

the allocation of harvest opportunity between sectors. Allocation decisions can affect OYs because different sectors may catch fish of different ages, allowing different sustainable harvest levels.

For each set of ABCs/OYs used in a given alternative, a set of management measures will be identified that will constrain total harvest mortality (across all fisheries intercepting groundfish). Restrictive management measures intended to rebuild overfished species have been adopted and implemented over the past several years for most commercial and recreational fishing sectors. Management measures intended to control the rate at which different groundfish species or species groups are taken in the fisheries include trip limits, bag limits, size limits, time/area closures, and gear restrictions. Large area closures, called Groundfish Conservation Areas (GCAs), intended to reduce bycatch of overfished species, were first implemented in late 2002. These closed areas will continue to be a key feature of alternatives considered in the EIS to manage groundfish fisheries in 2005–2006. A second important type of measure used to manage groundfish is the cumulative landing limit. These restrict the total weight of fish by species or species group that any one vessel may land during the limit period, which is normally two months. Different cumulative landing limits are established for areas north and south of 40°10' N. lat. (near Cape Mendocino, CA) and for limited entry trawl, limited entry fixed gear, and open access fishery participants.

Preliminary Identification of Environmental Issues

A principal objective of the scoping and public input process is to identify potentially significant impacts to the human environment that should be analyzed in depth in the EIS. The EIS evaluates a range of feasible alternatives (described above) to determine their likely impacts on the human environment and identify significant impacts. Council and NMFS staff conducted initial screening to identify

the potentially significant impacts of the range of alternatives that will be developed. Issues considered in the EIS for 2004 harvest specifications, currently in preparation, are likely to be relevant to the EIS for 2005–2006 harvest specifications. (These include the effects of fishing on essential fish habitat, protected species listed under the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act, the sustainability of overfished and non-overfished groundfish stocks, and socioeconomic impacts to individuals and communities involved in the use of groundfish resources). The transition from annually specifying harvest levels and management measures to this 2-year management cycle may also raise issues that will be considered in the EIS.

Public Scoping Process

A public scoping meeting is scheduled for Sunday, November 2, 2003 from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. This scoping session will coincide with the Council meeting and will occur at the same location, the Hilton San Diego/Del Mar, 15575 Jimmy Durante Blvd., Del Mar, California 92014–1901 (858–792–5200). The primary purpose of the scoping meeting is to focus the analysis on the real issues and concerns of the public (see 40 CFR 1500.5(d) and 40 CFR 1501.7). Public comment also may be made during the November Council meeting (November 3–7), under the agenda when the Council will consider the proposed action. The agenda for this meeting will be available from the Council website or by request from Council offices in advance of the meeting (see **ADDRESSES**). The agenda will also identify the room in which the Sunday scoping meeting will occur. Written comments on the scope of issues and alternatives may be submitted as described under **ADDRESSES**.

NMFS invites comments and suggestions on the scope of the analysis to be included in the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The scope includes the range of alternatives to be considered and potentially significant impacts to the human environment that should be

evaluated in the DEIS. In addition, NMFS is notifying the public that, in conjunction with the Council, it is beginning a full environmental analysis and decision-making process for this proposal, so interested or affected people may know how they can participate in the environmental analysis and contribute to the final decision.

A DEIS will be prepared for comment later on in the process. The comment period on the DEIS will be 45 days from the date the Environmental Protection Agency's notice of availability appears in the **Federal Register**. It is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate at that time. To be the most helpful, comments on the DEIS should be as specific as possible and may address the adequacy of the statement or merits of the alternatives discussed. It is also helpful if comments refer to specific pages or chapters of the DEIS. Comments may also address the adequacy of the DEIS or the merits of the alternatives formulated and discussed in the DEIS. (Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points). Comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposal and will be available for public inspection.

Special Accommodations

These meetings are accessible to people with physical disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Carolyn Porter 503–820–2280 (voice) or 503–820–2299 (fax), at least 5 days prior to the scheduled meeting date.

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

Dated: October 8, 2003.

Bruce C. Morehead,

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

[FR Doc. 03–26075 Filed 10–14–03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–22–S