

**ACTION:** Proposed 2004 harvest specifications for groundfish; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** NMFS proposes 2004 harvest specifications for groundfish, reserves and apportionment thereof, Pacific halibut prohibited species catch (PSC) limits, for the groundfish fishery of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). This action is necessary to establish harvest limits for groundfish during the 2004 fishing year. The intended effect of this action is to conserve and manage the groundfish resources in the GOA in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

**DATES:** Comments must be received by January 5, 2004.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments must be sent to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator, Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, 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 final 2002 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports, dated November 2002, are available from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, West 4th Avenue, Suite 306, Anchorage, AK, 99510 or from its home page at <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc>. 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 5, 2004.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Tom Pearson, Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, 907-481-1780 or e-mail at [tom.pearson@noaa.gov](mailto:tom.pearson@noaa.gov).

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

##### **Background**

NMFS manages the groundfish fisheries in the exclusive economic zone off Alaska under the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Groundfish of the GOA. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) prepared the FMP under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, 16 U.S.C. 1801, *et seq.* Regulations governing U.S. fisheries and implementing the FMP appear at 50 CFR parts 600 and 679.

The FMP and implementing regulations require NMFS, after consultation with the Council, to specify annually the total allowable catch (TAC) for each target species and

for the "other species" category, the sum of which must be within the optimum yield (OY) range of 116,000 to 800,000 metric tons (mt) (§ 679.20(a)(1)(ii)). Regulations at § 679.20(c)(1) further require NMFS to publish annually, and solicit public comment on, proposed annual TACs, halibut PSC amounts, and seasonal allowances of pollock, and inshore/offshore Pacific cod. The proposed specifications set forth in Tables 1 through 9 of this document satisfy these requirements. For 2004, the sum of the proposed TAC amounts is 277,797 mt. Under § 679.20(c)(3), NMFS will publish the final specifications for 2004 after (1) considering comments received within the comment period (see **DATES**), (2) consulting with the Council at its December 2003 meeting, and (3) considering new information presented in the EA and the final 2003 SAFE reports prepared for the 2004 fisheries.

Regulations at § 679.20(c)(2)(i) provide that one-fourth of each proposed TAC and apportionment thereof (not including the reserves and the first seasonal allowances of pollock and Pacific cod), one-fourth of the proposed halibut PSC amounts, and the proposed first seasonal allowances of pollock and Pacific cod will become effective 0001 hours, Alaska local time (A.l.t.) January 1, 2004, on an interim basis and remain in effect until superseded by the final harvest specifications, which will be published in the **Federal Register**. Without interim specifications in effect on January 1, the groundfish fisheries would not be able to open on that date, which would result in disruption to the fishing industry. The interim harvest specifications will be published by NMFS in the **Federal Register** prior to January 1, 2004.

##### **Proposed Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) and TAC Specifications**

The proposed ABC and TAC for each species or species group are based on the best available biological and socioeconomic information, including projected biomass trends, information on assumed distribution of stock biomass, and revised methods used to calculate stock biomass. The Council, its Advisory Panel (AP), and its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed current biological and harvest information about the condition of groundfish stocks in the GOA in October 2003. Most of this information was initially compiled by the Council's GOA Plan Team (Plan Team) and is presented in the final 2002 SAFE report for the GOA groundfish fisheries, dated November 2002. The Plan Team

annually produces such a document as the first step in the process of specifying TACs. The SAFE report contains a review of the latest scientific analyses and estimates of each species' biomass and other biological parameters, as well as summaries of the available information on the GOA ecosystem and the economic condition of the groundfish fisheries off Alaska. From these data and analyses, the Plan Team estimates an ABC for each species category. The 2002 SAFE report will be updated to include new information collected during 2003. Revised stock assessments will be made available by the Plan Team in November 2003 and will be included in the final 2003 SAFE report, which will be available in December 2003.

Based on the recommendations from the SSC for overfishing levels (OFLs) and from the SSC and AP for ABCs, the Council recommended the OFLs and ABCs for stocks in tiers 3 and above, except for pollock, be based on biomass projections as set forth in the 2002 SAFE report and estimates of groundfish harvests through the 2003 fishing year. The Council recommended that OFL and ABC levels for those stocks in tiers 4 and below, for which projections cannot be made, remain unchanged from 2003 levels (Table 1).

The SSC adopted the OFL and ABC recommendations from the Plan Team for all groundfish species. In the 2002 SAFE report, the ABC projection for 2004 is 65,400 mt for the combined Western, Central, and West Yakutat (W/C/WYK) GOA stock of pollock. The Plan Team did not endorse the ABC projection because the NMFS 2003 winter Shelikof survey estimates indicate that the biomass level is lower than projected and because it represents a substantial increase from the 2003 ABC. The Plan Team recommended that the 2003 ABC of 47,890 mt for the W/C/WYK pollock stock be rolled over in the proposed specifications given the apparent pessimistic survey results from the NMFS winter survey in the GOA. The SSC concurred with the pollock assessment recommendation that OFL and ABC levels be unchanged from 2003 levels until a formal stock assessment can be completed.

As in 2003, the SSC's, AP's and Council's recommendation for the method of apportioning the sablefish ABC among management areas includes commercial fishery and survey data. NMFS stock assessment scientists believe that the use of unbiased commercial fishery data reflecting catch-per-unit effort provides a desirable input for stock distribution assessments. The use of commercial