

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT ON AMENDMENT OF THE FISHERY
MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE GULF OF ALASKA GROUND FISH FISHERY

INTRODUCTION

The Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Fishery was adopted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), approved and implemented by the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Assistant Administrator) pursuant to sections 302-305 of the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 (FCMA), and published in its entirety on April 21, 1978, (43 FR 17242). A final environmental impact statement was prepared for the FMP and is on file with the Environmental Protection Agency. The FMP has been amended eight times. The Council approved a ninth amendment during its July 1980 meeting. This amendment has been submitted for approval and implementation by the Assistant Administrator.

This Environmental Assessment is prepared pursuant to 40 CFR 1501.3 and 1508.9, and NOAA Directive 02-10, to determine whether an environmental impact statement must be prepared on the proposed action pursuant to section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act.

DESCRIPTION OF AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

Amendment No. 9 is designed to reduce the conflict between the foreign trawl fisheries and the domestic crab (fixed gear) fisheries around Kodiak Island. The amendment proposes that a large area (the "Kodiak Gear Area") be closed to foreign trawling during the domestic crab season in the Kodiak district.

Presently, six small areas around Kodiak Island (the "Kodiak Gear Areas") are closed to foreign trawling from August 10 to June 1. Despite these closures, domestic king crab fishermen have testified at public hearings that the loss

of gear to foreign trawlers and the fear of future losses on the crab fishing grounds outside these small closed areas continue to be problems around Kodiak Island. In essence, the domestic fishermen claim that, although they have been given some protection, they have been preempted from their fishing grounds; they are reluctant to set their crab gear because of the risk of losing it, the expense of replacing it, and the loss of fishing time. Domestic trawlers avoid domestic crab gear by coordinating their activities with the domestic crab fishermen.

The proposed single area encloses the present six small areas as well as a considerable amount of additional ocean. Further, the proposed area, itself, is enclosed in a larger management area (the fishery conservation zone between 147°W and 157°W) that is closed to all foreign trawling from February 16 to June 1. Although foreigners are allowed to fish with pelagic (off-bottom) trawls in this large management area from December 1 to February 16, few foreign vessels have done so. Thus, closing the proposed area to foreign trawling during the domestic king crab fishing season (currently from September 15 to June 1) will reduce foreign fishing for about 10 weeks (September 15 to December 1) for some of the traditional foreign bottom trawling grounds, will open the previously closed Kodiak Gear Areas to foreign trawling from August 10 until about September 15, and will eliminate the loss of domestic crab gear and fishing time caused by foreign trawling.

The proposed closure, besides reducing gear losses, will also encourage the domestic crab fishermen to spread their fishing over a larger area, thus reducing the harvest from some overfished stocks and increasing the harvest from some underfished stocks. The discrete crab stocks around Chirikof Island, for example, are not presently being exploited.

The amendment also corrects an inconsistency of dates within the fishery management plan (FMP) and between the FMP and the foreign fishing regulations. The published regulations (section 611.92(b)(2)(ii)) state that the region between 147° W and 157° W longitude is closed to foreign trawl fishing "from February 16 to June 1." In contrast, the FMP (section 8.3.2.1(c)(2)(b)) states that the region will be closed "as shown in Figure 15 -- February 16 through May 31," but Figure 15 states "February 16 through May 15." This amendment will conform the FMP internally and with the foreign fishing regulations.

ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

Alternative 1. Adopt Amendment No. 9. This is the proposed action and the preferred alternative. This alternative is preferred because it would respond to the problems described in the statement of need, above, that led to formulation of the amendment.

Alternative 2. Close a small area. A proposal to close a smaller area was presented to the Council by the Japanese fishing industry. The proposal sought to change the configuration of the closed area to permit unrestricted foreign trawling in two areas east and south of Trinity Island. These areas, however, contain significant numbers of king crab and are generally well within the one hundred fathom line. This alternative would not adequately reduce gear conflict nor ground preemption and is therefore considered unacceptable.

Alternative 3. Close a larger area. Proposals for the closure of two larger areas were found to be unwarranted because they would not substantially increase the protection afforded to U.S. fishermen, although they would

greatly increase the cost of foreign groundfish operations.

Alternative 4. Reject the proposed amendment and retain the existing six smaller time/area closures. This alternative would reduce neither gear conflict nor grounds preemption and is therefore considered unacceptable.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Impacts on the Biological and Physical Environment

None of the alternatives just described are expected to have significant impacts on the biological or physical environment. Some evidence indicates that closing the king crab grounds to foreign trawlers will result in greater dispersal of crab fishery operations and will reduce under- and over-harvest of discrete king crab stocks because crab fishermen could expand their efforts into new areas without risk of gear loss. The opportunity for this possible beneficial impact on the biological environment would be eliminated if this measure was not approved and implemented.

Impacts on the Socio-economic Environment

Restrictions on foreign trawling will not prevent any nation from harvesting its TALFF allocation. Gear loss and loss of fishing time resulting from the necessity of fishermen to return to port to obtain tags for replacement gear would be reduced. Reduction of grounds preemption would enable crab fishermen to expand their fishing efforts during periods of low and/or dispersed crab populations thereby increasing the domestic crab catch. The opportunity for these possible economic benefits would be eliminated if this measure was not approved and implemented.

Effects on Endangered Species and on the Alaska Coastal Zone

None of the alternatives would constitute an action that "may affect" endangered or threatened species or their habitat within the meaning of the regulations implementing Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Thus, consultation procedures under Section 7 will not be necessary on the proposal and its alternatives.

The proposed action will be carried out in a manner that is consistent, to the maximum extent practicable, with the Alaska Coastal Management Program, in accordance with section 307(c)(1) of the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 and its implementing regulation.

AGENCIES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

In the course of the preparation of this environmental assessment, the following persons and agencies were consulted:

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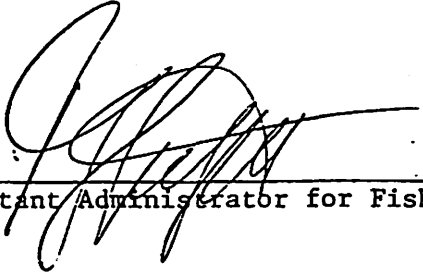
LIST OF PREPARERS

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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

For the reasons discussed above, it is hereby determined that neither approval and implementation of Amendment No. 9 nor any of the reasonable alternatives to that action would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, and that the preparation of an environmental impact statement on these actions is not required by section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act or its implementing regulations.


Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, NOAA

Dec. 16, 1980
Date