

A maximum of six traditional longline and tub trawl vessels would be authorized to participate in the experiment at any given time. These vessels would be limited to a maximum number of 700 hooks per boat, and would be restricted to using circle hooks no smaller than 14/0 in size. Each of the six participating vessels would also be limited to a total allowable catch (TAC) of 50 individual halibut, with no possession or landing limit prior to reaching this amount. Once this TAC is reached by an individual vessel, that vessel would be restricted to possessing and landing no more than four legal-sized halibut per day. The maximum number of Atlantic halibut that could be harvested as part of this study would be 500. The maximum harvest for both the 2000 and 2001 experimental fisheries was 1,080 halibut; for the 2002 study, it was reduced to 234 halibut.

Logbooks supplied by Maine DMR would be used to record information on length of all halibut caught, whether retained or released, time and place of all halibut caught, tag number (if applicable), amount of gear used, and bait type. In addition, species identification and length of all species caught as bycatch during the course of the study would be recorded. For all halibut that are retained, participants would be required to preserve stomachs, gonads, and any other biological samples (including scale and otolith samples) requested by scientists from Maine DMR and NMFS for further analyses. All halibut less than 36 inches (91.4 cm) total length would be measured, tagged and released. Only legal-sized halibut would be retained for commercial sale. Training in the procedures for collecting this information would be provided by Maine DMR or Center personnel. In addition, participants would be required to complete a training program in the tagging and release of halibut. Vessels may be required to carry onboard observers as requested by NMFS and Maine DMR. Maine DMR or Center personnel would train observers in the protocols of the experiment.

The 2002 experimental Atlantic halibut fishery took place with six vessels participating from April 1 - May 31, 2002, within the same study area as the proposed 2003 experimental fishery. Over the course of 60 days, 469 Atlantic halibut were caught, of which 234 were kept and 235 were tagged and released.

Therefore, the experimental fishery attained the maximum allowable harvest of 234 halibut. Most of the kept halibut were sold for consumption, but 30 were sold live to the University of Maine for use as brood stock. Ten tagged fish were recaptured in 2002: seven from the 2000 experimental fishery, two from the 2001 season and one from the 2002 season. Otolith and gonad samples were taken from all fish retained, except for the 30 fish sold live to the University of Maine.

The 2001 experimental Atlantic halibut fishery took place from April 12–May 31, 2001, within the same study area. Although six vessels were permitted to fish in the 2001 experimental fishery, only four actively participated. Over the course of 50 days, 152 Atlantic halibut were caught, of which 126 were kept and 26 were tagged and released. Most of the kept halibut were sold for consumption, but 45 of the 126 kept halibut were sold live to the University of Maine for use as brood stock. Two of the fish that were caught were recaptured from the 2000 experimental fishery. One of the recaptured fish was re-released, while the other was sold live to the University of Maine. Otolith and gonad samples were taken from all fish retained, except for the 45 fish sold live to the University of Maine.

The 2000 experimental Atlantic halibut fishery took place from April 15 to June 15, 2000. Three vessels participated in this experimental fishery capturing 234 halibut, of which 162 were kept.

With an average weight of 47 lb (21 kg) per halibut, the 2000 experimental fishery landed 7,650 lb (3.5 metric tons (mt)) of halibut, approximately 32 percent of the 11–mt total Atlantic halibut landings from the GOM/Georges Bank (GB) management unit in 2000. Outside of the experimental fishery, vessels were (and continue to be) restricted to a trip limit of one halibut. The 2001 Atlantic halibut experimental fishery landed approximately 2.5 mt, 22 percent less than the 2000 experimental fishery's halibut landings. The 2002 Atlantic halibut experimental fishery landed 4.3 mt, or about 20 percent of the total GOM/GB halibut landings (22 mt) during 2002. Based on the past year's data, if the 2003 experimental fishery harvests the proposed maximum allowable take of 500 halibut, the 2003 landings will be approximately 20,276

lb (9.2 mt). In comparison, the halibut landings from the Canadian Scotian Shelf/Southern Grand Banks management unit totaled about 1,000 mt in 2001, with a total allowable catch of 1,150 mt for that unit in 2002.

Given that the Canadian halibut harvest is more than 100 times the proposed harvest for the 2003 experimental fishery, NMFS believes that the taking of 500 halibut will not significantly impact the halibut resource because halibut appear to be a transboundary resource. If the GOM/GB halibut population is discrete, the impacts of the proposed increase in total allowable harvest from 234 to 500 in the 2003 experimental fishery on the Atlantic halibut resource are unknown, but do not appear to exceed the impact of the U.S. trawl bycatch and Canadian fisheries. NMFS believes the potential negative biological impacts (which are not fully known) from the increased harvest by the experimental fishery would be outweighed by the biological benefits that could be obtained from the study. Furthermore, NMFS would closely monitor the catch rates of vessels participating in this experimental fishery. If NMFS determines that catch rates are declining, indicating a significant impact to the resource, it would have the authority to terminate the experimental fishery.

The EA prepared for the 2002 experimental fishery concluded that the activities conducted under the 2002 EFP were consistent with the goals and objectives of the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan and would have no negative environmental impacts including impacts to Essential Fish Habitat, marine mammals, and protected species. The draft 2003 Supplement to the 2002 EA makes a preliminary determination that the proposed experimental fishery to collect biological and ecological information on Atlantic halibut will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

Based on the results of the EFPs, this action may lead to future rulemaking.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: April 14, 2003.

Dean Swanson,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 03–9636 Filed 4–17–03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–22–S