

a fishing or other type of vessel, including recreational and/or commercial vessels.

Funds generated from the RSA landings shall be used to cover the cost of the research activities, including vessel costs, and to compensate boats for expenses incurred during the collection of the set-aside species. For example, the funds could be used to pay for gear modifications, monitoring equipment, additional provisions (e.g., fuel, ice, food for scientists), or the salaries of research personnel. The Federal Government is not liable for any costs incurred by the researcher or vessel owner, should the sale of the excess catch not fully reimburse the researcher or vessel owner for his/her expenses.

### G. Eligibility Criteria

All commercial organizations; non-profit organizations; state, local, or tribal governments; institutions of higher education; and individuals are eligible to apply, provided that all proposal requirements are satisfied, and the proposal is received by the date specified in this document.

A person is not eligible to submit an application under this program if he/she is an employee of any Federal agency or a Regional Fishery Management Council. However, Council members who are not Federal employees may submit an application.

### H. Proposal Preparation and Requirements

NOAA employees (whether full-time, part-time, or intermittent) are not permitted to assist in the preparation of an application, except that staff may provide information on program goals, funding priorities, application procedures, and completion of application forms. Since this is a competitive program, NMFS and NOAA employees will not provide assistance in conceptualizing, developing, or structuring proposals, or write letters of support for a proposal. However, the Council or NMFS contact person (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**) may provide assistance to researchers who are seeking vessels to participate in the collection of set-aside species or directly in research projects. NMFS, in consultation with the Council, may decide to hold a meeting with the public to discuss general topics concerning past RSA program accomplishments and ways to enhance communications on funding priorities and associated potential study methods. Such meetings will be publicized by NMFS through a **Federal Register** notice, and through the public mailing list maintained by the

### Council office (see **FOR FURTHER CONTACT INFORMATION CONTACT**).

Proposals must identify the research to be conducted and the total amount of the set-aside species requested for the project, including its approximate cash value. If a waiver of Federal regulations is proposed, a list of the specific regulations to be waived and a brief justification for each regulation to be waived must be included with the proposal.

In addition, each proposal must identify the RSA harvesting activities for the participating vessel(s) that would make a trip to collect the set-aside species. The vessel(s) selected by the applicant must be listed in the proposal, if possible, or specifically identified prior to final approval by NOAA. Proposals may request that the quota set-aside be collected separately from the research trips. The separate compensation trips do not necessarily have to be conducted by the same vessel. In general, compensation (in terms of the value of fish landed) should not exceed 2.5 times the cost of the associated research (See Evaluation Criterion 2 in Section J.).

The researcher's proposal must state the amount of funds required to support the research project, including any costs for participation by project scientists or consultants, as well as the amount required to compensate the vessel owner either for the collection of set-aside species, or for participation in the research project, or both. The proposal should also include the agreement between the applicant and participating vessel operators that shows exactly how the research activity is to be paid for, if possible, or such agreement must be provided prior to final approval by NOAA.

### I. Project Funding Priorities

The Council and NOAA will give priority to funding research proposals in the following areas identified as research priorities by the Council and Commission for the 2004 fishing year (not listed in order of priority):

1. Bycatch and discard reduction concerning: (a) distinctions between regulatory discards and bycatch attributed to gear, including mesh selectivity and/or overall gear design in the summer flounder fishery; (b) gear modifications in the Loligo squid fishery to reduce scup and other species bycatch; (c) discard studies in the Loligo and scup fisheries; (d) better estimates of recreational discards in the summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, and bluefish fisheries; or (e) ways to decrease discards associated with increases in size limits.

2. Mesh and gear selectivity focusing on: (a) the examination of summer flounder catch composition in small-mesh net fisheries within the summer flounder small-mesh exemption area; (b) summer flounder mesh selectivity studies; (c) scup mesh selectivity; (d) squid mesh selectivity; (e) black sea bass mesh selectivity; (f) the development of threshold triggers based on gear and fishery characteristics; (g) evaluation of various pot vent sizes and shapes for black sea bass and scup; (h) estimation of mortality of black sea bass left in pots during the closed season; and (i) mesh retention studies of 2 1/2-inch (6.35-cm), 2 3/4-inch (6.99-cm), and 3-inch (7.63-cm) mesh for butterfish.

3. Fishing impacts on habitat pertaining to: (a) mobile gear impacts on tilefish burrows; (b) scup spawning areas and scup larval settlement areas in coastal/estuarine waters; (c) benthic habitat of juvenile and adult black sea bass, and scup offshore wintering areas; (d) mapping of spawning areas and egg mop areas for Loligo squid; and (e) further delineation of essential fish habitat (EFH), particularly in nursery areas for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass, as well as the potential for possible gear impacts to this EFH.

4. Cooperative stock assessment surveys focusing on: (a) the use of alternative industry assessment methods to determine abundance of Atlantic mackerel; (b) the summer flounder fishery; (c) surveys for summer flounder in areas not traditionally sampled by NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) gear; (d) side-by-side comparisons for summer flounder and scup of commercial and NEFSC survey gear; (e) better survey information for bluefish; (f) tagging studies of bluefish movements; and (g) DNA analysis for stock descriptions of Atlantic bluefish and Atlantic mackerel.

5. Improved recreational fishery data focusing on: (a) research to enhance the overall knowledge of the recreational fishery; (b) statistical models to evaluate the effectiveness of recreational management measures and/or data collection process; (c) studies of bluefish, summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass hooking mortality by size of fish and the compliance with the regulations for these species; and (d) tagging studies with break-away hooks for movement of tilefish.

6. Other: (a) an evaluation of redirection of fishing effort with area closures for black sea bass; (b) an evaluation of whether artificial reefs increase the productivity of black sea bass or simply concentrate the resource; (c) an evaluation of the mixing of Illex and Loligo squid in September and