

discarding are identified, the research vessels would work in pairs to make coordinated trips of about 5 days duration. Each research vessel, working in close proximity to the paired research vessel, would conduct about 10 research tows for a total of about 20 research tows during a coordinated trip. One of the vessels would use unmodified gear (1.875–inch (4.76–cm) standard codend and unmodified extension) and the other would use modified gear (1.875–inch (4.76–cm)) standard codend with a square mesh panel in the extension or other configuration). Nets will be towed using an ABBA pattern of deployment. Approximately 80 combined two-hour research tows will be made to carry out the mesh study. Most tows would occur in March, but some tows may take place in November and December. The catch will be sorted by species and weighed. Target species in order of priority will be scup, *Loligo* squid, summer flounder, black sea bass, and whiting. Data will be statistically analyzed and a report prepared. Generally, where sampling permits, at least 100 lengths of discards and landings will be collected for each target species.

To conduct the mesh study, the research vessels would be granted exemptions to black sea bass quarterly quota closures at § 648.141; scup trimester quota closures at § 648.121(a); scup time and area restrictions at § 648.122(a) and (b); scup trawl gear restrictions at § 648.123; and *Loligo* squid trip and quarterly closures at § 648.22. In addition, in order to collect individual size measurements and other data, the EFP for the ten vessels identified as research vessels to conduct the mesh study would grant additional exemptions from the following regulations: Minimum sizes for scup at § 648.124(a), summer flounder at § 648.103(a), (b), and (c), and black sea bass at § 648.143. The 1 to 15 vessels that would be used to harvest the RSA would be exempt from the following: Black sea bass trip limits at § 648.140(b)(2); black sea bass quarterly quota closures at § 648.141; scup trimester quota closures at § 648.121(a); and *Loligo* squid possession limit, and quarterly closures at § 648.22(a) and (c).

Any landings that would occur from research or compensation fishing would be reported in the Vessel Trip Report, as required, because the participating vessels possess a commercial scup, *Loligo* squid, summer flounder, or black sea bass moratorium permit. All fish would be landed in compliance with applicable state landing laws.

Based on the results of the EFP, this action may lead to future rulemaking.

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

Dated: February 21, 2003.

Richard W. Surdi,

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

[I.D. 022003B]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Delay of Full Retention and Utilization Requirements for Rock Sole and Yellowfin Sole

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

ACTION: Notice of availability (NOA); request for comments.

SUMMARY: The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) has submitted Amendment 75 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area (FMP). This amendment would delay the effective date of requirements for 100-percent retention and utilization of rock sole and yellowfin sole from January 1, 2003, until June 1, 2004. The purpose of Amendment 75 is to provide the Council and the affected industry with additional time to develop and assess alternatives to address groundfish discards in the groundfish fisheries of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Management Area (BSAI).

DATES: Comments on Amendment 75 must be received by April 29, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Comments on Amendment 75 may be mailed to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator, Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802–1668, Attn: Lori Durall. Hand delivery or courier delivery of comments may be sent to the NMFS, Alaska Region, 709 West 9th St., Room 453, Juneau, AK, 99801. Comments also may be sent via facsimile (fax) to (907) 586–7557. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or the Internet. Copies of Amendment 75 and the Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review/Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (RIR/IRFA) prepared for this action are available from NMFS at the above

address, or by calling the Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, NMFS, at (907) 586–7228.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Kent Lind, (907) 586–7228 or kent.lind@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) requires that each regional fishery management council submit any FMP or FMP amendment it prepares to NMFS for review and approval, disapproval, or partial approval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving an FMP, immediately publish notification in the **Federal Register** that the FMP or amendment is available for public review and comment.

Purpose and Need for Amendment 75

In 1997, the Council adopted a regulatory program to reduce the amount of groundfish discards in the groundfish fisheries off Alaska. This program, known as the Improved Retention/Improved Utilization (IR/IU) Program, was adopted as Amendments 49 to the FMP for the Groundfish Fishery of the BSAI and Amendment 49 to the FMP for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) (Amendments 49/49). The IR/IU program requires that vessels fishing for groundfish in Alaska retain all pollock and Pacific cod beginning in 1998 when directed fishing for those species is open. In January 1, 2003, the program expanded to include all rock sole and yellowfin sole in the BSAI, and all shallow water flatfish in the GOA.

In December 1995, the Council adopted its IR/IU problem statement. That statement reads as follows:

“In managing the fisheries under its jurisdiction, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council is committed to: (1) assuring the long-term health and productivity of fish stocks and other living marine resources of the North Pacific and Bering Sea ecosystem; and (2) reducing bycatch, minimizing waste, and improving utilization of fish resources in order to provide the maximum benefit to present generations of fishermen, associated fishing industry sectors, communities, consumers, and the nation as a whole...

The Council's overriding concern is to maintain the health of the marine ecosystem to ensure the long-term conservation and abundance of the groundfish and crab resources. As a response to this concern, a program to promote improved utilization and effective control/reduction of bycatch and discards in the fisheries off Alaska should address the following problems:

1. By catch and discard loss of groundfish, crab, herring, salmon, and other non-target species.
2. Economic loss and waste associated with the discard mortality of target species