

MIXED PROGRESS IN 2008 ALASKA FLATFISH FISHERIES

When the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (the Council) cut the 2008 Bering Sea pollock quotas by 28%, it supplemented the total all-species quota in the Bering Sea with major increases to quotas of various flatfish species. Although these flatfish species command lower prices than pollock or Pacific cod, the Council felt increased flatfish quotas could somewhat offset quota holders for the lost pollock revenue. Here is a table showing the 2008 quotas of several major Alaskan groundfish species:

ALASKA GROUNDFISH TOTAL ALLOWABLE CATCH (TAC) 2007-2008							
all figures in metric tons (MT)							
	2007			2008			% change
Species	BSAI	GOA	Total	BSAI	GOA	Total	Total
Pollock	1,413,010	68,307	1,481,317	1,019,010	60,180	1,079,190	(27.1%)
Pacific cod	171,000	52,264	223,264	170,720	50,269	220,989	(1.0%)
Yellowfin sole	136,000		136,000	225,000		225,000	65.4%
Arrowtooth flounder	20,000	43,000	63,000	75,000	43,000	118,000	87.3%
Northern rock sole	55,000		55,000	75,000		75,000	36.4%
Flathead sole	30,000	9,148	39,148	50,000	11,054	61,054	56.0%
Alaska plaice	25,000		25,000	50,000		50,000	100.0%
Atka mackerel	63,000	1,500	64,500	60,700	1,500	62,200	(3.6%)
All other species	87,315	95,693	183,008	112,915	96,823	209,738	14.6%
Total	2,000,325	269,912	2,270,237	1,838,345	262,826	2,101,171	(7.4%)

Notes: BSAI Bering Sea / Aleutian Islands area
GOA Gulf of Alaska area

Stalled yellowfin sole fishery

Despite the quota increases, trawlers in Alaska have yet to fill their pollock shortfall with flatfish, due mainly to a slow start to the yellowfin sole fishery. At 225,000MT, the yellowfin sole quota is now the largest in the Bering Sea after pollock. But as of April 19th, yellowfin catches are not only below expectations but are actually trailing last year's figures despite the increased quota:

YEAR-TO-DATE CATCHES OF ALASKAN FLATFISH, 2007-2008							
all figures in metric tons (MT) unless otherwise noted							
	As at April 21, 2007			As at April 19, 2008			% change
Species	BSAI	GOA	Total	BSAI	GOA	Total	
Yellowfin sole	72,348		72,348	51,004		51,004	(29.5%)
Rock sole	22,584		22,584	36,534		36,534	61.8%
Arrowtooth flounder	3,188	9,118	12,306	1,021	14,629	15,650	27.2%
Flathead sole	7,427	1,711	9,138	7,116	1,806	8,922	(2.4%)
Alaska plaice	16,657		16,657	8,431		8,431	(49.4%)
"Shallow water flatfish"		1,649	1,649		2,301	2,301	39.5%
Rex sole		955	955		1,672	1,672	75.1%
"Deep water flatfish"		47	47		157	157	234.0%
Total			135,684			124,671	(8.1%)

Notes: BSAI Bering Sea / Aleutian Islands area
GOA Gulf of Alaska area
Deep water flatfish Includes Dover sole, Greenland turbot and deep-sea sole
Shallow water flatfish Includes Alaska plaice, rock sole, yellowfin sole, butter sole, starry flounder

Why the shortfall in yellowfin sole catches when flatfish quotas are up and pollock quotas are down? One reason may be that end users have yet to find sufficient uses for yellowfin sole and other flatfish species to absorb the entire available quota. These species have roles as inexpensive whitefish substitutes but large scale whitefish markets still demand more traditional species such as pollock or cod.

Rock sole fishery surging

The shortfall in yellowfin sole catches means Alaska's total year-to-date (YTD) flatfish catch is 8% below last year's. This disguises some developments in other flatfish fisheries:

- The YTD rock sole catch of 36,500MT is already greater than the full year catch in 2007.
- Since the April 1st opening of the B-season in the GOA, catches of deep-water fish have surged such that NMFS closed the "deep water species" complex (includes "deep water flatfish," rex sole and arrowtooth flounder) after it filled its B-season halibut mortality quota.

Looking forward

Given the different conduct of the flatfish fisheries in Alaska in 2008, using historical trends may be less useful. But in previous years we could expect the following trends in the flatfish fisheries:

- The yellowfin sole C-season begins on May 21. This falls within the lull between spring and summer fisheries for pollock and Pacific cod, so trawlers usually direct for yellowfin sole during this period and mop up any remaining quota. At the moment there appears to be more available quota than they can fill during this shoulder season, but halibut mortality will likely close the fishery before quota.
- The A- and B- seasons of the Bering Sea flatfish fishery, lasting until April, are usually devoted to roe-bearing rock sole. When the C-season opens in July the focus shifts to flathead sole.

Sources: NMFS, Tradex analysis

Implications for frozen seafood buyers:

- Increased supply of flatfish and decreased supply of pollock and Pacific cod will give buyers incentives to find uses in the market for these relatively underutilized flatfish products.
- If trawlers in Alaska follow the trend from previous years, they will catch a large volume of yellowfin sole in late May and early June. The glut of product may provide some attractive buying opportunities.

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