

October; (d) increased and more representative sea sampling of the various fisheries in which summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass are caught (needed to adequately characterize the length composition of the discards); (e) better estimates of discard mortality for the recreational and commercial fisheries (by gear type) for each species of Council-managed fish; (f) a study of summer flounder fecundity and why recruitment appears low as the resource is being rebuilt; (g) a study to develop optimum sampling levels to estimate discards of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass; (h) increased and more representative port sampling of the various fisheries in which summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass are caught; (i) development of fishery independent surveys and expansion of existing surveys to capture all sizes and age classes of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass in order to develop independent catch-at-age and catch per unit effort data; (j) expansion of age sampling of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass from commercial and recreational catches, with special emphasis on collection of large specimens; (k) quantification of the percentage of commercial fishery trips that had discards but no landings, and evaluation of how such trips contribute to the total commercial fishery discard estimate; and (l) evaluation of fishery management actions, e.g., do closures have a net positive effect on fishing mortality by postponing such mortality, or do they simply allow for concentration of resources such that when the seasons open the consequent fishing effort offsets the mortality reductions that occurred during the closure?

## J. Evaluation Criteria

The review panel convened by NOAA to evaluate proposals submitted in response to this RFP (see section L of this notice), will evaluate proposals by assigning scores up to the maximum indicated for each of the following criteria:

1. A clear definition of the problem, need, issue or hypothesis to be addressed. The proposal should describe its relevance to RSA program priorities. If not directly related to priorities listed in this solicitation, provide justification why the proposed project should be considered. (25 points)

2. Cost-effectiveness of the project. The requested value of the anticipated revenue from the RSA should be commensurate with estimated project costs, and generally should not exceed

2.5 times the cost of the associated research. Economic and budget projections should be quantified, to the extent possible. Where appropriate, use of existing equipment (fishing gear) is preferred versus acquisition of new equipment. (25 points)

3. Special emphasis will be given to proposals that foster and improve cooperative interactions with NMFS. A clear definition of the approach to be used, including description of field work, theoretical studies, and laboratory analysis to support the proposed research, and the ability of the applicant to physically complete RSA harvest during the 2004 calendar year in the area and time proposed is important. The time frame for harvesting the RSA catch and conducting the proposed research should be clearly specified. Activities that take place over a wider versus narrower geographical range, where appropriate, are preferred. (25 points)

4. Demonstration of support, cooperation and/or collaboration with the fishing industry, and qualifications/experience of project participants. Where appropriate, unified versus separate stand-alone proposals on related projects involving multiple principal investigators are preferred. (15 points)

5. Identification of anticipated benefits, potential users, likelihood of success, and methods of disseminating results. Where appropriate, data generated from the research must be formatted in a manner consistent with NMFS' and Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistical Program's (ACCSP) databases. A copy of this format is available from NMFS (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**). (10 points)

## K. Selection Procedures

NOAA will solicit written technical evaluations from the Council members who make up the Research Set-Aside Committee (Committee) and from three or more appropriate private and public sector experts to score proposals using the criteria specified in section J of this notification to determine the technical merit of the proposal. Following completion of the technical evaluation, NOAA will convene a review panel, including the Committee and technical experts, to review and individually critique the scored proposals to enhance NOAA's understanding of the proposals. Initial successful applicants may be required, in consultation with NMFS, to further refine/modify study methodology as a condition of project approval. No consensus recommendations will be made. Based on the results of the technical review's

comments and scores, comments provided by the review panel, and the following program policy factors, NOAA will select the successful proposals and inform the Council of its recommendations. The program policy factors are: (1) The time of year the research activities are to be conducted; (2) the ability of the proposal to meet the experimental fishery requirements discussed under section N of this notice; and (3) redundancy of research projects. Therefore, the highest scoring projects may not necessarily be selected for an award. Subsequent approval by the NOAA Grants Officer will allow NMFS, as applicable, to exempt selected vessel(s) from specific regulations implementing the respective FMPs through written notification to the applicant.

For proposals that request exemptions from existing regulations (e.g., possession limits, closed seasons), the impacts of the proposed exemptions must be analyzed. The Council will analyze these impacts as part of the impacts of the proposed specifications for the upcoming fishing year in the annual quota specification packages it submits to NMFS. However, those individuals with proposals that include vessel activities that extend beyond the scope of the analysis provided by the Council may be required to provide additional analysis before issuance of an EFP (see section N). Any applicants who request regulatory exemptions that are beyond the scope of the Council analysis may be required to adhere to the regulations that govern the issuance of an EFP by NMFS (see section N). If necessary, and as appropriate, NMFS will consult with the Council and successful applicants to secure the information required for granting an exemption, if issuance of an EFP is necessary for the research to be conducted. The final decision on the applicant's proposal for research quota will not be made by NOAA until NMFS advises that the applicant's EFP request is approved.

## L. Proposal Format

Proposals should be limited to seven pages, excluding item 6 below. The format may vary, but must include:

1. A project summary.
2. A narrative project description to include: (a) project goals and objectives; (b) the relationship of the proposed project to management needs or priorities identified by the Council; (c) a statement of work (project design and management, including who is responsible, expected products, and participants other than applicant); and (d) a summary of the existing state of