

[I.D. 101796A]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Electronic Reporting

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

ACTION: Public meeting.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces a meeting with members of the groundfish processing industry to discuss the electronic reporting system currently under development by the Alaska Region. The purpose of the meeting is to exchange information relating to software development, communications, and system implementation.

DATES: The meeting will be held on October 29, 1996, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will be held at the following location: Alaska Fisheries Science Center, Building 4, Room 2079, 7600 Sand Point Way Northeast, Seattle, WA 98115.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Nick Hindman, 907-586-7228.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: At its June and September 1996 meetings, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended that NMFS staff meet with interested industry members to discuss ideas relating to the electronic reporting system currently under development by the Alaska Region. One such meeting was held in Seattle on August 8, 1996.

A second meeting is warranted to discuss ideas and issues pertaining to this initiative. NMFS therefore has scheduled a public meeting to take place in Seattle (see **DATES** and **ADDRESSES**) and encourages fishermen, processors, and others interested in electronic reporting to attend.

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

Dated: October 16, 1996.

Bruce Morehead,

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

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Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Disaster Program; Revisions

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

ACTION: Revisions to program for financial assistance.

SUMMARY: This notice serves the following purposes: To revise the definition of "eligible causes" to include the "Storm of the Century," which occurred on March 12-14, 1993; to clarify that the definition of eligible gear or vessels includes gear and vessels lost or damaged from eligible causes while on land; to clarify that fishermen who have not yet repaired or replaced their eligible gear or vessels are eligible to apply; and to notify the public that NMFS will provide an additional 30 days for submission of applications.

DATES: Effective October 24, 1996. Applications must be postmarked November 25, 1996.

ADDRESSES: Applications should be sent to Charles L. Cooper, Program Leader, Financial Services Division, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Charles L. Cooper, Program Leader, (301) 713-2396.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**Background**

NMFS published the proposed and final program notice describing the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Disaster Program (GOMFDP) on April 1, 1996, and June 10, 1996, respectively. (61 FR 14293; 61 FR 29350). The program description and background are included in those notices and are not repeated here.

Revisions to the program

NMFS has determined that the revisions contained herein are necessary to clarify certain aspects of the program. NMFS believes that these revisions will expand the program to reach fishermen who suffered eligible losses during the disaster period. NMFS also believes that clarification is needed to indicate the intention to include certain fishermen who may believe they are not eligible.

Expansion of Eligible Causes

Pursuant to the authority under the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFA), the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) may determine the extent, and the beginning and ending dates, of any fishery resource disaster. Accordingly, the Secretary limited the definition of disaster to those events that are of a magnitude foreseen by the IFA, and the final program notice defined disasters as hurricanes and the Mississippi river floods of 1993 and 1994 and their aftereffects. Since implementation of the program began, however, NMFS has

received significant new data that suggest that the "Storm of the Century," on March 12-14, 1993, was equal in magnitude to a hurricane. This storm was not deemed an official hurricane, since it occurred in the winter and was not cyclonic in nature, which is a defining characteristic of a hurricane. However, a National Climatic Data Center Technical Report (#93-01) and other reports state that this storm brought a 12-ft (3.7-m) tidal surge along portions of Florida's west coast and hurricane strength winds of up to 109 mph, damaged or destroyed 18,000 homes, and caused over \$500 million in damage to the Florida Gulf coast alone. Based on this new information, NMFS has determined that the "Storm of the Century" qualifies as a disaster of a magnitude of a hurricane. Therefore, any fisherman who suffered uninsured gear or vessel loss during the "Storm of the Century" on March 12-14, 1993, may now apply for a grant award under the program. Applications previously submitted that request compensation for damage suffered from this storm will be processed, if otherwise eligible.

Clarification of Eligible Loss

Some fishermen have reported to NMFS that they believed that the GOMFDP limited grant awards to costs arising from the repair or replacement of eligible gear or vessels lost in eligible waters and excluded fishermen who had removed their gear or vessels from the water to a land site before a storm, where it was damaged or destroyed. The program was not designed to exclude these fishermen. The definition of eligible cause extends causation to any hurricane or flood, or its aftereffects, during a period from August 23, 1992, through December 31, 1995, including, but not limited to, wind, waves, rising waters, and the debris or other obstructions caused by them or carried by them. This definition of "eligible cause" underscores that the attendant forces of a hurricane, such as the wind and rising waters, are eligible forces, the impact of which may cause eligible harm, even if the gear or vessel was not literally in the water at the time. Therefore, NMFS clarifies that fishermen who lost their fishing gear or vessels due to eligible causes while such gear or vessels were on land are eligible to apply for this program.

In addition, the GOMFDP final program notice may be read to limit compensation to fishermen who had already repaired or replaced their gear or vessels. However, many fishermen may not have had sufficient funds at the time to repair or replace their lost gear or vessels. These fishermen were also