

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF AN AMENDMENT
(Amendment 4)
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. The amendment (Amendment 4) relieves restrictions in the management measures and regulations for both foreign and domestic fisheries. The amendment and its components are as follows:

AMENDMENT 4:

FOREIGN

- a. Allow foreign fishing from 169° to 170° W. longitude from 3-12 miles.
- b. Remove the restriction which prohibited more than 25% of the TALFF to be taken from December 1 to May 31.
- c. Allow foreign longlining for sablefish seaward of 400 meters from May 1 to September 30, and seaward of 500 meters from October 1 to April 30, in the area between 140° and 170° W. longitude.
- d. Permit a directed Pacific cod fishery only by longline in the area between 140° and 157° W. longitude and seaward of 12 miles, except foreign longlining is prohibited landward of the 400 meter isobath during the U.S. halibut season, as established by IPHC.

- e. Exempt the foreign longline fisheries from the provisions of the foreign regulations which provides that all of the nation's fisheries in a statistical area be closed once the allocation for any one species has been taken (if the species is not a target species for the longliners).
- f. Increase the squid OY to 5,000 metric tons (from 2,000 mt).
- g. Increase the Atka mackerel OY by 2,000 metric tons to 26,800 mt, the increase to be apportioned to the newly combined Eastern (Southeast-Yakutat) area and designated for incidental catch only.

GENERAL

- h. Reduce the number of regulatory areas in the Gulf of Alaska from five to three as follows:

Eastern area combines Southeast/Yakutat
Central area combines Kodiak/Chirikof
Western area remains Shumagin

DOMESTIC

- i. Remove the domestic one-hour tow restriction.
- j. Remove the domestic requirement for the use of off-bottom trawl from December 1 to May 31.
- k. Require domestic permits to be renewed annually and domestic reporting (i.e., fish tickets) to be within 7 days instead of 72 hours.

The fishery management plan and its environment impact statement 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 (43 F.R. 52709) and became effective December 1, 1978. Amendments 2 and 3 were published as final regulations on December 1, 1978 (43 F.R. 56238).

Environmental Impact

As a consequence of continual stock reassessment, new observer information, and recent foreign and domestic fishery data, the plan and regulations have been reevaluated. Inadvertent omissions in the regulations have also been identified.

The closure of the area from 169° to 170° W. longitude from 3-12 miles to foreign fishing is such an omission (4a). This has been a traditional fishing area for foreign fleets which was closed in the FMP by oversight. Reopening this area will not constitute an adverse environmental impact. Also omitted were the requirements to renew domestic fishery permits annually (4k) and to require reporting within 7 days instead of 72 hours.

Many of the management measures in the initial FMP were designed to protect the halibut resource and fishery. Amendment components 4b, 4c, 4d, 4h, and 4i, are all changes designed to remove unnecessary foreign and domestic trawling restrictions without compromising halibut conservation goals and principles. The 25% winter TALFF restriction (4b) is unnecessary as other more effective management measures are used (i.e., gear restrictions, area restrictions, and observers) to regulate the foreign fishing effort in the winter when halibut stocks are most vulnerable. Recent reevaluation of information on the distribution of halibut and the analysis of observer data over the previous 14 months shows that a directed longline sablefish fishery would not have an adverse impact on halibut stocks seaward of 400 meters (instead of 500 meters) during the summer (4c). In this

season, the incidental catch of halibut is insignificant in depths greater than 400 m. Allowing a directed Pacific cod fishery by longline between 140° and 157° W. longitude (4d) and seaward of 12 miles except during the U.S. halibut season, is not expected to adversely impact the halibut, due to the low incidental catch rate (and low mortality) of halibut associated with the fishery. A higher catch rate and halibut mortality rate is associated with trawl fisheries for Pacific cod (See Annex 1). The action is consistent with an earlier amendment to the plan for an identical fishery west of 157° W. longitude.

Reevaluation of the status of gulf stocks of squid and Atka mackerel shows that these species can support an increased level of exploitation by the foreign fisheries. There is no directed fishery for squid, but it makes up a small percentage of the total trawl catch. Previous low allocations have resulted in operational difficulties by forcing the fleets to avoid grounds where the incidental catch was high. An OY increase of 3,000 mt for squid (4f) is well within conservative EY and MSY estimates and will not have an adverse impact on the stocks.

Estimates of MSY for Atka mackerel are also considered to be conservative, as they were derived from Soviet fishery data in the western Gulf area only. An OY increase of 2,000 mt (4g) is not expected to have an adverse impact on the stocks, or the environment. In view of the uncertainty of the exact stock assessment figure, this increase has been allocated as an incidental catch species only. The specific allocation of the Atka mackerel OY increase to the foreign fisheries in the Eastern (Southeastern-Yakutat) area will permit this traditional fishery to operate without being limited by an unworkable apportionment of incidental catch species.

Operational problems due to minute allocations of species (both directed fishery and incidental catch species) has also resulted from the allocation of foreign fisheries quotas over five statistical areas (4h). These areas were originally drawn around the approximate distribution of

stocks in the Gulf of Alaska. However, in consideration of presently available stock distribution data, and in the absence of any significant biological evidence to demonstrate that the stocks are localized within the 5-area management scheme, it was decided that the FMP management measures can be accomplished equally well by combining the areas to three (See Annex 2). This change will primarily benefit the foreign fisheries without adversely affecting the resource. Changing the statistical area boundaries will not adversely impact the resource or domestic groundfish fishermen and would allow a more realistic allocation of TALFF and incidental species quotas to the foreign fisheries.

Conservation of halibut stocks and the uncertainties surrounding a new U.S. fishery were the primary rationale for the restrictions on the domestic groundfish fishermen. These restrictions involved seasonal off-bottom trawls (4i), one-hour tows (4j), and observers. Observer data from the previous fishing season has demonstrated that these gear and time regulations do not significantly benefit the halibut resource, and are difficult to enforce. Thus these restrictions have been removed.

The provision of the FMP which closes a nation's fishery once that foreign nation has caught its allocation of any species in any given (regulatory) area was designed to "minimize or eliminate incidental capture of non-target species." The amendment (4e) excluding foreign longliners from this provision is consistent with this philosophy, so long as the species for which the allocation has been reached is not a target species for the longliners. This change was also made as a result of analysis of observer data which showed the longline fishery as having both a lower incidental catch rate and a lower mortality rate of incidentally caught species.

This action is expected to have a beneficial impact on the social and economic status of the U.S. fishermen.

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

Only two (2) alternatives were considered to the proposed action, no action or more restrictions.

A. No Action

Taking no action would mean retaining unnecessarily restrictive regulations for the groundfish fishery. It would have also resulted in adverse social and economic impact on domestic and foreign fishermen.

B. More Restrictions

Imposing more restrictions on the foreign and domestic fishing fleets would have meant retaining unnecessary management measures and adding others as well. The proposed amendments appear to provide the best overall balance between biological considerations and social and economic impacts available at this time.

Recommendation

Having reviewed the Environmental Impact Assessment and considered the spirit and intent of P.L. 94-265, as amended by P.L. 94-354, and the available information relating to the proposed action, we have determined there will be no significant environmental impact resulting from the action.