

necessary to support a Commission's ISFMP, and consistent with the national standards set forth in section 301 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The Assistant Administrator for Fisheries has preliminarily determined that these actions are consistent with the national standards. The Secretary, before making the final determination, will take into account data, views, and comments received during the comment period.

NMFS prepared an initial regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA) that describes the impact that this proposed rule, if adopted, would have on small entities. A summary of the IRFA is as follows:

This proposed rule is published under the authority of section 803 of the Atlantic Coastal Act. The purpose of the proposed rule is to improve cooperative management of the Atlantic coast weakfish fishery by supporting the Commission's Amendment 4, as required under the Atlantic Coastal Act. The proposed Federal regulatory change would increase the permitted non-directed incidental catch of the species from 150 lb (67 kg) to no more than 300 lb (135 kg) per day or trip. Analysis of the best available data in the EA/RIR/IRFA suggests that the proposed increase would not alter current fishing practices or effort, or increase the number of weakfish caught. The 150-lb (67-kg) increase would simply convert 150 lb (67 kg) of weakfish, which would be caught and discarded at sea as dead bycatch, into 150 lb (67 kg) of weakfish caught as incidental catch and landed. The need for the proposed action is explained in the preamble to this proposed rule and is not repeated here.

Only two alternatives were considered for this proposed action. They were: Alternative 1: No Action; and Alternative 2 (Preferred Alternative): Allow vessels in non-directed fisheries, using mesh sizes less than 3¼-inch (8.3 cm) square stretch mesh or 3¾-inch (9.5 cm) diamond stretch mesh for trawls and 2⅞-inch (7.3 cm) stretch mesh for gillnets to possess no more than 300 lb (135 kg) of weakfish during any one day or trip, whichever is longer in duration. Although a third alternative was identified in the environmental assessment, it was considered to be not significant for purposes of this IRFA. Furthermore, because the Secretary is required to develop and implement a program to support the Commission's action, analysis of additional alternatives would not meet the purpose and need for this action, or objectives of the Atlantic Coastal Act.

The preferred alternative would allow vessels in non-directed fisheries, using a mesh size less than 3¼-inch (8.3 cm)

square stretch mesh or 3¾-inch (9.5 cm) diamond stretch mesh for trawls and 2⅞-inch (7.3 cm) stretch mesh for gillnets, to possess no more than 300 lb (135 kg) of weakfish during any one day or trip, whichever is longer in duration (an increase of 150 lb (67 kg)).

NMFS does not have an estimate of the number of small entities to which the proposed action would apply because vessels most likely to be impacted are not required to hold a permit to fish for weakfish in the EEZ. However, the action would only apply to those fishermen who capture weakfish incidentally while fishing for other species using a smaller mesh size than is allowed in the directed weakfish fishery. In addition, under Alternative 1, status quo, no additional small entities would be impacted; while implementation of Alternative 2 would apply to fishermen who use nets with smaller mesh sizes and catch over 150 lb (67 kg) of weakfish on a given day or trip. During 1998–2002, vessel trip reports indicated that only 1,116 small mesh otter trawl trips and 4 small mesh gillnet trips landed weakfish caught while fishing in the EEZ. The average price received by fisherman reporting weakfish catch in the EEZ in 2001 was \$0.614 per lb. If an affected vessel were to land 150 lb (67 kg) of weakfish, as currently permitted (Alternative 1), \$92 in revenue could be realized, per trip. If Alternative 2 were implemented, an additional \$92 in revenue, for a weakfish total of \$184 per trip (double the current amount) would be possible. For a more accurate picture of the expected economic impacts for the two alternatives, actual catches from individual vessel trip records, from 1998–2002, were multiplied by average price-per-pound of weakfish from the EEZ to determine estimated revenues per trip. Since vessels may not catch the full 150 lb (67 kg) or 300 lb (135 kg) allowed in Alternative 1 and 2, revenues for each Alternative were projected as the average for those trips that reported from 1 to 150 lb (67 kg) (Alternative 1) and from 151 to 300 lb (135 kg) (Alternative 2). Catches from trips that reported over 300 lb (135 kg) were capped at the 300 lb (135 kg) proposed limit (Alternative 2) for these calculations. Calculated revenues for sale of allowed weakfish landings under Alternative 1 averaged \$22; potential revenues for Alternative 2 were estimated at \$160 per trip. Based on 1998–2002 vessel trip data, total annual revenues for all non-directed weakfish trips, coastwide are projected to be about \$6,200 under Alternative 1, and

about \$7,800, if Alternative 2 were to be implemented.

There will be no reporting and recordkeeping requirements resulting from this proposed action.

There are no Federal rules which may duplicate, overlap, or conflict with the proposed action.

NMFS is inviting the public to provide comment on the number of small entities that might be affected by this proposed action. NMFS will consider comments received during the public comment period for this proposed action that relate to the economic impacts of the preferred alternative before publishing the final action.

A copy of the IRFA is available from NMFS (see **ADDRESSES**).

NMFS has made a preliminary decision that this proposed rule is not significant for purposes of E.O. 12866. This proposed rule has been submitted to the Office of Management and Budget for review pursuant to E.O. 12866.

List of Subjects in 50 CFR Part 697

Fisheries, Fishing

Dated: June 25, 2003.

Rebecca J. Lent,

Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs, National Marine Fisheries Service.

For the reasons set out in the preamble, 50 CFR chapter VI, part 697, is proposed to be amended as follows:

PART 697—ATLANTIC COASTAL FISHERIES COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

1. The authority citation for part 697 is revised to read as follows:

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 5101 *et seq.*

2. In § 697.2, the definition for "Atlantic Coastal Act" is added in alphabetical order to read as follows:

§ 697.2 Definitions.

* * * * *

Atlantic Coastal Act means the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 5101 *et seq.*).

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3. Section 697.7, paragraph (a)(4) and (a)(7) are revised to read as follows:

§ 697.7 Prohibitions.

(a) * * *

(4) Possess more than 300 lb (135 kg) of weakfish during any one day or trip, whichever is longer, in the EEZ when using a mesh size less than 3¼-inch (8.3 cm) square stretch mesh (as measured between the centers of opposite knots when stretched taut) or 3¾-inch (9.5 cm) diamond stretch mesh