

## GGBP Case Study Series

# Alaskan Halibut Fisheries

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Case developed by: [Antonia Gawel](#)

Country: [United States](#)

Sector(s): [Fisheries](#)

Key words: [Sustainable fisheries](#), [fishing quota](#), [monitoring](#), [jobs](#)

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The management of Alaskan halibut fisheries has been enabled through a long-term collaboration between government policymakers and private fishing vessel owners in designing a scheme that rigorously meets environmental standards, while enabling the industry to thrive.

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## Context

At the global level, fisheries are under significant stress, with about a quarter of fish stocks overexploited, depleted, or recovering, and about half of fish stocks fully exploited (fished at or close to their maximum sustainable yield). It is estimated that inefficient operations, overexploited stocks and perverse incentives result in approximately USD 50 billion in losses each year (FAO, 2010).

Designing effective fisheries management schemes is essential to overcoming these challenges and ensuring the sustainability of fish stocks in the longer term.

Alaska has long been renowned for its successful fisheries management practices and is host to one of the most sustainable fisheries worldwide. This success is the result of long-term collaboration between government policymakers and private fishing vessel owners in designing a scheme that rigorously meets environmental standards while enabling the industry to thrive.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Alaskan fisheries saw a considerable increase in capacity, with an open access fisheries policy and an increased number of vessels entering the area. To avoid overexploitation of stocks, the fishing season was reduced from nine months to two-three days in the 1990s. While this ensured maintenance of a sustainable catch level, it led

to a number of other challenges, including conflicts between vessels, poor fish quality, low product value, and small amounts of fish available for the fresh market. The short season was also seen as risky for crew members, and saw nets abandoned in waters as a consequence of the frenzied approach to catching as much as possible in a very short timeframe.

Voicing concerns over this management system, two industry-led associations, the Seattle-based Fishing Vessel Owners' Association and the Petersburg Vessel Owner's Association requested a revised fisheries management strategy from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (MRAG, 2010).

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## Approach

A multi-stakeholder process was established to develop Alaska's current fisheries management model – a fishing rights based approach that sees the allocation of transferable individual fishing quotas (IFQs), which are differentiated by vessel size to enable smaller-scale private players to maintain operations.

Throughout the process of designing the resource management strategy, multi-stakeholder forums were convened to engage private vessel owners and community members. Cooperation between private vessel owners and state observers is also critical to the successful monitoring of quotas and the scientifically rigorous revisions to annual quota levels.

To ensure compliance with quota allocation and provide broader scientific data, the North Pacific Observer Program (observer program) was developed, which places government

employed scientific experts on fishing vessels. The information collected by observers provides the best available scientific information for managing fisheries, and developing measures to minimize bycatch by collecting biological samples and information on total catch and interactions with protected species. Scientists also use data collected by observers for stock assessments to set annual catch quotas and for marine ecosystem research.

This cooperation between fishing vessels and government observers not only ensures strict enforcement of quota systems, but also provide essential scientific information to ensure the long-term sustainability of the fisheries.

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## Outcomes

The shift to the IFQ system saw vessel owners benefit from a rise in fish prices from 0.45-0.91/kg to 1.36-2.2/kg, given a more constant supply of fresh fish to the market. This has led to year-on-year increases in the industry revenue from about USD 50 million in 1992 to about USD 245 million in 2008 (MRAG, 2010).

Jobs have been more stable and long-term for the entire industry, including fishermen and processors. Safety has also been improved, given a shift away from 'derby-like' fishing. The fishery also gained Marine Stewardship Council certification in 2006, which may have further contributed to the higher market value of the fish.

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## Lessons

Reasons for the success of this system are multi-fold. They include:

- Strong collaboration between public and private sectors, which was encouraged through a stringent process focusing on multi-stakeholder forums. The management approach was led by the public sector, but engagement of the private sector was instrumental in shifting towards a management strategy that met both public policy and private sector development goals. Throughout the process of resource management strategy design, multi-stakeholder forums were convened to engage private vessel owners, as well as community members. Cooperation by private vessel owners with state observers is also critical to the successful monitoring of quotas, and scientifically rigorous revisions to annual quota levels. Collaboration has been essential to effective program design and implementation – a key challenge in the case of many natural resource management policies;
- Trust among partners, which was built through a science-based approach; the design of the fishing quotas was based on strict adherence to scientific data related to sustainable catchment levels;
- Strong monitoring and enforcement through the observer program, which ensured compliance with quotas, while also providing additional data for scientific research.

Limitations and challenges include:

- Loss of businesses: while the IFQ system is deemed a success by government and businesses alike, the number of fleets in operation was reduced as a result of the program. This led to the relocation or shifting of activities of some fleet operators;
- Resource requirements to ensure enforcement: one of the key success factors of the program is also one of its potential limitations – strong monitoring and enforcement, which comes at a cost to government, is critical. In considering the implementation of such a system in other fisheries, resources must be considered to ensure that such processes are in place.

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## Further Information

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), The Pacific Halibut and Sablefish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program:

<https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/fisheries/ifq>

## References

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the state of world fisheries and aquaculture, 2010

MRAG 2010. Towards sustainable fisheries management: international examples of innovation. MRAG Ltd., London: 93 pages.

### Disclaimer

This case is a summary of research input to the Green Growth in Practice: Lessons from Country Experiences report published by GGBP in July 2014. The views and information expressed in this case study are not necessarily endorsed by the GGBP sponsors or organizations of the authors.

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