DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 000511130–0130–01; I.D. 032900C]

RIN 0648–AN25

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Allocation of Pacific Cod among Vessels Using Hook-and-Line or Pot Gear in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands

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

ACTION: Proposed Rule; proposed revision to the 2000 harvest specifications for Pacific cod; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS proposes regulations to implement Amendment 64 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area (FMP). This proposed amendment would also necessitate a revision to the 2000 harvest specifications for Pacific cod in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands management area (BSAI). Amendment 64, submitted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), would apportion the hook-and-line or pot gear (fixed gear) allocation of total allowable catch (TAC) of Pacific cod in the BSAI among hook-and-line catcher-processor vessels, hook-and-line catcher vessels, and pot gear vessels. This action is necessary to respond to socioeconomic needs of the fishing industry that have been identified by the Council and is intended to promote the goals and objectives of the FMP.

DATES: Comments must be received by July 10, 2000.

ADDRESSES: Comments must be sent to Sue Salveson, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, Attn: Lori Gravel. Hand or courier delivered comments may be sent to the Federal Building, 709 West 9th Street, Room 453, Juneau, AK 99801. Comments also may be sent via facsimile (fax) to 907–586–7465. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or the Internet.


FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: James Hale, 907–586–7228.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: NMFS manages the groundfish fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (3 to 200 miles offshore) of the BSAI under the FMP, which the Council prepared and NMFS approved in 1982 under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, P. L. 94–265, 16 U.S.C. 1801 (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

The Council has submitted Amendment 64 for Secretarial review. NMFS published a Notice of Availability (NOA) of the FMP amendment in the Federal Register on April 11, 2000 (65 FR 19545), with comments on the FMP amendment invited through June 12, 2000. Written comments may address the FMP amendment, the proposed rule, or both, but must be received by June 20, 2000 to be considered in the decision to approve or disapprove the FMP amendment.

Background and Need for Action

Beginning in 1997, Amendment 46 to the FMP allocated the TAC for BSAI Pacific cod among vessels using jig gear, trawl gear, and hook-and-line or pot gear. Two percent of the TAC is reserved for jig gear, 51 percent for hook-and-line or pot gear, and 47 percent for trawl gear. The amendment further split the trawl allocation equally between catcher vessels and catcher/processor vessels, but no split was adopted for the 51 percent allocated to hook-and-line or pot vessels.

Since the approval of Amendment 46, increasing competition for Pacific cod among catcher/processor and catcher vessels using pot or hook-and-line gear has given rise to new allocation issues. Increased prices for Pacific cod, reduced crab guideline harvest levels, and shortened or canceled crab seasons due to low resource abundance have resulted in increased harvests of Pacific cod by vessels using pot gear. Fishermen displaced from crab fisheries have expressed ongoing interest in fishing for Pacific cod, aggravating the concerns of long-term Pacific cod fishermen about erosion of their gear share of the cod fishery in favor of new entrants using pot gear who, until very recently, focused harvest activity in the BSAI crab fisheries.

In response to these concerns, the Council initiated an analysis at its April 1999 meeting of the effects of splitting the hook-and-line or pot gear allocation of Pacific cod in the BSAI among hook-and-line catcher/producer vessels, hook-and-line catcher vessels, and all vessels using pot gear. At its June 1999 meeting, the Council reviewed the analysis and drafted the following problem statement to guide further analysis of alternatives for Amendment 64:

The hook-and-line and pot fisheries for Pacific cod in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands are fully utilized. Competition for this resource has increased for a variety of reasons, including increased market value of cod products and a declining acceptable biological catch and total allowable catch. Longline and pot fishermen who have made significant long-term investments, have long catch histories, and are significantly dependent on the BSAI cod fisheries need protection from others who have little or limited history and wish to increase their participation in the fishery. This requires prompt action to promote stability in the BSAI fixed gear cod fishery until comprehensive rationalization is completed.

The subsequent analysis reviewed, in addition to the status quo, alternatives for separate Pacific cod allocations for the different hook-and-line and pot gear users that approximate their historical catches over the past 4 years. The options analyzed determined those percentages based on catch histories from (1) 1996 and 1997, (2) 1997 and 1998, (3) 1996 through 1998, and (4) 1995 through 1998. In general, the