

meetings convened by the Council's Sea Turtle Conservation Special Advisory Committee.

The SEIS will analyze, among other things, additional alternatives that include an abolition or modification to the southern area closure; the restoration of the swordfish fishery at some reduced level; mitigation measures such as circle hooks and mackerel bait known to reduce interaction rates of sea turtles with longline gear; international conservation measures to increase sea turtle recruitment; and an analysis on the potential impact of such alternatives on the continued existence of endangered and threatened sea turtles.

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

Dated: November 26, 2003.

Bruce C. Morehead,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.
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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 031124287-3287-01; I.D. 111703C]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands; Proposed 2004 Harvest Specifications for Groundfish

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Proposed 2004 harvest specifications for groundfish; apportionment of Reserves; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS proposes 2004 harvest specifications and prohibited species catch (PSC) allowances for the groundfish fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands management area (BSAI). This action is necessary to establish harvest limits for groundfish during the 2004 fishing year and to accomplish the goals and objectives of the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area (FMP). The intended effect of this action is to conserve and manage the groundfish resources in the BSAI.

DATES: Comments must be received by January 2, 2004.

ADDRESSES: Comments may be sent to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator, Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, National Marine Fisheries Service, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802-1668, Attn: Lori Durall, or delivered to room 401 of the Federal Building, 709 West 9th Street, Juneau, AK. Comments also may be sent via facsimile (fax) to 907-586-7557. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or Internet.

Copies of the draft Environmental Assessment/Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (EA/IRFA) prepared for this action are available from NMFS (see **ADDRESSES**) and comments must be received by January 2, 2004. Copies of the final 2002 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report, dated November 2002, are available from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, West 4th Avenue, Suite 306, Anchorage, AK 99510-2252 (907-271-2809), or from its homepage at <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Mary Furuness, 907-586-7228 or e-mail at mary.furuness@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background for the 2004 Proposed Harvest Specifications

Groundfish fisheries in the BSAI are governed by Federal regulations at 50 CFR part 679 that implement the FMP. The Council prepared the FMP and NMFS approved it under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. General regulations governing U.S. fisheries also appear at 50 CFR part 600.

The FMP and its implementing regulations require NMFS, after consultation with the Council, to specify annually the total allowable catch (TAC) for each target species and the "other species" category, the sum of which must be within the optimum yield range of 1.4 million to 2.0 million metric tons (mt) (see § 679.20(a)(1)(i)). Regulations at § 679.20(c)(1) further require NMFS to solicit public comment on proposed annual TACs and apportionments thereof, PSC allowances and prohibited species quota (PSQ) reserves established by § 679.21, seasonal allowances of pollock TAC, including pollock Community Development Quota (CDQ), and CDQ reserve amounts established by § 679.20(b)(1)(iii) and to publish proposed specifications in the **Federal Register**. The proposed specifications set forth in Tables 1 through 13 of this action satisfy these requirements. For 2004, the proposed sum of TACs is 1,998,443 mt.

Under § 679.20(c)(3), NMFS will publish the final annual specifications for 2004 after (1) considering comments received within the comment period (see DATES), (2) consulting with the Council, which will occur at its next meeting beginning the week of December 8, 2003, and (3) considering new information presented in the EA and the final 2003 SAFE reports prepared for the 2004 groundfish fisheries.

With some exceptions, regulations at § 679.20(c)(2)(ii) require that one-fourth of each proposed initial TAC (ITAC) amount and apportionment thereof, one-fourth of each CDQ reserve established under § 679.20(b)(1)(iii), and one-fourth of each proposed PSC allowance established under § 679.21, become available at 0001 hours, Alaska local time (A.l.t.), January 1, on an interim basis and remain in effect until superseded by the final specifications. Regulations at § 679.20(c)(2)(ii) (A) and (B) require that the proposed first seasonal allowance of non-CDQ and CDQ pollock, Pacific cod and Atka mackerel becomes available at 0001 hours, A.l.t., January 1 on an interim basis and remains in effect until superseded by the final specifications. Regulations at § 679.20(c)(2)(ii) do not provide for an interim specification for either the hook-and-line and pot gear sablefish CDQ reserve or for sablefish managed under the Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program. Interim TAC specifications and apportionments thereof for the 2004 fishing year will be published in a separate **Federal Register** notice.

Other Rules Affecting the 2004 Specifications

In October 2003, the Council discussed Aleutian Islands pollock fishery management, but made no recommendation to close or open the fishery in 2004. The Council set the proposed Aleutian Islands pollock TAC at 2003 amounts, which is for incidental catch only. The Council may consider apportionment of the TAC of several rockfish species in the Aleutian Islands subarea among the Eastern, Central, and Western Aleutian Districts and separating the shortraker and rougheye rockfish TAC.

Amendment 77 to the FMP, approved by the Secretary of Commerce on October 20, 2003, provides for apportioning the BSAI Pacific cod TAC among hook-and-line and pot gears sector. Table 4 lists the proposed 2004 allocations and seasonal apportionments of the Pacific cod ITAC based on regulations that would implement Amendment 77. For more