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Tense times in Homer
by
Les Palmer

A panel dominated by commercial-fishing interests, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, is on a decade-long mission to cap the halibut charter-boat harvest and include charter operators in an Individual Fishing Quota program.

The IFQ program, now under review by the feds and on the verge of becoming final, has polarized Homer. Local captains see one another at church, in the grocery store, at the post office. They are friends. Or were.

This spring, the Homer City Council and Homer Chamber of Commerce backed resolutions opposing charter IFQs. Most members of the Homer Charter Association are "pro IFQ," while members of the year-old Alaska Charter Association oppose IFQs. Some skippers belong to both groups. Most are at odds with the commercial fishermen, the longliners.

The bickering began in the early 1990s, when Sitka-based longliners became edgy about an increase in the halibut catch by anglers on charter boats. Through the North Pacific Council, they were able to set guideline harvest limits (GHLs) for charter boats in Southeast and Southcentral.

There are fears on all sides. The longliners fear any move toward equity with sport fishing, even though the disparity in their catches is as vast as the Gulf of Alaska. According to the International Pacific Halibut Commission report for 2003, the commercial and sport catches for Alaska were an estimated 73.1 and 9.1 million pounds, respectively.

Fears of where GHLs might lead, at worst, cutting the daily bag limit from two fish to one, led charter-boat owners to accept the limiting of their harvest by means of IFQs.

Commercial halibut fishing went from "derby" style fishing to IFQs in 1995. The change was made for biological and safety reasons, neither of which applies to charter-boat IFQs.

As a measure of how controversial the charter IFQ issue is, in October of 2001, the North Pacific Council took up a motion to rescind charter IFQs. Approved by the council only six months earlier, the program barely survived. The motion to rescind failed by a vote of 5-6.

Many charter-boat owners say they are against IFQs "on principle."
Among their complaints:

The regulatory process is unfair because it's controlled by commercial-fishing interests. Charter boats would never have had GHLs imposed upon them, if sport fishing had been fairly represented.

IFQs will drive up the price of charter-boat fishing to where the average guy won't be able to afford it.

Some skippers falsified logbook entries during the 1998 and 1999 IFQ monitoring period. If these are allowed, cheaters will get a greater share than honest people.

Commercial interests can't be blamed for getting nervous about the increasing harvest by anglers aboard charter boats. They feel themselves losing control of something they've always controlled.

Charter-boat skippers who would receive quotas worth hundreds of thousand dollars can't be blamed for wanting IFQs.

Charter-boat owners who IFQs will put out of business, and those who are forced to buy their quota and who must compete with skippers who got theirs free, can't be blamed for fearing and detesting everything about IFQs.

Most of the blame for this conflict should fall on the shoulders of the unwary, uncaring public, which has allowed commercial interests to dominate the rule-making panel for so long. Fair allocation of halibut will come only where there is fair representation for sport-fishing interests on the North Pacific Council.

More to the point, equity is in the hands of our Governor, who nominates five of the 11 voting members on the council. Only one of the current members, Ed Rasmussen, can be said to represent sport-fishing. Of the eight fishery management councils, the North Pacific Council has by far the least equitable mix of commercial and sport interests.

Governor Murkowski could help remedy this inequity. Until he or some future Governor brings some balance to the North Pacific Council, halibut longliners and processors will continue to decide what's fair and what's not.

Les Palmer is an outdoor writer who lives in Sterling.

The End