

June 12, 2003

The Honourable Robert G. Thibault, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Fisheries and Oceans  
200 Kent Street  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0E6

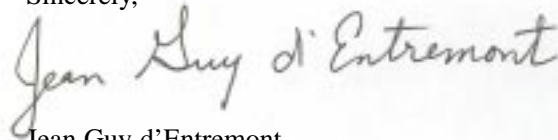
Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Council, please find attached the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council's advice on Atlantic halibut, 3NOPS4VWX5Zc. This assessment, initially scheduled for last fall's Regional Advisory Process (RAP), was postponed by DFO Science until later in 2003. Normally, this advice would have been included with the Council's January report.

There is concern that the Expert Opinion view on the Atlantic halibut resource, prepared by DFO Science, has somewhat of a different view from the attached Appendix which resulted from a subsequent meeting with Industry. This has created considerable confusion, and could have been avoided if survey participants were invited to take part in the Expert Opinion panel.

Finally, Atlantic halibut are showing similar signs in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Scotian Shelf, including Sub Area 3 on the Grand Banks. The Council would encourage these two Regions to cooperate in future research with respect to the Atlantic halibut resource..

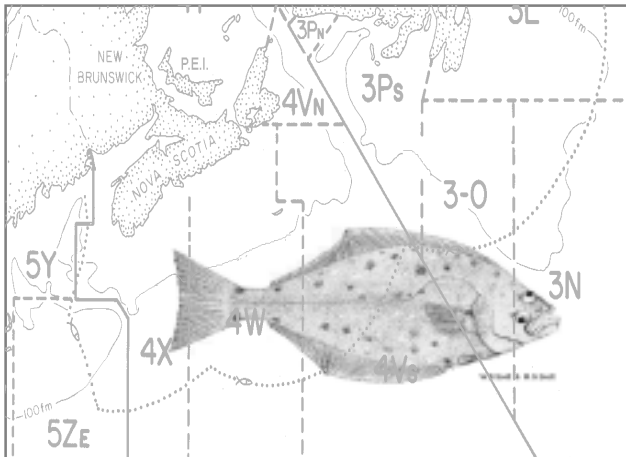
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Jean Guy d'Entremont". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Jean Guy d'Entremont  
A/Chairman

attachment

# ATLANTIC HALIBUT - 3NOPs4VWX5Zc



## PERSPECTIVE

Atlantic halibut is the largest of the flatfishes ranging widely in waters of Atlantic Canada. Atlantic halibut are most abundant in the deep-water channels running between the banks and on the edge of the continental shelf. It is thought that these fish generally spawn in deeper waters in late Fall and early Winter.

This is a slow growing, long-lived species. Females grow faster than males, and reach a much larger maximum size. While 50% of females appear to achieve maturity at 115 cm, 50% of males appear to attain maturity at 75 cm.

## ANALYSIS

Atlantic halibut did not go through the regular Regional Advisory Process (RAP). Instead, DFO Science produced an Expert Opinion at an ad hoc internal DFO meeting without the involvement of the industry or other interested parties. Subsequent consultations with industry members who participate in the halibut longline survey led to the production of an appendix to the Expert Opinion. There are differences between the views expressed in the body of the Expert Opinion and those in the appendix. Had a normal RAP process been followed, it is probable that the resulting Stock Status Report (SSR) update would have incorporated some elements currently included in the appendix. The process followed for Atlantic halibut in 2003 to provide scientific information is unsatisfactory.

The body of the Expert Opinion produced by DFO in April 2003 states:

- FRCC recommended increases in TAC in 2000 and 2001, resulting in a current 2002 TAC of 1,150t.

- White hake, cusk, cod, dogfish, and a range of other species, are caught in association with halibut. This has management implications in an ecosystem context. In the DFO – Industry halibut survey, the average non-halibut by-catch (% weight of all species) has ranged from 76 to 88% in the fixed station phase to between 46 and 69% in the commercial index phase. The latter would be more indicative of bycatch rates in the fishery as a whole.
- According to industry, there has been an increase in the amount of unreported halibut catch, particularly in 2002.
- Adult halibut have a low catchability to the DFO summer Research Vessel (RV) survey, resulting in highly variable estimates of adult abundance. The RV survey provides information on incoming recruitment (fish < 81cm) and overall spatial distribution. The RV survey shows below average recruitment in 2002; and has been relatively stable over the past decade.
- The halibut longline survey provides the capacity to monitor the halibut population. It has now been in place for five years, is internally consistent (rankings of high, medium and low strata are consistent, fishing grounds are consistently identified, and the commercial and fixed station indices give similar trajectories), and does not suffer from the high variability observed in the RV survey series.
- The halibut longline survey indicates lower recruitment numbers in 2002 for the stock area as a whole. Recruitment estimates for Sub Area (SA) 3 are relatively high in 2001 and 2002 which suggests that SA3 may be a more important recruitment area than previously thought. However; survey coverage in SA3, particularly 3NO, remains problematic mainly due to the costs involved in getting there and management restrictions related to cod bycatch limits.
- Halibut longline survey commercial index and fixed station estimates of biomass (cpue) show a relatively stable overall population size from 1998 – 2002. Individually, the sub-components of the main survey areas (3Ps4VWX) also appear stable over this period.

Figures are in 000t

Year	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03*
TAC				3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	1.5	0.85	0.85	0.85	0.85	0.85	1	1.15	1.15
Catch	4	3.3	2.6	2.3	1.9	2.1	2.2	1.30	1.2	1.04	0.72	0.79	1.16	0.96	1.2	0.91	1.23	1.28

\*Canadian Catch as of May 15/03

1. Above figures include Reported Landings extracted from the Integrated Fisheries Management Plan Atlantic Groundfish (IFMP)

- The halibut population biomass appears to be relatively stable even with a 35% increase in TAC and landings since 1998.
- The continued operation of the longline survey to effectively monitor population status, is essential to the management of this fishery.

The FRCC considers it important to mention the following points from the appendix to the Expert Opinion:

- Halibut fishermen have observed a dramatic increase in catches of halibut in 4X over the past several years.
- Participants were in particular disagreement with the summary point in the Expert Opinion, which states that: "According to industry, there has been an increase in the amount of unreported halibut catch, particularly in 2002".
- Given the stability of the halibut population biomass observed over the past five years, all the meeting participants (including DFO Science) considered that in the absence of negative indications from the halibut longline survey, a reasonable approach to the management of this fishery would be to implement cautious annual increases in TAC over the next 3-5 years at least until landings equal the long-term annual average of about 1,900t. During this period, negative indications from the longline survey, particularly in the form of catch rate reductions would result in reductions in TAC.

During the May 21/03 consultation, both industry and DFO acknowledged that the stock review process was flawed this year. DFO representatives indicated that about 30% of the TAC would normally be caught in 4VsW, and increases up to the 1900t long-term average could be fished without any increase in the 150t catch cap of 4VsW cod. They also stated that there is no apparent increase in illegal fishing of Atlantic halibut; vessels catching greater than 300 lbs of Atlantic halibut in 4X will be required to hail and receive 100% dockside monitoring in 2003.

Industry observations were that Atlantic halibut abundance is high and widespread, with a mixture of sizes throughout its range. The observation was made that

the longline survey does not cover the eastern Grand Banks where significant catches were made in the 1980s. It was stated that vessels in the 65-100' sector were experiencing record catch rates in 3NO and 3Ps. Industry's view is that, while the TAC can easily be set at 1,600t without placing the stock in any danger, it is unanimously prepared to accept the approach of a 300t increase to 1,450t in 2003-2004 (since there was no increase in 2002-2003), with 150t increases for each of the following three years up to the long-term average of 1,900t. A comment was made that the greater than 65' fleet sectors did not participate in the survey, nor are their catch rates incorporated into the assessment.

The Council commends the cooperative efforts of the industry and DFO Science in the continuation of the halibut longline survey that commenced in 1998. This survey provides the best available measure of the status of this resource on a continuing basis. The FRCC supports all reasonable measures to ensure the continuing integrity of the survey for the long-term, including the need to extend coverage fully on the Grand Banks in SA3. **The FRCC recommends that the industry/DFO halibut longline survey be continued with sufficient observer coverage to ensure its ongoing integrity, especially in NAFO SA3.**

In 2000/2001 and 2001/2002, in light of the recognized problems related to the DFO RV survey and pending the results of the longline survey, the Council acknowledged industry observations of stock abundance and decided to recommend a directional increase in the TAC by 150t for each year. A status quo TAC of 1,150t was recommended for 2002/2003, in part in recognition that continued year-over-year increases in the TAC may not enable a reasonably clear determination of the impact of fishing effort on the condition of the stock. The Council expressed the intent of utilizing the 5-year time series of the longline survey in 2003 and consider whether a more significant increase is sustainable and consistent with continued rebuilding.

Unfortunately, DFO Science has not made much progress towards producing the previously requested estimates regarding absolute abundance and biomass, population structure, and harvest rates. This lack of information makes it very difficult to identify an analytical basis for any specific TAC for this fishery. The Council was advised that DFO Science is planning to conduct an Intensive Fisheries Evaluation (IFE) as

soon as it can be fit into their schedule. It is important to note that the IFE is an important part of a multi-year conservation framework. **Accordingly, the FRCC recommends that DFO Science complete the necessary analysis (including the previously requested tagging and aging initiatives) to table at the upcoming IFE.**

The Council notes the agreement between DFO Science and industry that a series of cautious annual increases in the TAC would be reasonable, subject to there being no negative indications from the longline survey. The Council notes that a stable survey index does not necessarily indicate that the stock can support repeated increases in TAC. At the same time, the Council acknowledges that neither the survey nor the current fishery includes coverage of the eastern Grand

Banks where significant fisheries formally took place. In addition, the survey gear in 4X is experiencing saturation difficulties with other species and may be underestimating abundance in the area, and fishermen continue to report increasing catch rates in the commercial fishery. The Council also observes that an Intensive Fisheries Evaluation for Atlantic halibut is being planned for the near future. Given these considerations, the Council is not yet prepared to recommend a multi-year plan for TAC increases, but notes that a multi-year fishery management plan should be developed, possibly including a co-management agreement, following the IFE. **The FRCC recommends that the Atlantic halibut TAC be set at 1,300t for 2003/2004.**

The Council observes that approximately 1/3 of the 2002 catch of Atlantic halibut was caught in 4VW. The Council previously expressed concern with the seriously depleted condition of the 4VsW cod stock and recommended a cap of 150t for 2003/2004. **The FRCC recommends that DFO implement effective measures to ensure that this 150t cap is not exceeded (e.g. requiring that incremental directed effort on Atlantic halibut be conducted in areas other than 4VW, 100% dockside monitoring for all landings, etc.).**

## SOURCES

### DFO SCIENCE

Expert Opinion On Current Estimates of Population Status of Atlantic Halibut on the Scotian Shelf and Southern Grand Banks – April 30, 2003 (including Appendix 1)

### FRCC CONSULTATIONS

The FRCC held a public consultation on this stock in 2003 in:

Halifax, N.S., (May 21, 2003)

### WRITTEN BRIEFS (FROM NOVEMBER CONSULTATIONS)

Yarmouth County Fixed Gear Association – C. Davis & L. Blackler (2002-010-00178)  
Eastern Nova Scotia 4VsW Management Board (2002-010-00183)

Shelburne County Competitive Fishermen's Association – P. Decker & V. Wolfe (2002-010-00187)

Shelburne County Quota Group – Gary Dedrick (2002-010-00188)

Inshore Fisheries Limited – Claude d'Entremont (2002-010-00205)

Scotia Fundy Inshore Fishermen's Association – E.L. Walters (2002-010-00207)

Scotia Fundy Mobile Gear Fishermen's Association (2002-010-00210)

## COUNCIL'S VIEWS ON STOCK STATUS

Overall Stock:	moderately healthy
Spawning Biomass:	unknown
Total Biomass:	relatively stable
Recruitment:	relatively stable (RV survey); improving trend with a 2002 dip (LL survey)
Growth and Condition:	apparently normal
Age Structure:	unknown; relatively positive size frequency
Distribution:	appears to be widely distributed
Recent exploitation Level:	apparently moderate