

NOAA/NMFS, Office of Protected Resources, 13th Floor, 1315 East-West Hwy, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Mark the outside of the envelope with "Request for Bowhead EA."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Chris Yates or Winnie Chan, 301-713-2322.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Electronic Access

Copies of the EA may be obtained over the Internet at the Office of Protected Resources Marine Mammal website under "Quick Information Links" at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/prot_res/overview/mm.html. The link is titled "Bowhead Whale Environmental Assessment".

Background

At the 5th Special Meeting of the IWC held in October, 2002 the Commission approved a 5-year aboriginal subsistence quota for the take of Western arctic bowhead whales. The quota allows for a combined total of up to 280 whales to be landed in the years 2003 through 2007 by Alaskan Eskimos and Russian natives. For each of these years, the number of bowhead whales struck shall not exceed 67, except that any unused portion of a strike quota from any year shall be carried forward and added to the strike quota of any subsequent year, provided that no more than 15 strikes shall be added to the strike quota for any one year.

The basis for the quota was a joint request by the Russian Federation and the United States for 280 whales (255 for Alaska Eskimos and 25 for Russian natives) over a 5-year period. The annual strike limits and quotas for whales are determined at the beginning of each year after consultation with the Russian government.

At the 54th annual meeting of the IWC, held in May, 2002 the Scientific Committee reiterated its previous advice for the Bering-Chukchi-Beaufort Seas stock of bowhead whales. That is, it is very likely that a catch limit of 102 whales or less would be consistent with the requirements under IWC regulation.

The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, under which the IWC operates, is implemented domestically through the Whaling Convention Act (WCA). Under the WCA, NMFS issues a share of the IWC bowhead quota to the AEWG.

Alaska Eskimos have been taking bowhead whales for at least 2,000 years. Alaska Native subsistence hunters take less than one percent of the population of bowhead whales per year. Since 1977, the number of takes has ranged between 14 and 75 per year.

NEPA requires that Federal agencies conduct an environmental analysis of the effect of their proposed actions on the environment. Although all quotas under the WCA are issued on an annual basis, NMFS evaluated the effects of issuing them over a 5-year period. A draft EA was distributed for public comment on December 9, 2002. The EA analyzed four alternatives:

Alternative 1 - Grant the AEWG a quota of 255 landed bowhead whales over 5 years (2003 through 2007), with an annual strike quota of 67 bowhead whales per year, where no unused strikes are added to the strike quota for any one year.

Alternative 2 - Grant the AEWG a quota of 255 landed bowhead whales over 5 years (2003 through 2007), with an annual strike quota of 67 bowhead whales per year, where no more than 15 unused strikes are added to the strike quota for any one year.

Alternative 3 - Grant the AEWG a quota of 255 landed bowhead whales over 5 years (2003 through 2007), with an annual strike quota of 67 bowhead whales per year, where, for unused strikes, up to 50 percent of the annual strike limit is added to the strike quota for any one year.

Alternative 4 (No Action) - Do not grant the AEWG a quota.

After reviewing and addressing the comments received, NMFS selected Alternative 2 as the preferred alternative. NMFS issued a final EA and Finding of No Significant Impact on February 23, 2003. The Final EA was prepared in accordance with NEPA, implementing regulations at 40 CFR parts 1500 through 1508, and NOAA guidelines concerning implementation of NEPA found in NOAA Administrative Order 216-6.

Dated: February 26, 2003.

Stephen L. Leathery,

Acting Director, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[I.D. 022603C]

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council; Public Meetings

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of public meeting.

SUMMARY: The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and its Research Set Aside (RSA) Committee and its Executive Committee will hold a public meeting.

DATES: The meetings will be held on Tuesday, March 18, through Thursday, March 20, 2003. On Tuesday, March 18, there will be a Research Set-Aside (RSA) Workshop from noon until 5 p.m. There will be a Dogfish Scoping meeting from 7 pm to 8:30 p.m. On Wednesday, March 19, the Executive Committee will meet from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. The Council will meet from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The Council will tour the U.S. Coast Guard Museum and hear a presentation on Homeland Defense from 11 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. The Council will meet from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. The Council will then visit the Virginia Marine Science Museum from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. On Thursday, March 20, the Council will meet from 8 a.m. until noon.

ADDRESSES: This meeting will be held at the Sheraton Oceanfront Hotel, 36th Street and Atlantic Avenue, Virginia Beach, VA; telephone: 757-425-9000 or 800-325-3535.

Council address: Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 300 S. New Street, Dover, DE 19904; telephone: 302-674-2331.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Daniel T. Furlong, Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council; telephone: 302-674-2331, ext. 19.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Council and NMFS will hold a collaborative workshop from noon to 5 p.m. on March 18, 2003 to discuss the Council's RSA program.

The RSA program is carried out through the cooperation of the Council, NMFS, and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. It provides a mechanism to fund research relevant to the Council's and Commission's fishery management plans and to compensate vessels through the sale of fish harvested under specially designated RSA quotas. Research projects have been funded through the RSA in 2002 and 2003, and a notice for solicitation of 2004 projects has recently been published in the **Federal Register** (68, FR 3864, 1/27/2003). The NMFS is currently soliciting proposals for research activities concerning the summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, *Loligo* squid, *Illex* squid, Atlantic mackerel, butterfish, and bluefish fisheries. While the tilefish fishery is part of the RSA program, the Council has voted to set the tilefish RSA quota to zero until a stock assessment has been completed. All research proposals