

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 991223348-9348-01; I.D. 122399A]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Closures of Specified Groundfish Fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska

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

ACTION: Closures.

SUMMARY: NMFS is closing specified groundfish fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). This action is necessary to prevent exceeding the directed fishing allowances specified for the 2000 interim total allowable catch (TAC) amounts for the GOA.

DATES: Effective 0001 hrs, Alaska local time (A.l.t.), January 1, 2000, until superseded by the effective date of the final 2000 harvest specifications for GOA groundfish, which will be published in the **Federal Register**.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Thomas Pearson, 907-481-1780 or tom.pearson@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: NMFS manages the groundfish fishery in the GOA exclusive economic zone according to the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska (FMP) prepared by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council under authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Regulations governing fishing by U.S. vessels in accordance with the FMP appear at subpart H of 50 CFR part 600 and 50 CFR part 679.

In accordance with § 679.20(d), if the Administrator, Alaska Region, NMFS (Regional Administrator), determines that the amount of a target species or

“other species” category apportioned to a fishery will be reached, the Regional Administrator may establish a directed fishing allowance for that species or species group. If the Regional Administrator establishes a directed fishing allowance, and that allowance is or will be reached before the end of the fishing year, NMFS will prohibit directed fishing for that species or species group in the specified GOA Regulatory Area or district (§ 697.20(d)(1)(iii)).

The interim 2000 harvest specifications for the groundfish fisheries in the GOA are published elsewhere in this issue of the **Federal Register**. The Regional Administrator has determined that the following interim TAC amounts will be reached and are necessary as incidental catch to support other directed groundfish fisheries before final specifications for groundfish are likely to be in effect for the 2000 fishing year:

Pollock	entire GOA
Thornyhead rockfish	entire GOA
Atka mackerel	entire GOA
Sablefish	entire GOA
Shorthead/rougeye rockfish	entire GOA
Deep-water flatfish	Western Regulatory Area
Northern rockfish	Eastern Regulatory Area
“Other rockfish”	Western and Central Regulatory Area

Consequently, in accordance with § 679.20(d)(1)(i), the Regional Administrator establishes the interim TAC amounts for the species listed above as directed fishing allowances.

Further, The Regional Administrator finds that these directed fishing allowances will be reached before the end of the year. Therefore, in accordance with § 679.20(d) NMFS is prohibiting directed fishing for these species in the specified areas. These closures will be in effect beginning at 0001 hours, A.l.t., January 1, 2000, until superseded by the effective date of Final 2000 Harvest Specifications for GOA Groundfish or, with respect to pollock, until a final rule implementing the recommended preferred alternatives to protect Steller sea lions is effective.

While these closures are in effect, the maximum retainable bycatch amounts at § 679.20(e) and (f) apply at any time during a fishing trip. Additional closures and restrictions may be found in existing regulations at 50 CFR part

679. These closures to directed fishing are in addition to closures and prohibitions found in regulations at 50 CFR part 679. Refer to § 679.2 for definitions of areas. The definitions of GOA deep-water flatfish and “other rockfish” species categories are provided in the Interim 2000 Harvest Specifications, as published in this issue of the **Federal Register**.

NMFS may implement other closures under the interim specifications, at the time the final 2000 harvest specifications for GOA groundfish are implemented or during the 2000 fishing year, as necessary for effective conservation and management.

Classification

This action is required by § 679.20 and is exempt from review under E.O. 12866.

This action responds to the interim TAC limitations and other restrictions on the fisheries established in the interim 2000 harvest specifications for

GOA groundfish. It must be implemented immediately to prevent overharvesting the 2000 interim TAC of several groundfish species in the GOA. A delay in the effective date is impracticable and contrary to the public interest. The fleet will begin to harvest groundfish on January 1, 2000. Further delay would only result in overharvest. NMFS finds for good cause that the implementation of this action should not be delayed for 30 days. Accordingly, under 5 U.S.C. 553(d), a delay in the effective date is hereby waived.

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

Dated: December 27, 1999.

George H. Darcy,

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