

Fed's halibut allocation policy makes no sense

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If there's one issue that affects the west coast recreational fishery more than any other in 2009, without doubt that issue is the one of halibut allocation. Although the allocation policy determining the catch shares between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors has been in effect since the fall of 2003, because of a convergence of factors this year the negative consequences of this policy for the recreational fishery and its infrastructure have become acute.

A full accounting of this topic would take several pages of this newspaper but, to be brief, the allocation policy fixed the commercial and recreational catch shares on an 88/12 per cent split of the combined total allowable catch (TAC). Although the principle of a catch ceiling for the recreational fishery for reasons other than conservation was and continues to be opposed in principle, in practice it didn't really change anything until the 12 per cent ceiling was exceeded, as it has been in the past couple of years.

This has happened not because of a perpetually increasing recreational halibut catch but because, under the treaty arrangements it shares with the USA, in recent years the TAC allocated to Canada has declined by about a third in response to a cyclical downturn in the overall abundance of halibut. Consequently, the 12 per cent recreational share has shrunk proportionately.

After decades of stability in season length and daily bag and possession limits of two and three halibut respectively, last year this led to a delayed opening of the recreational season, an emergency closure two months early and a patchwork quilt of three different bag and possession limit changes. Because the 2009 recreational allocation is 918,360 lbs. and the sector needs 1.5 million pounds or more to have a normal fishery, this year the season opened a month later than usual with a daily limit of one fish and a possession limit of two.

The consequences of this reduced opportunity are easy to figure out. Canadians with their own boats, most of who live some distance from the outer coast where halibut are usually found, are less inclined to make plans to go fishing for them. And, because of current economic climate, in the face of the toughest marketing conditions ever lodge and resort sector operators are now faced with a new challenge in attracting clients.

As if to emphasize the fact that this halibut allocation issue isn't driven by a conservation problem the commercial sector, which was awarded 88 per cent of the harvest, left half a million pounds of fish in the water at the end of last year because of soft market conditions. In fact at the start of the commercial season this year, coast wide there remained between five and 10 million pounds of halibut unsold in frozen storage.

When the halibut allocation policy was announced in late 2003, the government stated that

should the recreational fishery need additional halibut to maintain customary bag and possession limits and/or to avoid an in-season closure then it was to lease or purchase halibut quota from the commercial sector via an as yet to be determined "market-based mechanism". Having to set to one side principled objections as to why Canadians should have to pay for a common property resource that in theory they already jointly own and faced with a political directive, the recreational fishery through the Sport Fishing Advisory Board has attempted to do just that. The experience has been a complete failure.

In early 2008, at the direction of the then Deputy-Minister Larry Murray, representatives of the SFAB met in an independently facilitated process with representatives of the Pacific Halibut Management Association (PHMA), which represents most commercial quota holders, the provincial government, regional DFO staff and some First Nations representatives. Agreement was reached on a compensated transfer scheme, which would have seen the federal government put up the funds to purchase enough quota from the commercial sector and reallocate it to the recreational sector to provide stability for the foreseeable future, the cost of which would be recovered through a halibut stamp on the saltwater fishing license. After nearly a year of consideration, the federal government rejected the proposal out of hand.

Meanwhile, though some funds were available to the recreational sector last year to lease quota, it was unable to acquire enough to keep the 2008 season going even as the commercial sector left fish in the water. Clearly, this is a policy that doesn't work but the federal government, originally Liberal but now Conservative, stubbornly persists with it.

Bizarrely, even though government has effectively privatized 88 per cent of the halibut resource it continues to state this isn't so. In a recent letter to the Campbell River Guides Association, current federal fisheries minister Gail Shea wrote "Pacific halibut are, and will continue to be, a common property resource. The department's allocation of the TAC for Pacific halibut between the commercial and recreational sectors does not change this." That statement is a complete and stand alone paragraph, with nothing added or taken away. How it can be reconciled with the fact that the 99.9 per cent of the Canadian public who aren't commercial halibut quota holders only have access to 12 per cent of the resource is a real mystery.

Perhaps this policy might make sense if the commercial harvest of halibut on a per pound basis generated more money for the Canadian economy than the recreational fishery, but in fact the reverse is true. Trying to sort out the halibut specific share of the overall tidal waters recreational fishery economy is a challenge, but credible estimates accepted by government range between \$15 and \$20 per pound of halibut caught. The PHMA naturally disagrees, but even it acknowledges that the value of halibut in the commercial sector is only half that taken in the recreational fishery.

At a time when recreational fishery tourism is an increasingly important economic component to the well-being of many small coastal communities, the ability of many businesses involved in this sector to survive in these challenging times is being badly compromised by this policy that works against the best interests of Canada as a whole.

Despite the case being made for the minister to exercise her absolute and unfettered discretion to re-allocate some halibut between sectors, which we are repeatedly assured exists, Ottawa remains unmoved and will thus ensure that Canada generates far less

money on its national halibut TAC than it could otherwise do so.

This puzzling and damaging situation persists in large part because the minister continues to receive advice from her party representatives on the west coast, including the MP for the Vancouver Island North riding, to continue on with the halibut allocation policy. In letters to several newspapers published in this riding I have twice requested that John Duncan explain his support of a policy that works against the better interests of the majority of his constituents.

Weeks have gone by with no answer and so I have to conclude that he really doesn't understand the issue or he simply doesn't care to.

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