

INTERNATIONAL (HALIBUT)  
FISHERIES COMMISSION

The International Fisheries Commission regulating the halibut fishery of the North American side of the Pacific Ocean was established in 1923 by treaty between Canada and the United States. It consists of four commissioners --- two from each country. The commissioners serve without salary while the expenses of administration and investigation are divided between the two countries.

Its original purpose was to eliminate fishing during the halibut spawning season from November to February and to undertake an intensive investigation into the life history of the halibut. As a result of the recommendations of the Commission, a new treaty was concluded in 1930 which set up regulatory power to rebuild the fishery. Included in the Commission's responsibilities was the power to set a catch limit for halibut in any area along the coast.

Historical Background

The year 1888 marked the beginning of the commercial halibut fishery on the West Coast. The completion that year of transcontinental railroads opened eastern markets, especially Boston, to Pacific halibut. From a catch of 1,500,000 pounds in that year the take increased steadily until 1908. Approximately 50,000,000 pounds annually were taken from then on.

To achieve this production the industry had to use more efficient equipment with bigger and stronger ships. Diesel engines reduced costs considerably so that it was possible to make distant fishing a profitable operation. Even with the increased fishing effort there were fluctuations of millions of pounds from year to year.

Owing to the character of halibut which live along the ocean bed and because of the uneven bottom of the fishing grounds, ground lines are most effective for halibut fishing. The unit of gear, which is the amount of gear that can be easily operated by one fisherman, is known as a "skate". It consists of six fairly heavy ground lines each about 50 fathoms long and to each of which, at 13-foot intervals, five-foot lines are attached which carry a single hook at the end. At one time fishing was conducted from dories but they became outmoded and finally were prohibited in the fishery. With the skate as a measure of efficiency it was shown that where formerly the average catch per skate was several hundreds of pounds the catch had fallen to under a hundred pounds. In addition, where formerly the fishermen were able to get their fish in a 600 mile area, the fishery now covered an area of almost 1,800 miles.

Effects of Regulation

When the Commission was first established the fishery had fallen off considerably. Evidence of over-fishing was apparent. A much greater fishing effort was required to