



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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ANGLER RESPONSE LEADS TO CSP POSTPONEMENT RFA Says Grassroots Efforts Lead to Stalled Alaska Catch Sharing Plan

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has recommended postponement of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Catch Sharing Plan (CSP), originally scheduled for implementation in 2012. The controversial proposal to limit the charter boat fleet and its clients to one halibut each or purchase quota shares has left too many questions unanswered for federal regulators, effectively putting the CSP on the shelf for now.

According to the Alaska Charter Association (ACA), the enormous amount of individual comments that poured in during the comment period which require answers from NMFS left no ability for the fisheries service to remain on schedule for their 2012 CSP implementation date.

In a member bulletin on August 25, the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) called the Catch Sharing Plan anything but sharing, as it would take 30% of the guided angler allocation and assign it to commercial fishermen.

Jim Martin, RFA's West Coast Regional Director said the CSP would mean a 50% reduction in bag limits for guided anglers in Southcentral Alaska, requiring recreational fishermen to have to buy fish from charter operators who lease this privilege from the commercial sector. "If they drop it to one fish per angler in Homer, you would be able to keep a second halibut but only if you were willing to pay for it, but that's up to the commercial fisherman to decide if he's willing to lease it to the charter operator you fish with," Martin said.

In their official release, NMFS said "the public comment process elicited comments that raised a number of policy and technical issues. After our initial review, we believe that a number of the comments raised issues that may require additional input from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council before NOAA Fisheries can proceed to a final rules."

The Homer Tribune reported this week that NNMFS had received 4,185 comments regarding the proposal. By comparison, 273 comments were received in response to a new management plan for charter vessels back in 2008, which RFA says typifies angler frustration today with the inequity in fisheries management.

"Sen. Mark Begich himself expressed his very public concerns about the fairness of a formula which would set the charter halibut quota below the sector's previously set guideline harvest levels," said RFA executive director, Jim Donofrio. "When you consider that the commercial sector's bycatch harvest surpasses all the fish taken by recreational anglers in Alaska, it's not hard to figure out why sector is ticked off."

Homer Tribune reporter Naomi Klouda said this week that Sen. Begich had accompanied NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco on a visit to Homer where more than 200 people crowded into the Bidarka Inn conference room to ask questions about the plan. In a release issued by the senator's office after the decision to postpone the CSP plan, Sen. Begich said some Alaskans will be pleased and still others disappointed, but noted there's still a lot more work ahead to resolving this longstanding and divisive issue."

"In my comments to NOAA Administrator Lubchenco, I said the public raised some legitimate issues which need further consideration. This includes the adequacy of economic analysis of the impact of the rulemaking, a general concern I have raised about other NOAA actions," Sen. Begich said.

RFA thanks those members and individuals who helped keep the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Catch Sharing Plan on the shelf by sending letters of concern in to NOAA Fisheries. "Without the written comments showing that our community was not happy, NMFS could've very well just rammed this flawed rule through the process and forced anglers into buy shares from the commercial sector," Donofrio said.

“Our thanks of course to the Alaska Charter Association and RFA’s Jim Martin for working together to keep American anglers up-to-date on this very important issue, this is what can be accomplished with a united front,” Donofrio added. “RFA also thanks Sen. Begich for bringing people together on this.”

The next course of action could come as soon as December 5-13 when the North Pacific Fishery Management Council meets again in Anchorage. The International Pacific Halibut Commission will meet in Anchorage from January 24-27, 2012.

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA’s Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation’s saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.