

to this action. The final EA for the 2000 harvest specifications incorporates by reference the 1998 SEIS. Additionally, given the foregoing conclusions that publication of the final specifications for the 2000 Alaska groundfish fisheries will not amount to an irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources which would have the effect of foreclosing the formulation or implementation of any reasonable and prudent alternative measures for the Alaska groundfish fisheries, NMFS finds that it is unnecessary to revise, amend, or supplement the environmental assessment and "finding of no significant impact" prepared for publication of the final specifications for the 2000 fisheries.

NMFS prepared an initial regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA) pursuant to the Regulatory Flexibility Act that describes the impact the 2000 harvest specifications may have on small entities. The IRFA considered the impacts of a range of alternative harvest levels that included no action (i.e., no harvest in 2000) and harvest levels equal to those proposed. NMFS solicited public comment on the IRFA. Although NMFS did not receive any public comments directly addressing the IRFA, NMFS and the Council have considered additional information on the fishery that became available in December. Based on that information, the Council recommended and NMFS hereby establishes final harvest specifications that have been revised from the preferred alternative identified in the proposed rule. NMFS has prepared an FRFA which analyzes the new TAC levels, recommended by the Council in December 1999, and based on updated survey and stock assessment information, for the final 2000 specifications. A copy of this analysis is available from NMFS (see **ADDRESSES**). This action authorizes the BSAI groundfish fisheries to continue under final specifications set at 2000 levels until the TAC is harvested or until the fishery is closed due to attainment of a PSC limit, or for other management reasons. The 2000 TACs are based on the most recent scientific information as reviewed by the Plan Teams, SSC, AP, and Council and which commented on through public testimony and comment from the October and December Council meetings and those comments sent to NMFS on the proposed specifications. This action also achieves optimum yield while preventing overfishing. Small entities would receive the maximum benefits under this alternative, in that they will be able to harvest target species and species groups at the

highest available level based on stock status and ecosystem concerns.

The six Community Development Quota (CDQ) groups are comprised of 64 small governmental jurisdictions with direct involvement in groundfish CDQ fisheries that are within the RFA definition of small entities. Based on 1998 data, NMFS estimates less than 280 small entities harvest groundfish in the BSAI.

The establishment of differing compliance or reporting requirements or timetables, and the use of performance rather than design standards, or exempting affected small entities from any part of this action would not be appropriate.

This action is necessary to establish harvest limits for the BSAI groundfish fisheries for the 2000 fishing year. The groundfish fisheries in the BSAI are governed by Federal regulations at 50 CFR part 679 that require NMFS, after consultation with the Council, to publish and solicit public comments on proposed annual TACs, PSC allowances, and seasonal allowances of the TACs. No recordkeeping and reporting requirements are implemented with this final action. NMFS is not aware of any other Federal rules which duplicate, overlap or conflict with the final specifications.

This action is not subject to a 30-day delay in effectiveness because it relieves a restriction as contemplated under 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(1). This rule allows fishing to continue. Without this rule, fishermen who are already on the fishing grounds fishing on interim TAC would have to stop fishing and return to port.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 773 *et seq.*, 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*, and 3631 *et seq.*

Dated: February 14, 2000.

Gary C. Matlock,

*Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 000211040-0040-01; I.D. 021400E]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Closures of Specified Groundfish Fisheries in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS is closing specified groundfish fisheries in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands management area (BSAI). This action is necessary to prevent exceeding the prohibited species bycatch allowances and directed fishing allowances specified for the 2000 BSAI groundfish fisheries.

DATES: Effective February 15, 2000, through 2400 hrs, A.l.t., December 31, 2000.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mary Furuness, 907-586-7228.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: NMFS manages the groundfish fishery in the BSAI according to the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area (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)(1)(i), if the Administrator, Alaska Region, NMFS (Regional Administrator) determines that any allocation or apportionment of a target species or "other species" category has been or 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 subarea or district (§ 697.20(d)(1)(iii)). Similarly, under § 679.21(e), if the Regional Administrator determines that a fishery category's bycatch allowance of halibut, red king crab, or *C. bairdi* Tanner crab for a specified area has been reached, the Regional Administrator will prohibit directed fishing for each species in the category in the specified area.

The Regional Administrator has determined that the following remaining allocation amounts will be necessary as incidental catch to support other anticipated groundfish fisheries for the 2000 fishing year:

Bogoslof District: 1,000 mt
Pollock

Aleutian Islands subarea:

Pollock: 2,000 mt

Sharpchin/northern rockfish 4,764 mt

Shorthead/rougheye rockfish 819 mt

"Other rockfish" 583 mt
 Bering Sea subarea:
 Pacific ocean perch 2,210 mt
 "Other rockfish" 314 mt
 "Other red rockfish" 1657 mt

Consequently, in accordance with § 679.20(d)(1)(i), the Regional Administrator establishes the directed fishing allowances for the listed species or species groups as zero.

Therefore, in accordance with § 679.20(d)(1)(iii) NMFS is prohibiting directed fishing for these species in the specified areas and these closures will remain in effect through 2400 hrs, Alaska local time (A.l.t.), December 31, 2000.

In addition, the BSAI, Zone 1, annual red king crab allowance specified for the trawl rockfish fishery (§ 679.21(e)(3)(iv)(D)) is 0 mt and the BSAI first seasonal halibut bycatch allowance specified for the trawl rockfish is 0 mt. The BSAI annual halibut bycatch allowance specified for the trawl Greenland turbot/arrowtooth flounder/sablefish fishery categories, (§ 679.21(e)(3)(iv)(C)) is 0 mt. Therefore, in accordance with § 679.21(e)(7)(ii) and (v), NMFS is prohibiting directed fishing for rockfish by vessels using trawl gear in Zone 1 of the BSAI, directed fishing for rockfish by vessels using trawl gear in the entire BSAI and directed fishing for Greenland turbot/arrowtooth flounder/sablefish by vessels using trawl gear in the BSAI. These closures will remain in effect through 2400 hrs, A.l.t., December 31, 2000, for directed fishing for Greenland turbot/arrowtooth flounder/sablefish by vessels using trawl gear in the BSAI, and for directed fishing for rockfish by vessels using trawl gear in Zone 1 in the BSAI, and the 1200 hrs, A.l.t., July 4, 2000, for directed fishing for rockfish by vessels using trawl gear in the entire BSAI.

Under authority of the interim 2000 harvest specifications (65 FR 60, January 3, 2000), NMFS closed directed fishing for Atka mackerel for gears other than jig in the Eastern Aleutian District and the Bering Sea subarea of the BSAI effective 1200 hrs, A.l.t., January 29, 2000, through 2400 hrs, A.l.t., September 1, 2000 (65 FR 4893, February 2, 2000); directed fishing for pollock by vessels, not participating in cooperatives, greater than 99 ft (30.2 m) LOA catching pollock for processing by the inshore component in the SCA of the BSAI effective 12 noon, A.l.t., January 30, 2000, until 1200 hrs, A.l.t., April 1, 2000 (65 FR 5284, February 3, 2000); and prohibited trawling within Steller sea lion critical habitat in the Central Aleutian District of the BSAI, effective 12 noon, A.l.t., February 10,

2000, until the directed fishery for Atka mackerel closes within the entire Central Aleutian District (65 FR xxxx, February x, 2000). The amount of available TAC remaining for these fisheries under the final 2000 harvest specifications for groundfish, following the closures under the interim 2000 harvest specifications for groundfish, will be taken as incidental catch in directed fishing for other species. Thus, these closures remain effective under authority of final 2000 harvest specifications.

These closures supersede the closures announced in the interim 2000 harvest specifications (65 FR 60, January 3, 2000). 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. 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. In the BSAI, "Other rockfish" includes *Sebastes* and *Sebastes* species except for Pacific ocean perch, shortraker, rougheye, sharpchin, and northern rockfish.

Classification

This action is required by § 679.20 and § 679.21 and is exempt from review under E.O. 12866.

This action responds to the TAC limitations and other restrictions on the fisheries established in the Final 2000 Harvest Specification for Groundfish for the BSAI. It must be implemented immediately to prevent overharvesting the 2000 TAC of several groundfish species in the BSAI. A delay in the effective date is impracticable and contrary to the public interest. The fleet is currently harvesting groundfish, and 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: February 14, 2000.

Bruce C. Morehead,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.
 [FR Doc. 00-3911 Filed 2-15-00; 2:50 pm]

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 000211039-0039-01; I.D. 111899A]

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Gulf of Alaska; Final 2000 Harvest Specifications for Groundfish

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

ACTION: Final 2000 harvest specifications for groundfish and associated management measures.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces final 2000 harvest specifications, reserves, allocations, and apportionments for groundfish, Pacific halibut prohibited species catch (PSC) limits, and assumed Pacific halibut mortality rates for the groundfish fisheries of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). This action is necessary to establish harvest specifications for GOA groundfish for the 2000 fishing year and to conserve and manage the groundfish resources in the GOA, and is intended to implement the goals and objectives contained in the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska (FMP).

DATES: The final 2000 harvest specifications are effective at noon on February 15, 2000 through 2400 hrs, Alaska local time (A.l.t.), December 31, 2000.

ADDRESSES: Copies of the Final Environmental Assessment (EA), the Final Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (FRFA) prepared for this action, and the Final Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report (SAFE report), dated November 1999, are available from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, 605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306, Anchorage, AK 99501-2252, or by calling 907-271-2809.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Thomas Pearson, 907-481-1780, fax 907-481-1781, or tom.pearson@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Federal regulations at 50 CFR part 679 implement the FMP and govern the groundfish fisheries in the GOA. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) prepared the FMP and NMFS approved it under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens