Finding of No Significant Impact for Issuing an Exempted Fishing Permit for the Purpose of Testing a Salmon Excluder Device in the Eastern Bering Sea Pollock Fishery [RIN 0648-XD257]

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National Marine Fisheries Service

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Administrative Order 216-6 (NAO 216-6) (May 20, 1999) contains criteria for determining the significance of the impacts of a proposed action. In addition, the Council on Environmental Quality regulations at 40 CFR 1508.27 state that the significance of an action should be analyzed both in terms of "context" and "intensity." Each criterion listed below is relevant in making a finding of no significant impact and has been considered individually, as well as in combination with the others. The significance of this action is analyzed based on the NAO 216-6 criteria and CEQ's context and intensity criteria. These include:

1) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any target species that may be affected by the action?

Response: No. The proposed action would harvest a very small quantity of pollock in relation to the overall annual harvest of pollock. No discernable effect on any target species is expected; therefore, the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the sustainability of any target species (EA Section 4.2).

2) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any non-target species?

Response: No. A very small quantity of fish species other than pollock and salmon is expected to be taken by the proposed action. The amount of salmon taken is a small portion of the annual bycatch of salmon. Any effect from the EFP is not likely discernable over the status quo fishery effects; therefore, the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the sustainability of any non-target species (EA Section 4).

3) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to cause substantial damage to the ocean and coastal habitats and/or essential fish habitat as defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and identified in FMPs?

Response: No. This action is limited to the use of pelagic trawl gear in a manner which has been found to not cause substantial damage to oceans and coastal habitats or essential fish habitat (EA Section 4 Introduction).

4) Can the proposed action be reasonably expected to have a substantial adverse impact on public health or safety?

Response: No. The proposed action involves two vessels (no more than one vessel will be EFP fishing at any time) conducting controlled scientific testing of a bycatch reduction device in a location away from the public. No changes to fishing practices are expected that would impact public health and safety. Therefore, no impacts to public health or safety are expected (EA Section 4).

5) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, marine mammals, or critical habitat of these species?

Response: No. The proposed action is limited to the use of pelagic trawl gear by one vessel, at any time, harvesting a relatively small amount of fish over several seasons in two large areas of the Bering Sea. Because of the amount of pollock and salmon harvested, the method of harvest, and compliance with existing closures for Steller sea lions and northern fur seals, no discernable effects are expected on ESA-listed species, critical habitat, marine mammals, or other non-target species (EA Sections 4.4 and 4.6).

6) Can the proposed action be expected to have a substantial impact on biodiversity and/or ecosystem function within the affected area (e.g., benthic productivity, predator-prey relationships, etc.)?

Response: No. This action is limited to the use of pelagic trawl gear by no more than one vessel at any time, harvesting a relatively small amount of fish over several seasons in two large areas of the Bering Sea. The quantity of fish and method of harvest are not likely to have any discernable effects on biodiversity or ecosystem function (EA Section 4).

7) Are significant social or economic impacts interrelated with natural or physical environmental effects?

Response: No. The issuance of the EFP would allow for the vessels used in the EFP work to be compensated for expenses through the sale of pollock harvested during the salmon excluder device testing. No significant social or economic impacts are expected from the issuance of the EFP. Successful development and use of the salmon excluder device may result in beneficial economic effects for the pollock industry and for those dependent on salmon resources (EA Section 4.7).

8) Are the effects on the quality of the human environment likely to be highly controversial?

Response: No. The potential effects of the action are well understood and not controversial. Any effects on the human environment are not likely discernable due to the limited amount of fish and vessel participation and short period of the EFP project. The industry, NMFS, Western Alaska salmon users, and environmental organizations are in favor of efforts to reduce salmon bycatch (EA Section 1).

9) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in substantial impacts to unique areas, such as historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas?

Response: No. This action is limited to the use of pelagic trawl gear in a manner which has been found to not cause substantial damage to oceans and coastal habitats or essential fish habitat. This action is limited to the marine environment so other unique areas listed would not be impacted (EA Section 1).

10) Are the effects on the human environment likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks?

Response: No. The potential effects of fishing on pollock and marine mammals are well understood and the returns of salmon in Alaska are well monitored. Any effects on the human environment are not likely discernable due to the limited amount of fish and vessel participation and short period of the EFP project (EA Sections 4.1, 4.3 and 4.5).

11) Is the proposed action related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant impacts?

Response: No. Each environmental component that may be affected by this action was analyzed for potential direct and indirect impacts. For each of these components, no discernable direct or indirect effects were identified resulting from this action when comparing the potential impacts under Alternative 2 to Alternative 1. An analysis of cumulative effects was included to determine the incremental effects of this and other actions on each environmental component affected. The combined direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts were not likely significant for this action (EA Section 4).

12) Is the proposed action likely to adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources?

Response: No. This action is limited to the marine waters of the Bering Sea, and these types of land-based sites do not occur in the Bering Sea. The fishing activities under this action are not likely to result in destruction or loss of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because the pelagic trawling occurs in the water column where these resources do not occur. Therefore, this question is not applicable (EA Section 1).

13) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species?

Response: No. This action does not change fishing activities in a manner that would result in the spread or introduction of non-indigenous species (EA Section 1).

14) Is the proposed action likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration?

Response: No. This action allows for the development of a single device that may be considered for manufacture and widespread use by the fishing industry at a later time. No decisions would be made at this time regarding the future use of the device, and any future actions would be analyzed for potential significant effects (EA Section 1).

15) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment?

Response: No. The proposed action would be conducted in accordance with all federal, state, and local laws (EA Section 1).

16) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in cumulative adverse effects that could have a substantial effect on the target species or non-target species?

Response: No. Reasonably foreseeable future actions from this EFP study is the industry's use of a salmon excluder device which would be a beneficial cumulative effect for pollock and salmon species. No cumulative adverse effects are likely for target or non-target species with this action (EA Section 4).

DETERMINATION

In view of the information presented in this document and the analysis contained in the supporting Environmental Assessment prepared for issuing an exempted fishing permit for the purpose of testing a salmon excluder device in the Eastern Bering Sea pollock fishery, it is hereby determined that this action will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment as described above and in the supporting Environmental Assessment. In addition, all beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action have been addressed to reach the conclusion of no significant impacts. Accordingly, preparation of an EIS for this action is not necessary.

Glenn Merrill for JWB 12/5/2014

James W. Balsiger, Ph.D. Date
Administrator, Alaska Region