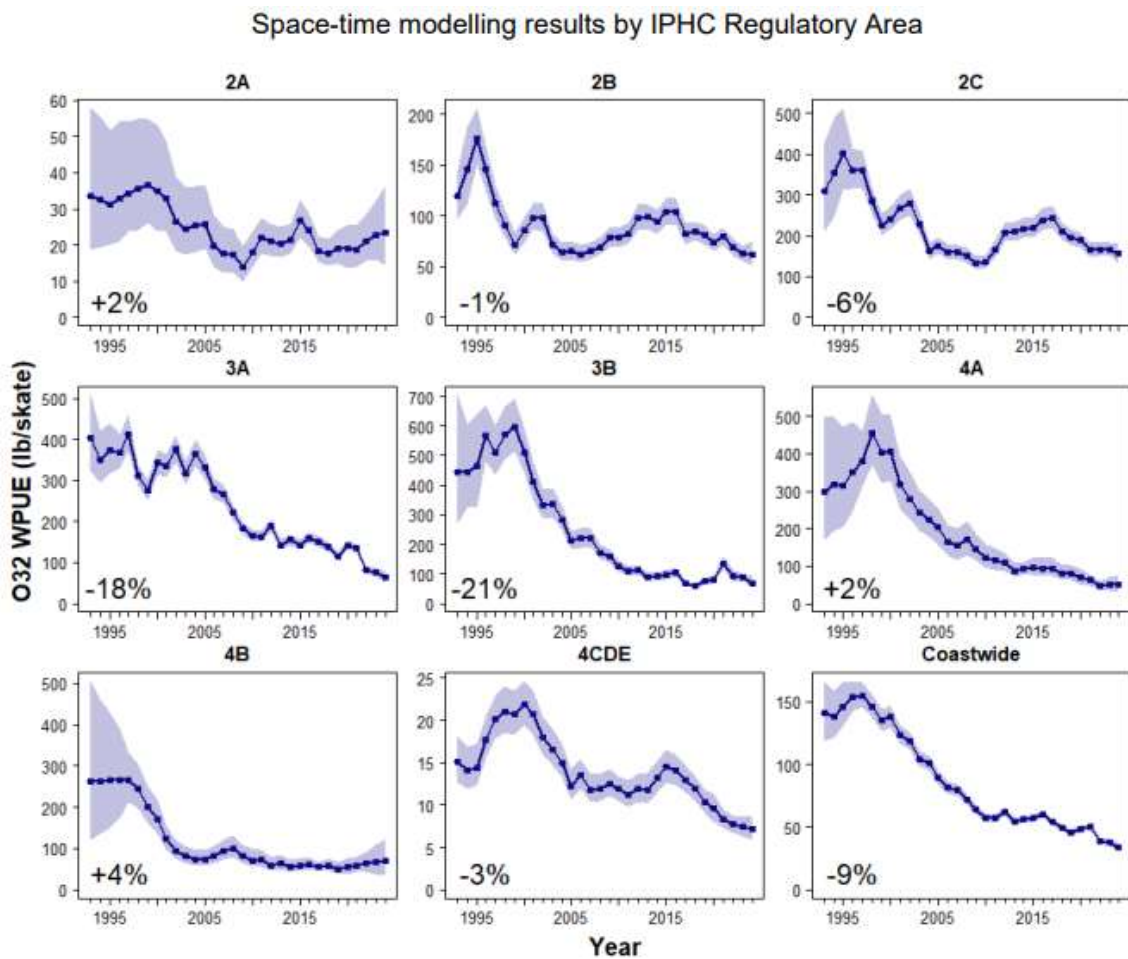


Figure A.1. Space-time model output for O32 WPUE for 1993-2024. Filled circles denote the posterior means of O32 WPUE for each year. Shaded regions show posterior 95% credible intervals, which provide a measure of uncertainty: the wider the shaded interval, the greater the uncertainty in the estimate. Numeric values in the lower left-hand corners are estimates of the change in mean O32 WPUE from 2023 to 2024.

The Association will have a meeting in early January to discuss further the halibut harvest levels for 2025. In all likelihood, there will be quota drops based on the survey and industry logbook information. The Commissioners have tentatively approved a larger survey for 2025.

Markets

EOWS

The funding from the 2023 NOAA Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant is coming to a close and Eat on the Wild has submitted a proposal for a second round of funding in 2025-26. We will find out whether we will get that funding in May 2025. We also secured guest spots on two different episodes of *The Hot Stove Society Podcast with Tom Douglas*. If you haven't yet, check out the website www.nwsablefish.com or follow [@nw_sablefish](https://www.instagram.com/nw_sablefish) on Instagram to keep up with everything going on.

Eat on the Wild Side is a tax-exempt effort by FVOA and DSFU.



Sablefish

Area

Landing Catch Quota lbs. Remaining Percent landed

Species

AI	sablefish	21	463,728	11,164,094	10,700,366	4
BS	sablefish	84	2,314,885	7,050,311	4,735,426	33
CG	sablefish	572	12,734,043	17,021,717	4,287,674	75
SE	sablefish	706	9,487,950	11,728,472	2,240,522	81
WG	sablefish	154	5,532,799	8,287,091	2,754,292	67
WY	sablefish	269	4,512,990	5,542,364	1,029,374	81
Total		1,806	35,046,395	60,794,049	25,747,654	58

Sablefish markets are slowly absorbing the increased catches and the market has been expanding. There are some positive market movements. The following represents the coastwide production of sablefish through mid-November 2024:

WA-OR-CA fixed gear..... 5,000,000 lbs.
 WA-OR-CA trawl..... 4,689,412 lbs.
 AK IFQ.....35,046,395 lbs.
 AK trawl (mostly BSAI).....10,268,000 lbs.
 Chatham Strait.....1,400,000 lbs.
 Canada, BC.....3,120,000 lbs.

Most areas are landing 60% of what's available. However, it looks like Alaska sablefish IFQ will land close 82% of the GOA allocations.

Some late prices for sablefish paid in Bellingham were as follows: 1-2 lbs = \$1.00; 2-3 lbs = \$2.00; 3-4 lbs. = \$2.50; 4-5 lbs. \$4.00; 7+ = \$7.20

One of the elements on sablefish prices that is out of our control is the exchange rate of the dollar for the yen. Over the next year, Japan is likely to increase their federal reserve rate, which will strengthen the yen. If the U.S. Federal Reserve lowers its rate, that will also strengthen the yen against the dollar. Hopefully this will result in a better export price. Meanwhile, there is more activity in sablefish consumption domestically.

Halibut

Area	Species	Vessel Landings	Total Catch Pounds	Allocation Pounds	TAC	
					Remaining Pounds	Percent Landed
2C	halibut	1,124	3,046,739	3,500,000	453,261	87
3A	halibut	1,521	6,694,058	7,560,000	865,942	89
3B	halibut	307	2,549,483	2,980,000	430,517	86
4A	halibut	107	704,566	1,280,000	575,434	55
4B	halibut	18	273,449	872,000	598,551	31
4C/4D	halibut	46	446,030	1,104,000	657,970	40
Total		3,123	13,714,325	17,296,000	3,581,675	79

Halibut prices in Juneau to an FVOA vessel were \$7.35 / \$7.50/ \$8.00. Bellingham prices were about a dollar higher. There is a very strong October-November market.

Something of concern for halibut is that the Canadian Maritime communities will produce 12 to 15 million pounds next year. This begins to rival Alaska landings which are now about 17 million lbs. Harvest limits in Alaska will all likely be reduced in 2025.

*****Washington, D.C.*****

Other than the political gymnastics currently playing out, we are tracking two issues:

1. Two years ago, Senator Sullivan and Senator Cantwell got a 2-year exemption from the Federal Communications Commission so you can use AIS to mark your gear. These two allies have put in for a 4-year exemption good through 2029, which is attached to a U.S. Coast Guard bill, which will be attached to a military funding bill in late December.
2. Senator Cantwell and Senator Sullivan put in for an additional \$1.5 million for IPHC survey work. If the D's and the R's can agree on a general funding bill, we should get this but if Congress does a continuing resolution CR, we will likely lose the funding for 2025.
- 3.

*****Second Watch*****

From Seafood.Com

Canada is ready to end open net salmon farms. Open net pen salmon aquaculture will need to transition to a close system of raising fish, largely due to pollution problems around existing pens.

Prince William Sound Halibut Restriction

The state of Alaska may restrict commercial halibut fishers in Prince William Sound due to rockfish by catch. They will do this by not allowing hook and line gear in the Prince William Sound area.

Passings

John Bruce, longtime halibut, fisherman and once president of the Deep-Sea Fisherman's Union, passed away on October 12, 2024. He was an ally on many issues before the Pacific and North Pacific Councils, testifying during the sablefish allocation wars before both Councils.

Ray Olson, past president of FVOA and vessel owner of the FV Leviathan and the FV St. John II, passed away, making it to 97 years old. My favorite memory of Ray was about 1978. He made a big sablefish delivery from off the Washington coast. I believe all his sons and daughter were aboard. He joyfully came into my office and asked "hey, we still have that sablefish reciprocal fishing with Canada, don't we?" I told Ray, "We have never had such an agreement." I then asked, "Where did you catch that big trip?" He stuttered and said "Well, just to the south of Canada."