

# North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF AN AMENDMENT (Amendment 7) TO THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR GROUND FISH IN THE GULF OF ALASKA

### DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTION

The proposed action would amend the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery in the Gulf of Alaska. The amendment will:

1. Extend the plan year through October 31, 1980;
2. Implement provisions of the Processor Preference Amendment (P.L. 95-354);
3. Change existing OY's for Pacific cod and Atka mackerel;
4. Establish a separate Gulf-wide OY for idiot rockfish (Sebastolobus);
5. Propose the concept of a time and area restriction policy for joint ventures; and
6. propose new domestic and joint venture reporting requirements.

The Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish in the Gulf of Alaska was approved by the Secretary of Commerce and published in the Federal Register on April 21, 1978. The plan has been amended six times, beginning December 1, 1978 (Amendment 1 implemented) and most recently, September 22, 1979 (Amendment 6 implemented). An explanation of these amendments is attached.

### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

As a consequence of continual stock reassessment, new observer information, recent foreign and domestic fishery data and Public Law 95-354 (the Processor Preference Amendment), this amendment has been proposed to the plan. The amendment is accompanied by suggested regulation changes.

1. *Extend the plan year through October 31, 1980.*

A regular extension of the plan beyond its present expiration date of October 31, 1979 could be accomplished two ways: a Secretarial or Council amendment. The first part of this amendment -- extending the plan through October 31, 1980 -- is a result of the desire of the Council to submit only one amendment to the plan and not effectively extend outdated provisions of the plan when new data were available. This amendment prevents a hiatus in the fishery, while implementing the Processor Preference Amendment, incorporating the latest biological data, and implementing new reporting requirements. Extending the provisions of the fishery management plan with its conservative management regime makes the environmental impact of this action beneficial from the standpoint of the resource and the fishery.

2. *Implement provisions of the Processor Preference Amendment  
(Public Law 95-354).*

The implementation of the provisions of the Processor Preference Amendment will neither increase nor decrease the total catch of groundfish in the Gulf of Alaska. Any environmental impacts from this action would be directly related to the management regime and not the provisions of the Processor Preference Amendment. The impacts of implementing the provisions of the Processor Preference Amendment are however likely to be beneficial both socially and economically to the developing U.S. domestic fishery. The refinement of DAH and its subcomponents and the re-creation of the 20% OY reserve concept will further the goal for fair and equitable distribution of the resource among the user groups.

A significant change brought about by the implementation of the Processor Preference Amendment was the review and release mechanism established for DAH and reserve to TALFF. This continual and periodic review and

reassessment of DAH and reserve is expected to result in the most timely and equitable allocation process. It should also promote a normal distribution of foreign effort throughout the year.

### 3. *Increase OYs for Pacific cod and Atka mackerel.*

The OY for Pacific cod is increased from 34,800 mt to 60,000 mt. The increase in the OY for Pacific cod was necessary after an analysis of the results of NMFS trawl surveys for 1977 and 1978. Based on these surveys the MSY for Pacific cod has been estimated at 88,000 to 177,000 mt. The estimate of total exploitable biomass using trawl survey data from the years 1973 to 1978 is of 368,000 to 736,000 mt and an increasing population.

Based on this information the most conservative estimate of MSY was 88,000 mt. Soviet surveys in the spring of 1979 also indicated increasingly abundant stocks and their estimate of a conservative MSY was 67,600 mt. The management plan drafting team, scientists from the Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center, and National Marine Fisheries Service -- Alaska Region, the Scientific and Statistical Committee, Advisory Panel, and Council recommended that the ABC and OY be 60,000 mt. This is conservative given the survey results and yet is a significant increase from 34,800 mt. This is considered a balanced and conservative action designed to provide for an orderly expansion of the cod fishery. This change is considered biologically conservative, well within the management objectives established in the fishery management plan, and is not expected to have a negative impact on the stocks or the associated members of the ecosystem.

The change in the OY for Atka mackerel from 26,800 mt to 28,700 mt is recommended on the basis of 1979 Soviet trawl surveys which were carried out during April and May of 1979. Previous estimates had been based on Soviet hydroacoustic surveys, but trawl surveys have been judged to be the more accurate of the methods available for estimating the biomass of Atka

mackerel in the Gulf of Alaska. The increase is considered biologically conservative and justifiable. The change is a consequence of continual stock reassessment and was reviewed and approved by scientists from the Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center, NMFS Alaska Region, management plan drafting team, the Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Council, and the Advisory Panel. It is not expected to negatively impact the stocks.

4. *Create a new category and a Gulf-wide OY for idiot rockfish, Sebastolobus sp., OY = 3,750 mt.*

Rockfish of the genus Sebastolobus, have historically been taken incidental to the foreign sablefish longline fishery. They were, however, never recorded as Sebastolobus, or even as "other rockfish" when historic catch data was used to determine MSY, ABC, and OY for the category "other rockfish." As a consequence of new observer information and more recent foreign fishery data, it appears that up to 29% of the catch by sablefish longliners is Sebastolobus sp. Because this genus has never been included in the allocations developed for "other rockfish," it is causing a serious problem when counted against the small "other rockfish" allocations. The OY of 3,750 mt was established by calculating what 29% of the average historic sablefish catch has been. It has been recommended as a Gulf-wide OY and has been reviewed and approved by the scientists at the Northwest and Alaska Fisheries Center, NMFS Alaska, management plan drafting team, Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Advisory Panel and the Council.

This action will result in a slight increase in the total allowable level of foreign fishing (TALFF). It is expected to ease the burden of small allocations of incidentally caught species in the "other species" category. This additional allocation will allow directed fishing for target species to continue without exceeding the assigned allocations for non-target species taken incidentally.

The increase in TALFF will be slight; actual increases in catch are not expected since about this amount of Sebastolobus sp. have always been taken in the foreign sablefish longline fishery, but never reported in the

past. No other changes in the fishery are anticipated and there are no negative impacts of the proposed action on the environment.

5. *Establish that the Council will consider case by case the possibility of time and area closures to joint ventures to afford a U.S. corporation the opportunity to utilize the boats of an area for DAP.*

The incorporation of this policy statement into the fishery management plan is an indication that the Council will consider, if requested, and on a case by case basis, time and area closures to joint ventures to afford U.S. processors the opportunity to take advantage of the intent of P.L. 95-354. Imposition of time/area closures by the Council would probably not increase or decrease the catch or the amount taken by U.S. fishermen. There are no negative impacts on the environment from this proposed action.

6. *Create new general domestic reporting requirements using the regulations to specify the information to be reported and the time schedule for reporting.*

The orderly conduct of the fishery management regime in the Gulf of Alaska is in part dependent upon accurate estimates and reassessments of expected domestic annual harvest. Under estimated domestic annual harvest amounts may be supplemented by the reserve. Over estimated DAH will be released to TALFF, as is unused reserve. The capability to periodically and accurately reassess domestic fishing and processing estimates is largely dependent upon domestic reporting. The amendment proposes some additional domestic reporting requirements to increase accuracy in forecasts of U.S. fishing activity. The general reporting regime has been discussed in the plan, and the specific reporting requirements in the regulations. These new reporting requirements should not affect the total amount of

fish caught, and should improve the equitable distribution of the catch. The reports required of U.S. fishermen and processors should not impose an undue burden in time or expense. This action is not expected to have any negative environmental impact.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

- a. No action. Taking no action would cause an hiatus in all fishing because the current plan provisions expire on October 31, 1979, or if foreign fishing was continued by amendments promulgated by the Secretary they would be based on old data. That would compound the "incidental species" problem, continuing underutilization of several target species. Neither result was considered acceptable.
- b. Status quo. Maintenance of status quo in the fishery would be illogical in the face of new biological data and the requirements of the Processor Preference Amendment (P.L. 95-354). The status quo could have extended the fishery management plan beyond its expiration date of October 31, 1979, but would not have allowed full utilization of the resource based on new resource surveys and data from the observer program. This alternative was considered unacceptable in light of the new information.
- c. More restrictive action. More restrictive regulations and provisions of the plan would serve to unnecessarily burden domestic and foreign fishing activities in the Gulf of Alaska without appreciable benefit to the resource or the U.S. To the contrary the purpose of the proposed action is to remove unnecessary regulations, recognizing a conservative management regime, a positive atmosphere for domestic expansion, and the needs of the foreign fisheries.

RECOMMENDATION

We have reviewed the possible environmental impacts and assessments, all available information relating to the proposed action, and the intents of Public Law 94-254 and Public Law 95-354, and have determined there will be no significant environmental impact resulting from this action.