NOAA Seeks Input on Halibut Bycatch Amendment

Friday, 20 September 2013

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The reductions in halibut bycatch passed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council last year have been codified and NOAA is looking for some input. “Amendment 95,” as it’s called, would implement bycatch reductions in both hook-and-line and trawl fisheries, according to Obren Davis, a fisheries management specialist with the National Marine Fisheries Service in Juneau:

“In June of last year, they took action to reduce some of the halibut prohibited species catch limits in the Gulf of Alaska. And the two major groundfish fishery components of that are the trawl sector and the and the hook-and-line sector. And we just got a proposed rule that outlines the phased in reductions that we’re proposing to undertake for these sectors beginning next year. When all is said is done, we’re looking at a 15-percent reduction in the PSC limit for the trawl sector and varying reduction for the hook-and-line sector.”

Those varying reductions are seven-percent for catcher-processors to go into effect in 2014, and 15 percent for catcher vessels to be phased in by 2016.

For hook-and-line fisheries, the current annual halibut bycatch limit is 290 metric tons, which would be stepped down to about 256 metric tons. In the trawl sector the current bycatch limit of 1,973 metric tons would be reduced to just over 1,700 metric tons.

He said the different phase-in rates for the hook-and-line sector reflect how the catcher-processors have already implemented bycatch reduction measures.

“The council looked at the various sectors and how they have been responding I think, to concerns over bycatch in the Gulf, and they noted that the catcher-processor hook-and-line sector had already undertaken some efforts on their own through formation of a fisheries cooperative, the nature of their fisheries and some other, various other factors and I t5hink they ultimately decided that they’d do a seven percent reduction for that fleet and just do it in the first year and basically it’d just be status quo after that.”

Davis said that if all goes well, NOAA Fisheries hopes to implement the rule in the beginning of 2014 or shortly thereafter.

“We hope to be incorporating that into what we call our annual harvest specifications process, which is when we set up all the annual groundfish catch limits for the various fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska. So it’ll probably be developed in parallel with that, but the plan is to get it implement early in 2014.”

NOAA is accepting comments on Amendment 95 through October 17th.