

Halibut bag limit cut down to 1 fish

CHARTERS: Operators fear for their business after word from the U.S.-Canadian panel.

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Alaska's halibut charter-boat operators were reeling from an international panel's vote Friday to cut their clients' bag limits from two to one fish per day in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska for part of the summer.

The International Pacific Halibut Commission's decision is an effort to check the growth of the charter fleet, which has exceeded its halibut harvest limits for the past few years.

The six-member commission, a joint U.S.-Canada panel established in 1923, voted in Victoria, British Columbia, to reduce the charter bag limit in Southcentral to one fish from June 15 to June 30 and in Southeast from June 15 through July.

The decision will not take effect unless the U.S. secretary of state approves.

The action is good for commercial fishermen because the charter fleet is taking a bigger and bigger bite of the available fish with no controls on its growth, said Linda Behnken, a Sitka commercial halibut fisherman.

Many charter captains, in contrast, were upset Friday. They said their clients might no longer want to pay \$200-plus for a day's fishing if they can keep only one of the big flatfish.

In Sitka, charter-boat operator Karen Keating was taken off guard by news of the one-fish bag limit. She said her summer clients who spend thousands to visit Alaska will be mad. She's worried about her company's reputation among its clients.

"People we've already booked, we've told them their limits. This makes us look like liars," said Keating, co-owner of Sitka's Big Blue Charters.

"This is going to kill a lot of the marginal (operators) and those of us who are part-timers," said Ken Larson, a Valdez charter-boat operator.

Alaska anglers who rely on charter trips are also ticked. Cleon Jackson, a 71-year-old military retiree who lives near Settlers Bay, said the commission unfairly penalized him and other Alaskans who fill their freezers with halibut for the winter.

"We have to go on a charter boat because we can't afford our own daggone boat to go way the heck out there to get a fish," Jackson sputtered Friday.

If the secretary of state approves the one-fish bag limit, the National Marine Fisheries Service will publish it as a final regulation.

At that point, people could sue to block it, said Doug Vincent-Lang, a special assistant for fisheries at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

State and federal regulators have struggled without success for more than a decade to divvy the halibut harvest and settle the mounting feud between commercial fishermen and some charter operators. That's how the matter landed in the halibut commission's court.

"It certainly isn't (our) first choice to get into the middle of this," said Bruce Leaman, the commission's executive director.

But the commission can't fully safeguard the halibut population if Alaska's charter fleet is exceeding its harvest level, he explained.

Commercial fishermen urged the commission to approve the bag-limit cut, saying the growing charter catch is cutting into their harvest.

Some charter operators are vowing to fight or sue to stop the cut.

"People are hot," said Donna Bondioli, a member of the Alaska Charter Association, based in Homer.

One likely point of dispute is whether a reduced bag limit in Southcentral that lasts for only two weeks will even curtail the charter halibut harvest as intended.

"It's unclear how great the savings will be," Vincent-Lang said.

Charter-boat catches in recent years have risen sharply in Southcentral and especially Southeast, where boats cater largely to tourists from cruise ships. Charter boats landed an estimated 333,036 halibut combined for the two regions last year, almost double their catch in 1999.

But charter captains note that the commercial catch still dwarfs that of the charter fleet.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, a federal panel that helps regulate commercial fishing off Alaska, is working on ideas to settle the charter-halibut issue permanently.

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