

US North Pacific Halibut



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SPECIES Halibut (*Hippoglossus stenolepis*)

FISHING METHOD Bottom hook and line (longline)

COUNTRY United States



Bering Sea, Alaska, Washington

FISHERY TONNAGE 24,000 tonnes

“THE PREFERRED SIZE is a 30 pounder,” says Bob Alverson, Executive Director of the Fishing Vessel Owners Association in Seattle, showing me some photographs of a huge halibut being hauled from the water by two grown men – their legs braced as if for a tug-of-war. It must be as heavy as both of them and these giant flatfish can weigh 500lb (225kg) – as much as three men. This one is as long as one of the female crew members is tall.

Environmental impact

In fact, it is the halibut’s vast size that makes it relatively easy to fish without catching juveniles or non-target species. By using appropriately large hooks, set at 5.5m intervals along a 550m ‘skate’ (or groundline) that lies in a straight line along the seabed but does little damage, fishermen largely avoid bycatch and discards. “They do catch some redfish, which are marketable,” says Alverson, “and some lingcod, which they are allowed to keep.” Cod, too, can legally account for up to 20 per cent of the catch but most of it gets used as bait, saving money. “They have to log that, of course,” says Alverson.

In the halibut fishery, jointly managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the International Pacific Halibut Commission, these and other regulations are strictly enforced. “You can’t retain halibut less than 32 inches (0.8m) long,” says Alverson, “which is the size of the fish when it starts to be sexually mature. We call it a 10/20, because it weighs between 10lb and 20lb. They [the marine scientists] want to get the fish up to that size before we start catching them. It’s good for us, because we get paid better for larger fish.”

In other respects, too, fishermen and conservationists seem to be on the same trajectory. “Years ago we had a bird bycatch problem,” Alverson says, “so we worked with the University of Washington, got a grant and dedicated six of our vessels as research platforms over two years. They tested out ‘tori lines’, little flappers that fly up behind

the boat. They found that, if the crews hung them right, they resulted in a significant reduction in bird interactions with the bait.” For three years, tori lines have been mandatory on all longlining vessels in the North Pacific, reducing bird bycatch by about 80 per cent.

Political influence

Only in one respect was there notable room for improvement. “We have no observer programme for bycatch in the halibut fishery, though we do have extremely tight management shoreside and a good logbook system,” Alverson says. In other words, commercially valuable bycatch is weighed and recorded back in port and fishermen keep their own records – but there are no independent scientists monitoring bycatch on board vessels. One condition of MSC certification was that the fishery should approach government agencies to implement such a programme. “In the next three years,” Alverson reckons, “there will be significant changes to the North Pacific Council’s observer programme that will meet the MSC’s concerns.” This may have happened anyway, he adds, but the extra pressure certainly helped.

Promotion and new markets

A far more concrete benefit of certification has been its appeal to ethically-minded chefs who have mentioned it on their daytime television shows. “They say, ‘This is MSC certified, it’s a wonderful product, we recommend you eat it,’” Alverson says. “On the West Coast, there isn’t a seafood restaurant that’s considered a seafood restaurant where halibut isn’t featured. I’d say we have benefited indirectly from the zeal of television chefs.”

Traditionally, 80 per cent of sales from the fishery have been in North America, split between Canada and the United States – but, slowly, that is changing. “The MSC label has been important in terms of the amount we now sell to Europe,” Alverson says. “It’s becoming the vogue there, I would say. That has generated new demand, which I think has helped us enormously.”



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“ We believe our North Pacific halibut fishery, managed by a joint United States and Canadian commission (International Halibut Commission), is a model for future generations. The MSC label is further verification that all stakeholders are – and should be – committed to sustainability. Our children’s children can expect to fish for, process, sell and consume this wonderful resource ”

Dana Besecker, President, Dana F Besecker Co, Inc



Photo provided courtesy of Bering Select Seafoods Company