

## Charter halibut catch-limit change rejected

**DISPUTE: Anglers can keep 2 per day; solution to growing sport fleet remains to be found.**

By WESLEY LOY  
Anchorage Daily News

*(Published: February 28, 2007)*

Charter boat anglers needn't worry this summer about being limited to keeping only one halibut per day instead of two, as international regulators proposed in January.

"We rejected that," said William Hogarth, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service, in an interview Tuesday in Anchorage.

The Seattle-based International Pacific Halibut Commission imposed a one-fish bag limit for charter boat anglers in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska. The measure, which would have applied during certain weeks this summer, was meant to slow the charter halibut catch, which has surged in recent years.

Commercial fishermen applauded the commission's action, but charter boat captains and their customers decried it, saying many people wouldn't pay \$200 or more for a day's fishing if they could keep only one fish.

While the halibut commission is responsible for protecting the halibut stocks off the U.S. and Canadian coasts, its vote to cut the charter bag limit was subject to approval by the U.S. Commerce and State departments.

Both decided to reject the measure, said Hogarth, whose agency is part of the Commerce Department.

Federal officials feel a better way to settle the growing fish fight between commercial fishermen and charter boat operators is to hammer out solutions through the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

The Anchorage-based council, with government, industry and other representatives from Alaska, Washington and Oregon, helps regulate fisheries off Alaska.

Council members already have wrestled for more than a decade over how to control the growing charter boat catches, which eat into the fish available for commercial harvest.

The commercial fishermen say it's not fair that they have to abide by catch limits when the charter boats don't. Charter boat captains counter that commercial fishermen are hogging the fish, taking more than 80 percent of the combined commercial and charter catch in Southeast and Southcentral each year.

Hogarth said he doesn't believe the catch by one sector -- the charter fleet -- should be allowed to grow unabated.

"I love halibut. The only way I get halibut is for the commercial guys to catch it and put it on the



William Hogarth is head of National Marine Fisheries Service. *(Photo by ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News)*

market. So when I'm in D.C. I go to Oceanaire (a restaurant) and I get some great, fresh Alaska halibut," he said. "I think there's a balancing act. ... I don't think you can say that one group gets to take all they want and the others don't."

He said in coming days, the National Marine Fisheries Service will come out with other alternatives to control the charter catch. One idea would be to allow charter anglers to keep two halibut only if the second one is a large or "trophy" fish. That's likely to limit the overall catch, as many anglers won't hook a big fish in a day's fishing.

The halibut stocks off Alaska are large and healthy, government biologists say. The problem is the competition for what fish are available.

Bob Ward, who captains a Homer charter boat, said Tuesday he was glad U.S. officials rejected the bag limit cut. But he said charter captains can't expect unlimited growth forever, and he said many are working hard on finding a permanent solution.

Among measures the North Pacific Council is considering is so-called limited entry for halibut charter boats. That would prevent more boats from entering the business.

Charter fleets in other parts of the country, such as the Gulf of Mexico, already have gone to limited entry, Hogarth said.

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