TABLE 5.—PROPOSED 1996 PACIFIC HALIBUT PSC LIMITS, ALLOWANCES, AND APPORTIONMENTS. THE PACIFIC HALIBUT PSC LIMIT FOR HOOK-AND-LINE GEAR IS ALLOCATED TO THE DEMERSAL SHELF ROCKFISH (DSR) FISHERY AND FISHERIES OTHER THAN DSR. VALUES ARE IN METRIC TONS

Trawl gear		Hook-and-line gear			
Dates	Amount	Other than DSR		DSR	
		Dates	Amount	Dates	Amount
Jan 1–Mar 31 Apr 1–Jun 30	600 (30%) 400 (20%)		29 (10%)	Jan 1-Dec 31	10 (100%)
Jul 1-Sep 30 Oct 1-Dec 31 Total	600 (30%) 400 (20%) 2,000 (100%)	Sep 1–Dec 31	19 (6.5%) 290 (100%)		10 (100%)

# (A) Estimated Halibut Bycatch in Prior Years

The best available information on estimated halibut bycatch is available from data collected in 1995 by NMFScertified observers. The calculated halibut bycatch mortality by trawl, hook-and-line, and pot gear through October 7, 1995, is 1,561 mt, 354 mt, and 16 mt, respectively, for a total of 1,931 mt. Halibut bycatch restrictions seasonally constrained trawl gear fisheries during the first, second, and third quarters of the fishing year and are anticipated to constrain trawl gear fisheries during the fourth quarter. Trawling for the deep-water fishery complex was closed during the first quarter on March 27 (60 FR 16587; March 31, 1995), for the second quarter on April 22 (60 FR 20658; April 27, 1995) and for the third quarter on July 21 (60 FR 37601, July 21, 1995). The shallow-water fishery complex was closed in the second quarter on May 8 (60 FR 25623, May 12, 1995) and in the third quarter on July 17 (60 FR 37600, July 21, 1995). The amount of groundfish that might have been harvested if halibut had not been seasonally limiting in 1995 is unknown. However, lacking market incentives, some amounts of groundfish will not be harvested, regardless of halibut PSC bycatch availability.

## (B) Expected Changes in Groundfish Stocks

At its September 1995 meeting, the Council recommended lower 1996 ABC amounts than 1995 ABC amounts for pollock, Pacific cod and thornyhead rockfish. A higher 1996 ABC than the 1995 ABC was recommended for POP.

The 1996 ABC amounts for the remaining species or species groups remain unchanged from 1995 levels. More information on these proposed changes is included in the preliminary SAFE Report, dated September 1995, and in the AP, SSC, and Council

minutes from the September 1995 meeting.

# (C) Expected Changes in Groundfish Catch

The total of the proposed 1996 TAC amounts for the GOA is 267,917 mt, which represents 96 percent of the sum of TAC amounts for 1995 (279,463 mt). Significant changes in TAC amounts for pollock, Pacific cod, and POP are proposed. POP is the only species for which a TAC was specified that is higher in 1996 than in 1995. This increase should not directly affect halibut bycatch.

#### (D) Current Estimates of Halibut Biomass and Stock Condition

The stock assessment for 1995 conducted by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) indicates that the total exploitable biomass of Pacific halibut in the GOA is approximately 166.9 million lbs. This represents a decline in biomass of approximately 16 percent from the previous stock assessment, a rate that is higher than the 5–15 percent annual decline observed in previous years. The low recruitment of recent years indicates that the stock will continue its decline at a rate of about 10–15 percent per year over the next several years.

### (E) Potential Impacts of Expected Fishing for Groundfish on Halibut Stocks and U.S. Halibut Fisheries

Halibut fisheries will be adjusted to account for the overall halibut PSC mortality limit established for groundfish fisheries. The 1996 groundfish fisheries are expected to use the entire proposed halibut PSC limit of 2,300 mt. The allowable directed commercial catch is determined by accounting for the recreational catch, waste, and bycatch mortality, and then providing the remainder to the directed fishery. Groundfish fishing is, therefore, not expected to affect the halibut stocks.

### (F) Methods Available for, and Costs of, Reducing Halibut Bycatches in Groundfish Fisheries

Methods available for reducing halibut bycatch include (1) reducing halibut bycatch rates through a Vessel Incentive Program; (2) modifications to gear; (3) changes in groundfish fishing seasons; (4) individual transferable quota programs, designed to reduce the derby-style fishing; and (5) time/area closures.

Reductions in groundfish TAC amounts provide no incentives for fishermen to reduce bycatch rates. Costs that would be imposed on fishermen as a result of reducing TAC amounts depend on species and amounts of groundfish foregone.

Trawl vessels carrying observers for purposes of complying with the observer coverage requirements (50 CFR 677.10) are subject to the Vessel Incentive Program. The program encourages trawl fishermen to avoid high halibut bycatch rates while conducting groundfish fisheries by specifying bycatch rate standards for various target fisheries.

Current regulations require groundfish pots to have halibut exclusion devices to reduce halibut bycatches. Resulting low bycatch and mortality rates of halibut in pot fisheries have justified exempting pot gear from PSC limits.

The regulations also define pelagic trawl gear in a manner intended to reduce bycatch of halibut by displacing fishing effort off the bottom of the sea floor when certain halibut bycatch levels are reached during the fishing year. The definition provides standards for physical conformation (§ 672.2) and also for performance of the trawl gear in terms of crab bycatch (§ 672.7(m)). Furthermore, all hook-and-line vessel operators are required to employ careful release measures when handling halibut bycatch. This measure is intended to reduce handling mortality, increase the amount of groundfish harvested under