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Over 1,500 Fishermen & Stakeholders Call for Reductions in Halibut Bycatch

Fishery Managers Scheduled to take Final Action Next Week in Kodiak

More than 1,500 commercial fishermen, sport fishermen, subsistence harvesters, Alaskan residents, families and other halibut stakeholders are calling for action to reduce waste of halibut as bycatch. The diverse signatories include many who hail from coastal communities such as Anchor Point, Sitka, Kodiak, Seward, Gustavus, Ketchikan and Juneau signed [onto a letter](#) submitted to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (the Council) this week asking the Council to take final action to reduce halibut bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska groundfish fishery.

The fishermen and others who depend on Alaska's halibut for their livelihoods, economy and culture are asking fishery managers to reduce the **current bycatch limit of just over 5 million pounds of halibut per year** by at least 15%. While viewed as a low reduction compared to cuts taken in the directed halibut commercial and sport fisheries, 15% is the maximum reduction being considered by the Council at this time.

"Halibut is absolutely critical to Alaskans. Our fisheries, businesses, economies and communities here in Kodiak and beyond rely on this vital resource. It is hard to believe more than 5 million pounds of these precious fish are thrown away as bycatch each year in the Gulf of Alaska and it's long past time to lower these limits," said Theresa Peterson, a commercial fisherman in Kodiak and Kodiak Outreach Coordinator for the Alaska Marine Conservation Council.

Alaska's halibut resource is in jeopardy, with total population numbers and the number of harvestable fish in the Gulf of Alaska declining in recent years. Commercial and sport harvests have been reduced extensively in response- over 50% in some cases. Yet, at the same time the halibut bycatch limits in groundfish trawl fisheries have not been significantly reduced since 1989.

"Halibut stocks have declined precipitously over the past decade and the causes of the decline are not fully understood. At this point we need all sectors to share the burden of conservation and work together to rebuild stocks. The small halibut taken as bycatch are the future for Alaska's subsistence, sport, charter and commercial fisheries. A 15% bycatch reduction seems minimal when Southeast longline quotas have been reduced 75% and charter allocations have been reduced 34%," said Linda Behnken, commercial fisherman and Executive Director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association.

"As an active harvester and 2C quota share holder I've seen a 76% reduction in my available quota share over the years. I fully recognize the need to protect the halibut resource and have accepted those cuts even though I am now unable to cover my loan payment. It is extremely important that all sectors are held accountable for the health of the halibut resource to ensure there is a future for the next generation of harvesters," said Julianne Curry, commercial fisherman and Executive Director of the Petersburg Vessel Owners Association.

Halibut bycatch impacts a tremendous number of people: there are 2,351 commercial halibut quota share holders in the Gulf of Alaska, 601 halibut charter permit holders, and countless sport and subsistence halibut harvesters throughout the state. Every halibut taken as bycatch has a direct impact on the amount of halibut available to fisheries now, and to the resource's reproductive potential in the future. The Council meets in Kodiak next week and is scheduled to take final action to reduce halibut bycatch on June 6-8.

"It's time for the Council to reduce the halibut bycatch by 15% to help protect our halibut. Thousands of Alaskans and others who depend on and care about the halibut resource have made their voice heard. They will be watching what happens in Kodiak as their fishing future will be affected by this crucial vote," said Tim Evers.

To view the sign-on letter online and for more information on halibut bycatch visit: www.akmarine.org

Visit the North Pacific Fishery Management Council website for more information about the upcoming meeting and the action on halibut bycatch, and for a link to watch the meeting live in Kodiak: <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/>