

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF AN AMENDMENT
(Amendment 5)
TO THE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR GROUND FISH
IN THE GULF OF ALASKA

Description of the Action:

The action amends the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the groundfish fishery in the Gulf of Alaska fishery management unit. Amendment 5 establishes a species category for the genus Coryphaenoides (rattails, grenadiers) for the purpose of separating the rattail catch from catches commonly associated with the category of "Other Species."

The Fishery Management Plan and associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) have been considered in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS/FMP) for groundfish in the Gulf of Alaska, U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, April, 1978. Final Regulations implementing the FMP and Amendment 1 were published on November 14, 1978 (F.R. 52709) and became effective December 1, 1978. Amendments 2 and 3 were published as final regulations on December 1, 1978 (F.R. 56238). Amendment 4 is currently being reviewed by the Secretary of Commerce with implementation expected by mid-July, 1979.

Environmental Impact

No adverse environmental impact will occur as a consequence of the adoption of Amendment 5. Species in the genus Coryphaenoides such as rattails and grenadiers are commonly associated in this fishery with the longline catch of sablefish. Available data indicate that the catch of rattails by foreign fishermen equals and may exceed two-thirds of the sablefish catch. American fishermen estimate the catch of rattails in the sablefish fishery at one-third, the difference in total catch rates being attributed to the fact that domestic fishermen fish shallower waters.

The rattail catch has been included in the total catch assessed against the "Other Species" category, even though the rattail is considered a non-commercial and unutilized species and is discarded at sea. The assessment of rattail catch totals to the "Other Species" category inflates the total catch figure for that category and would prematurely fill the allocation for the "Other Species" category in advance of a reasonable effort on the target species, which is primarily sablefish. A provision of the Fishery Management Plan for the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Fishery is that a nation which reaches its quota in any species must cease fishing for all species in the regulatory area for which the quota had been assigned.

Amendment 5 proposes the removal of rattail catches from the accumulated total of "Other Species" to a separate category of 'rattails, grenadiers' with a separate MSY/OY, thus allowing a reasonable effort on allocations of sablefish and other valuable target species without the threat of a premature closure by exceeding the allocation for "Other Species."

The average rattail catch for the last 12 years of record is calculated to be 13,200 mt. For the purpose of this amendment, this value is assumed to be the minimal estimate of Maximum Sustained Yield (MSY). Since the rattail population was not considered in the development of Optimum Yield (OY) for "Other Species," the creation of this new species category does not require any adjustment of the OY for "Other Species."

Alternatives to the Proposed Action:

Amendment 5 is proposed to alleviate a serious problem associated with the reasonable effort of foreign fishermen to harvest assigned allocations of a target species (primarily sable fish). The following alternatives have been considered:

(1) Retain the status quo - The retention of the rattail catch in the "Other Species" category continues the undesirable effect of accelerating attainment of the allotment in that category and the closure for all species of the foreign fishery involved. Such action denies a reasonable opportunity to catch the full amount of other species which have been allocated to a foreign nation.

(2) Creation of an additional species category - Consideration has been given to the creation of a species category for fish for which there is no commercial use or value, and which are discarded at sea. Data is being accumulated at the present for the creation of such an additional category. However, time constraints imposed upon the foreign fishery by the accumulated rattail catch which threatens the early attainment of the quota in the "Other Species" category require immediate action if those fisheries are to continue.

Recommendation:

Having reviewed the Environmental Impact Assessment and considering the spirit and intent of Public Law 94-265 and the available information relating to the proposed action, we have determined that there will be no significant environmental impact resulting from the action.

APPROVED:

Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

Date 1979