

California Halibut: A High-Priority Fishery for Management Attention

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview

To facilitate transparent and accessible management of the California halibut (*Paralichthys californicus*) fishery, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) frequently engages with the stakeholder community to share and receive information. Recently, in the summer and fall of 2021, CDFW convened a three-part public webinar series to learn of the priorities and concerns of stakeholders regarding the management of the state’s recreational and commercial fisheries. This “Frequently Asked Questions” document is one of several outputs from this engagement effort and seeks to clearly address the commonly asked questions by the stakeholder community about the resource and fishery. Please visit the CDFW California Halibut Scaled Management Process website: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Marine/CA-Halibut-Scaled-Management> for more information, including webinar agendas, recordings, and powerpoint presentations. A summary of the webinar series is forthcoming and will be available on the website.

Contact Us

CDFW is committed to working in partnership with stakeholders to make an informed decision on the best way to manage the fishery. We are interested in learning about your priorities and concerns so we can work together to manage the California halibut fishery for resource sustainability, ecosystem health, and community benefits. Visit the CDFW [California Halibut Scaled Management Process](#) website to learn how to stay informed and involved. [Join our email list](#) or email MLMAFisheriesMgmt@wildlife.ca.gov to receive updates regarding California halibut and share your questions and perspectives.

Frequently Asked Questions

[Why is CDFW stating California halibut is a high-priority fishery for management attention beginning in 2020? What does this mean to me as a member of the California Halibut stakeholder community?](#)

In 2019, CDFW assessed the state’s fisheries under the 2018 Master Plan for Fisheries (Master Plan) framework. A prioritization process identified California halibut as a species in need of management attention due to the potential risks from the fishery to the species, bycatch species, including sub legal-sized halibut, and habitat. CDFW is committed to working in partnership with stakeholders to make an informed decision on the best way to manage the fishery. We are interested in learning about your

priorities and concerns so we can work together to manage the fishery for resource sustainability, ecosystem health, and community benefits. At this time, CDFW is not proposing new management regulations or a Fishery Management Plan (FMP).

Why is CDFW referring to a “scaled management” process while engaging with the stakeholder community? What does “scaled management” mean and how does it differ from CDFW’s current management approach?

The complexity of a fishery, available information and resources, CDFW capacity and stakeholder interests — together with the identified priority level — all contribute to determining the scale (or degree) of management needed to benefit the species, fishery, and ecosystem. While the term was introduced in the 2018 Master Plan, CDFW has always implemented this approach. The Master Plan has helped CDFW more clearly describe to the stakeholder community the various tools, resources, and considerations that are utilized to assess how best to manage a fishery.

Is the California halibut fishery sustainable?

While this is a difficult question, CDFW currently considers the northern and southern stocks to be sustainable. The definition of sustainability includes taking into account fluctuations in abundance and environmental conditions. Halibut has the ability to attain high population size if environmental conditions are favorable. Based on Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) and preliminary results from a stock assessment, southern California landings declined in the early 2000s and again from 2009 through 2014, and northern California landings increased before declining sharply in the mid 2000s. Since then, landings in both areas have increased, with northern California experiencing a greater increase compared to southern California. However, there is still a need to define maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for the fishery and CDFW is actively working on this important step.

What are the key takeaways from the 2020 California halibut stock assessment? When will it be available?

California halibut is treated as two separate stocks in the stock assessment — a northern and southern stock separated at Point Conception. A peer review process determined that both models require improvements before they can be used to inform management. CDFW is actively working on recommendations for additional data collection, analysis, and model improvements, including reconstructing historical halibut landings to reflect an unfished (or nearly unfished) condition and initial population estimates. Despite the need for improvements, the stock assessment helped CDFW to better understand the history of the fishery and current status. The stock assessment is a work in progress and CDFW continues to work to improve the performance of the models and address the recommendations of the peer review panel.

What is the definition of bycatch and how does it apply to the various California halibut fishery sectors?

From Fish and Game Code §90.5 “‘Bycatch’ means fish or other marine life that are taken in a fishery but which are not the target of the fishery. ‘Bycatch’ includes discards.” Fish and Game Code §91 states

“ ‘Discards’ means fish that are taken in a fishery but are not retained because they are of an undesirable species, size, sex, or quality, or because they are required by law not to be retained.” Consequently, under the Marine Life Management Act (MLMA), species caught in a fishery can be considered either the “target” species or “bycatch,” and bycatch can be “discards” or “incidental,” which describes catch species that are not the target of the fishery but are desired and are kept or marketed.

Since differentiating target species from bycatch, and in particular incidental catch, is not always obvious, the Master Plan provides guidance on how to categorize catch. This includes the development of criteria, with the assistance of stakeholders, that can be used to categorize the fishery's catch. Such criteria can include the intended target(s) of the fishery as evidenced by landings data, marketability of landed commercial species or the desirability of recreational species, and the historical use patterns of the fishery.

Are discards a concern for the California halibut fishery?

Yes, discards are a type of bycatch and a consideration for all fisheries. For California halibut, discards in the commercial gill net and trawl fisheries are of particular concern, and one of the reasons the fishery was identified as a “high priority” for management attention during the prioritization process. Release mortality can be high for these gear types for some species. Discards within the California halibut fishery include sensitive marine fish species listed under the Endangered Species Act, marine mammals, and birds. The capture of sub legal-sized halibut is also a concern across all gear types. It is a high priority for CDFW to minimize bycatch to acceptable types and amounts as directed by the MLMA.

Is incidental catch a concern for the California halibut fishery?

Incidental catch is a consideration for all fisheries, including California halibut. As mentioned above, incidental catch can be difficult to separate from targeted catch. In addition, targets can change over time and vary among participants, further blurring the distinction. Whether a species is targeted or incidental catch, it needs to be managed to either target or bycatch standards according to the needs of the fishery as determined by the CDFW. Again, CDFW considers this another opportunity to engage stakeholders in the categorization of species within their fisheries.

How has the California halibut fishery changed over time? What does the fishery look like across sectors and statewide today, in 2021?

Halibut fishing has occurred in California for over 120 years. From 1922 to the present, the commercial landings have ranged from about 250,000 to 1.5 million pounds; the total for 2019 was approximately 720,000 pounds. The halibut fishery was located mostly in southern California (Santa Barbara and Los Angeles) from early years up through the 1970s. The fishery experienced a northward shift with increased northern landings throughout the 1980s and has been centered in northern California (San Francisco and Monterey) since the 1990s. Due to environmental factors, regulatory changes including area and seasonal closures, and declining numbers of gill net and trawl vessels, commercial fishery landings dropped sharply during the 2000s to the mid 2010s and began increasing again to the present day. The number of commercial hook and line vessels peaked in the 1990s and again in 2019, with landings greater than gill net vessels and comparable to trawl vessels in 2018-2019.

Recreational take of halibut occurs among many shore-based and boat modes. Since 2005, private/rental boats account for most landings in both southern and northern California. Historically, CPFV landings of halibut were highest in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly from southern California, and much lower from the 1970s to the present. CPFV landings in northern California have increased dramatically over the past several years. Since 2005 to the present, overall recreational landings of halibut have been about one-half of commercial landings but have been equal to or slightly greater in a few years.

CDFW is in the final stages of preparing an Enhanced Status Report (ESR) that will include the history of the fishery, as well as the biology and ecology of the species. Once this ESR is finalized, it will be added to the [Marine Species Portal](#). This Portal currently contains ESRs for 35 species as well as Species-at-a-Glance pages for 76 non-ESR species (primarily federally-managed species or species not targeted by a fishery).

When will the trawl grounds off Monterey Bay and Port San Luis, designated by Senate Bill 1309, open to California halibut fishing?

The trawl grounds will remain closed until the California Fish and Game Commission has sufficient information to make a determination that trawling does not impact bycatch, seafloor habitat, ecosystem health, and the restoration of biogenic habitat. CDFW is working in partnership with the Fish and Game Commission to review available information and identify additional data that are needed to address this question. Updates and discussions are ongoing at [Fish and Game Commission meetings](#).

Why did CDFW postpone the final webinar in the three-part series, “Exploring Scaled Management for the California Halibut Fishery”?

In late summer, 2021, CDFW invited stakeholders of the California halibut fishery to a webinar series to learn about and discuss California halibut. CDFW had envisioned a third webinar, following the first virtual meetings with the recreational and commercial sectors, that would provide an update on CDFW’s management priorities and next steps after reflecting on stakeholder knowledge. Upon reflection of stakeholder input, CDFW became aware of the need for additional internal visioning and planning sessions to talk through ideas related to the evaluation of bycatch, current and future trawl grounds, Management Strategy Evaluation, and specific action items to prioritize in the next iteration of the stock assessment. CDFW’s goal is to convene subsequent webinar(s) with the stakeholder community when CDFW has results from these evaluations and management measures to propose for discussion. Please [join our email list](#) or email MLMAFisheriesMgmt@wildlife.ca.gov to receive updates about future engagement opportunities.

Useful References

- [Informational Flyer: California Halibut Scaled Management Process](#)
- [Scaled Management Guided by the Marine Life Management Act](#)
- [California Halibut 2020 Stock Assessment Executive Summary](#)
- [California Halibut 2020 Stock Assessment Review Panel Report](#)
- [2018 Master Plan for Fisheries: A Guide for Implementation of the Marine Life Management Act](#)
- [California Halibut, *Paralichthys californicus*, Enhanced Status Report](#)

- [The Marine Life Management Act](#)
- Weber, M. L., Heneman, B., and McGonigal, H. 2017. [Guide to California's Marine Life Management Act: Second Edition](#). 155 pp.